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With: Ron Steiner
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Ron Steiner My first experience was a little before I joined. In my final year at the AA (Architectural Association) I studied—at the recommendation of Dick Hoben—with Leon Krier, who I didn't know about before. He was finishing off James Stirling's book at that moment. I had really wanted to study for my last year with Dalibor Vesely, but Dick convinced me otherwise. As you know, the AA has a unit system and in the mix was Rem (Koolhaas) and Elia's (Zenghelis) unit. Some of my friends were studying there, like Zaha Hadid and Harriet Gordon. What Leo, and Rem and Elia were professing in their teaching was more or less diametrically opposed, but the common ground was that we shared a lecture series by Demetri Porphyrios on the work of Architects of the French Enlightenment, which was interesting to both groups.

Over the Christmas/New Year's break Elia was going to Greece, but he needed some work done on an elaboration of the head of the Hotel Sphinx in New York. He felt that no one in his unit was capable to do it at the time, so he was recommended to look me up. I met with Elia, and we agreed. He had a beautiful 1:500 drawing, and he said, 'Can you make this 1:200 with a little more detail?'. That was my introduction to the world of OMA.

I remember when I was presenting the drawing to Elia, Rem came rushing into the room like a panting racehorse. Elia introduced me to him, and he went directly to the drawing, put his nose right up—looking really closely, with a very concerned look. I think he couldn't find anything wrong with it because he just smiled and walked off. That was the first time I met Rem. From then on, we kept in contact and started doing competitions together.

Before it was the Office for Metropolitan Architecture it was the 'Apartment for Metropolitan Architecture'! We worked in Rem and Madelon (Vrisendorp)'s large mansion block apartment, just off the Finchley Road between West Hampstead and Swiss Cottage. They took over this apartment from John Miller and Sue Rogers. This was right before Rem and Madelon had their daughter, Charlie, so they moved in with all this space and each of them had their studio and study—and that was where we started.

Elia managed to sublet a tiny little room in Kentish Town from some old friends of his who had a big office, and we did several competitions out of that space. Then he moved to a rented ground floor flat in Camden. We had some success, but nothing was commissioned in the end. We did the (Parc de) la Villette competition there and the Berlin competitions in Kentish Town. But in Rem's flat the two important projects we did, for me personally, were the extension of the Dutch Parliament and the competition for the Taoiseach's house (Irish Prime Minister's Residence) in Dublin—which was very well covered in *Lotus* magazine.

Through contacts of Rem's students like Kees Christiaanse and Willem-Jan Neutelings, and the Hague architect Jan Voorberg, we started a proper office here in Rotterdam, in Rijnhaven. From there, Rem started getting active commissions, such as the IJ Plein housing (IJ Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium) in Amsterdam and the Netherlands Dans Theater. That was the early-80s.

Then, I passed my Part III in London in 1983 and the Home Office wouldn't extend my work visa. So, I left for a year, went back to the US, did some housing projects and then Alex Wall phoned me and said, 'Rem says get your ass back here'. That was a critical stage of the Netherlands Dans Theater and that's when I returned. By then, Kees Christiaanse—owing to his father's business expertise—was more or less able to run the office properly.

RH So, you came back in 1984? How long did you stay?

RS Totally I was working in OMA for sixteen years, from the beginning to the mid-1990s.

RH You joined the office through circumstance in a way: from the proximity between Leon Krier, Rem and Elia, to being invited to work on a couple of drawings. This differs from people like Alex Wall who were taught by them.

RS Yes, exactly. Alex was in the unit with all my friends.

RH So, he joined on the basis of a cultivated interest, to some degree...

RS Yes, I ran out of time at the AA in the sense that I was there by transfer from Pratt in New York. I couldn't do the whole five years there. So, I didn't have a chance to study in Rem and Elia's unit. But by helping with presentation work on the Hotel Sphinx and the competitions, for me, this was more of a graduate school thing: the 'OMA Academy'! Going into the deep end in fact, because it wasn't really an organised office. First, it was just Rem and Elia and their wives—who were making great illustrations for the projects—and I brought the model culture into OMA, because there were no models at all before that. I was really pleased to have brought that.

RH What was the interest that kept you there for sixteen years?

RS I really admired the way Rem and Elia worked together. There was some kind of chemistry. Like one of these chemical formulas, where the compound becomes much stronger than the two elements individually. It was really that kind of chemistry. A prime example of that would be the Taoiseach's house, where they came up with the concept together but then divided the work—Rem doing the guest residence and Elia doing the Taoiseach's house itself—and the assistants, Stefano (de Martino) and I, were there to coordinate. That was a great project. The Dutch Parliament, where they split it into three, was exactly the same.

Office

RH It's really a brilliant strategy: 'cadavre exquis'. One gets the sense of a dress rehearsal. On that point, of all the people I've met, I think you're the only one who worked in

all of the London offices and then in Rotterdam. How did the organisation change through those different venues?

RS In London, I would say it was almost a part-time venture. Both Rem and Elia were teaching—well established at the AA by then—and they would work on competitions as they came up. Then, of course, the Rotterdam office was run on a full-time basis. There was a period when OMA had three offices, with a branch office in Athens, more or less manned by Elias Veneris. Elia wasn't there a lot, so Elias Veneris was really running the projects. Meanwhile, the London office was more of a think tank—when both Rem and Elia were there—and then the Rotterdam office was really the beginning of the practice. So, it's interesting that there were three OMA offices, but each was totally different in terms of size and scope.

Rem always dreamt about having an office in Paris. This was a very romantic notion. The reality is that Paris is a very open culture, in terms of art and architecture, but when it comes down to the reality of getting commissions, very few foreign architects actually establish themselves there. There are exceptions of course, but I think Rem discovered that.

London was quite different. There are a lot of foreign architects who have studios there. If they had continued there, the work that got built wouldn't have been so radical. There was also a lack of building experience that held active commissions back. Rem really wasn't after small interior renovations or houses, and access to big scale work was quite difficult. On the other hand, Rem was born in Rotterdam during the hunger winter of 1944 and—he could have had an office anywhere—but he came back to Rotterdam. So, he was living in London and working here, with a *pied-à-terre*. He's stayed in strange places: he had a place in Scheveningen, an apartment right on the beach; then he ended up in one of these white towers, near the office on the river. That was like this barren, undecorated Casco apartment.

Of course, a major factor was also Jan Voorberg, who presented himself to Rem. I can't quite remember if it was

after the Dutch Parliament competition or before the public housing in Amsterdam Noord (IJ Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium), but Jan was already an established architect in The Hague, and he convinced Rem that he could bring that building culture to the beginning of OMA. So, he was a partner right off the bat because he had such expertise in the Dutch system. It was great to have him there. It was a big shock for everyone when he was murdered in Rio de Janeiro. It was a big setback too. But Kees Christiaanse really stepped right into the breach. You've talked with Kees, so you know: he's a real 'go getter'. From the beginning he was very ambitious and had big ideas.

Rotterdam is a kind of backwater in most senses, but suddenly, you didn't have to travel to New York or Tokyo to experience some radical architecture practice. People were coming from all over the world to OMA. Offices were springing up from recent graduates of OMA or people from Delft who were following certain ideas, and Rotterdam slowly put itself on the global map. I think OMA had a lot to do with that.

Collaboration

RH I'm interested in Jan Voorberg. It seems clear in what you're describing that London was the 'paper' office—which required Elia—but there were professional aspirations in Rotterdam, which required Jan Voorberg. After Jan Voorberg dies, Kees takes on a similar role. It seems like Rem has a habit of finding partners.

RS There were some experiments. Certain people presented themselves—or were poached by Kees—to run the office professionally. That ended up kind of disastrous. Some guys came in with big ideas, but they kind of crumbled in the wake of Rem. So, it was always a struggle to find someone to really take the reins of the office in terms of professional practice.

But it was also difficult because Rem can be very stubborn. Especially when it comes to detailing a building. I remember his technical expert being driven away because of a detail Rem was insisting on doing in a particular way,

but it not being possible. That was a big pity. Rem had his vision, and it was concluded that it couldn't be done in the Dutch climate. That was the end of that relationship.

RH Could you talk about Rem's role? It's interesting that he's never worked alone. I think he's always been very clear about wanting to work with others.

RS Well, this is a little amusing. Very early on in my work with Rem and Elia, I saw that Rem had collaborated with O.M. Ungers. I thought this was very interesting. Then, one day in conversation I said, 'Well Rem, I see you worked for Ungers on this project', and he looked at me with this intense glare and said, 'I worked with Ungers'!

But Rem has a whole mythology behind him. It's not for me to say what's true and what isn't, but he doesn't have the traditional path to becoming an architect. Meanwhile, his grandfather was a great Dutch architect. He also had a long career, and if you look at the span of his work, he went from traditional Dutch buildings to quite high-tech modernist building technology. For example, he did a lot of buildings for the Phillips corporation in Eindhoven. Very early on you see De Witte Dame, which has now been remodelled—it's the old factory of Phillips, in the centre of the city—and he ended his career doing these labs on the ring road of Eindhoven. For me, a remarkable building would be the Mineworkers Union, which was a metal building, and the heating system comes from heat generated underground in the old coal mine. It's amazing, built in the 1920s I think.

So, Rem has some architectural history. But in terms of his own trajectory, he was always a conceptual guy. Perhaps he felt a bit insecure about the profession. He's always been handy in drawing and thinking, but maybe he needed help with building.

Elia had an amazing career before Rem, with lots of building experience. He graduated from the AA—he's from the generation of James Stirling—and then he worked with Douglas Stevens. That was one of the most interesting practices I came across during my time in London. Douglas Stevens was really like a businessman. He was out

getting acquisitions, doing the business side of things and had a studio full on young graduates who were hungry to build their first building. People like Kenneth Frampton even realised buildings there, before he went into teaching and theory. Elia had gone the same way, so he knew how to build.

Media

RH Could you talk about the culture of drawing in OMA?

RS I had this epiphany when I did my professional practice exam, during the lectures on building law. I found the relationship between common law, case law and written law in the English system really interesting. We were discussing the model of Partnership, and English common law has an interesting definition: two or more people coming together to make profit. But they don't define what profit is. When we were working on competitions, you win some, you lose some, but even if you lose and don't get the commission, you still make a profit. You have a project you would never have done otherwise, which you can publish. For me, that was a really interesting form of profit. There are many people doing a competition: most of them lose. They put the drawing away and its never seen again. Chalk it up to experience. But, in OMA, they were actually used to promote ideas through publication. This is a really interesting form of practice.

RH That's a very beautiful way of putting it.

RS But then, of course, to make this profit you needed teams, and to have it run properly. How do you pay these people when you're both teaching and you have your own struggles? My whole career at OMA was terribly underpaid! You did have people who would come there and demand a certain amount of money. I respected that, but it wasn't in my heart. Then, at a certain moment, I became a Partner and wondered if that was a kind of reward for all the suffering and underpayment.

Something that annoyed me a bit in the beginning: when you don't have many projects you have a lot of time on

your hands to develop an idea. There would be moments in my time with Elia when we'd be working on something and think it was quite good. Then Elia would always come back the next day and want to change or improve everything. For me, that was getting really annoying because I'd be doing presentation quality drawings and when something changes that needs the whole thing redrawn. It would just drive me crazy.

Coming to Rotterdam—working with the team here—it wasn't that long, drawn-out process. We developed a method of making sketch models that allowed the project to advance quite quickly. Especially for Rem, he could see things that maybe weren't evident in the drawings. Two very curious things about Rem: first, it was almost as if he had an endoscope surgically attached to his eye. He was constantly looking at models with it—he even had a case for it in the back of his car. The second thing: he would take these models to his office and look at them through the mirror. Maybe it was part of his 'paranoid critical method', but he told me that by mirroring the image he wouldn't recognise it and could critique it freely. New things could spring out of that. It's a certain design technique, I guess.

So, the model studio was an important thing. We eventually began farming out presentation models to Vincent and other professionals if a client would pay, or for competitions. But really the main thing was study models to develop the designs. For us, it wasn't something to be proud of: it was just a tool. A way of working.

At a certain moment, people started to say, 'Oh, Ron's a really great modelmaker'. It became a label that was attached to me. I'm just an architect who could make decent models. That's the way I see it myself. But it became very annoying at a certain moment, 'Oh, he's the modelmaker'. Forget about my drawings or designs—or being an architect even. That's the price of fame I guess! No one seemed to realise I could draw.

Authorship

Another funny thing: we never signed our drawings or put or names on them. But a guy called Gary Bates came to work for us, and Rem was very enthusiastic about him. Then, we were working on the Jusseiu library (Jussieu—Two Libraries) and we saw a little article in the New York Times with a drawing that Gary did—with a very chic looking figure in the front, almost Archigram-like—printed very small. At the bottom of the article the drawing was credited to Gary Bates. I thought, ‘That’s a bit funny’. I didn’t even notice if OMA was mentioned. It was like a whole new departure; he’s broken the unwritten rule!

On the other hand, there was a really nice OMA exhibition at Stroom Den Haag and some of the credits were downright wrong. I spoke to the curator and corrected a couple of things, because these things are hard to track down if you don’t know the actual provenance of the drawing. I imagine when you’re looking at the archives, you probably don’t know who did what?

RH Rarely.

RS But I can tell, ‘Oh, Xaveer did that’. If one’s Georges Heintz, Alex or Stefano I would know, but an outsider wouldn’t.

RH There’s an interesting cluster of drawings made by Xaveer, Willem-Jan and Luc Reuse, where they’re more likely to deny authorship than claim it...

RS Oh! Luc Reuse is incredibly talented. I remember, we did a competition in Berlin. It was two slabs opposite each other. One was the office, one was the hotel. Rem came to Luc with a huge piece of art paper—the kind Madelon would paint on—and said, ‘Do a perspective of this à la Mies van der Rohe’. Luc just nodded and made the drawing, in that rough charcoal style of Mies. It was beautiful. I found it in the basement at OMA years later—I think they even made a limited-edition silkscreen of it for an exhibition. Marty Kohn got a copy of it when he left the

office to go back to Toronto. I felt so jealous that I didn’t have one. It was such a beautiful thing.

Technique

Actually, that was another breakthrough by OMA in London. When I worked for Martin Richardson, he had little presentation drawings—tracing paper, ink drawings—and he would take it to a small printing studio in Holborn. They had a technique—not with ink or dye, not like a blueprint—but a kind of light process, like photostat that could print onto any substrate. You could print on plywood, canvas, whatever. Before that Zoe (Zenghelis) and Madelon (Vrisendorp) were doing the OMA presentation paintings directly on blueprints, which is pretty crappy paper, difficult to work on. I introduced that technique to them. Madelon especially did the most beautiful watercolours, but before that she was forced to do opaque gouache-type paintings. Zaha—because it was always a circle—was also going there for her work. Even in the student times, I think. It was three or four times more expensive than dyeline, but it opened up new possibilities for presentation drawings. It was really a breakthrough.

Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA)

[IBA Berlin, urban context isometric – OMA]

This is for the IBA in 1984. I made this drawing and it was a bit of a detective work. We located (Ludwig) Hilberseimer’s project. Trying to find the exact triangular site of Mies’ tower was a bit trickier. And then, the beautiful Metalworkers Union—the A-shape was built, but the rest was never realised. This is East and West Germany...

RH The green strip is the wall zone?

RS Exactly. I made the drawing but the project I made with Elia is not on here I believe. I think it’s Rem and Stefano’s...

RH Here, the patio houses...

[Koch-Friedrichstrasse, isometric – OMA]

RS Yes, exactly. For Rem and Stefano's project, they had four blocks for which they had to do a global plan and then concentrate on one of them. So, of the sixteen architects, each would have a plot assigned, but also each would do a masterplan associated with it. That was the format as directed by Josef Paul Kleihues. Elia with Matthias Sauerbruch did a project right here later on, at Checkpoint Charlie.

Rem didn't win this one, much to his annoyance. On the flight over to Berlin, the day before the presentation, Rem was reading a German newspaper and the headline was about some East German guard dogs savaging a woman who was trying to escape. At the jury it was considered a mystery why Rem would have such a low project on such a central site. All the other projects were quite large buildings. Anyway, Rem held up this newspaper and told them, 'It's irresponsible to build buildings that overlook women being ripped apart by dogs'. That kind of scandalised the jury. They were really upset about Rem's theatrics.

RH These are Stefano de Martino's drawings, right?

RS Yes. Stefano is just such an amazing draughtsman. A great architect and great artist too. It also looks like bombed-out Berlin, 1945. With the wall and chimneys. It was really quite a work, every house is different.

[Lützowstrasse, overview isometric – OMA]

But with Lützowstrasse, our site was the ends—the street frontage—to these rows of houses. Elia really wanted to propose a way of protecting their gardens and defining the public spaces. Welcoming and guarding.

[Lützowstrasse two-sided aerial perspective – OMA]

I made a 1:500 model of the project, out of blocks of really old teak wood from a massive door that someone had brought to the workshop at the AA. It was a very greasy wood. So, we made a beautiful model with that, and then

it was photographed from the two directions. Elia had the two images superimposed and projected onto a piece of plexiglass, from which I made a line drawing that Zoe then turned into a painting.

So, these were the two different views. In the middle, because they overlap the forms are abstracted, I was just freestyling them, but the rest was pretty accurate on both sides.

[Lützowstrasse, kindergarten detail painting – OMA]

This is another painting by Zoe from the model, with the kindergarten.

RH I always wondered why these were so abstract, like objects in a Giorgio Morandi still life. It makes so much sense that it's a painting of a drawing of a model!

RS It's really quite accurate in terms of replicating the model. It's actually an elegant little proposal, with the raised creche, the big playground and the ramp up for the kids to the classrooms.

These are just constructed perspectives that I made. They aren't from the model. I always suffered with perspectives, but Stefano could do them like that [clicks fingers]. I would take a while to work them out.

[Lützowstrasse perspective vignettes – OMA]

RH It's interesting—also relating to something you mentioned earlier—beyond personal style, it's possible to discern a perspective by Stefano just by the geometric precision. Arnhem, for example.

RS He's just amazing. There are those big drawings, but he also made a series of twenty or thirty vignettes, walking through the prison. Like a story. He made them so quickly, but they're so beautiful. He's the master.

Parc de la Villette

[Parc de la Villette, general arrangement plan – OMA]

This was funny. Martin van Schaik inherited one of these from Hans van Dijk—a critic, who died recently—and I hadn't seen this image in years until he showed it to me. It was produced by a silkscreen artist in Amsterdam who did most of the screen prints for OMA.

RH Including the Boompjes triptych?

RS Especially that. He really was a master at silk screening. These were all strictly limited editions.

[Parc de la Villette, concept layer diagrams – OMA]

Rem was like a conductor of an orchestra. He was really setting the principles for this, but a lot of the work was done with Elia. I remember, in our studio in Camden, Elia was making these analytical drawings one after the other. They were all superimposed in the final project, but to understand the project it's really interesting to analyse the individual layers because there's a very clear logic. When you superimpose them it seems almost chaotic. Once you separate them, they become self-evident.

RH I'm a huge advocate of this kind of self-analysis of projects.

RS It's very interesting, now that I think of it. Winy Maas, Yushi Uehara and Willem-Jan Neutelings too, they had a very interesting technique where they would make a rough sketch and then put a piece of trace over it from the roll, refine a bit more, and then another layer and refine, and again and again. So rather than erasing anything they would just make versions, each time becoming sharper. Adding things and omitting things to make the idea clear. Amazing to watch. Instead of a rough drawing and final drawing, it's just a process. A progression from the very rough to the very fine, but each layer in between has its own purpose.

[Parc de la Villette, point grid formular – OMA]

Rem and Elia never struck me as particularly good at maths, but suddenly when this was published there was this very complex mathematical formula. I'd be curious to find out if they even know what that means! I certainly didn't. Like these mathematics professors on the chalkboard...I chuckled to myself when I saw this.

[Parc de la Villette, 'The Pleasures of Architecture' poster – OMA]

This is Alex Wall. This was a very strong concept. I can't remember whether Jan Voorberg was still alive then, but I think he might have had some influence on the idea of growing cypress trees, or Poplar trees—which grow super-fast—alongside other trees which grow much slower. There was a really interesting idea about time as a factor in landscape design, which could have a spatial dimension. In landscape architecture, like Capability Brown, they would imagine something one hundred or two hundred years in the future, whereas architects see their scheme at its best in five or ten years.

Rem always had an interest in landscape, but for me this was always a very strong part of the project. It was a relief from the Dutch landscape strips, suddenly this largescale cluster.

[Parc de la Villette, model photograph – OMA]

The model! This was made at Hans Werlemann's studio—at Utopia—and Hans was really a great photographer. Well, he was more than a photographer... I'd call him a light magician. He also made Polaroid slides. The set-ups he would use gave a special quality, 35mm onto Polaroid slides. They gave an amazing quality when projected. Quite different from Kodachrome.

Anyway, this model was produced at his studio and it was only part of the terrain, not the whole park. In order to be stored it was then crated up, and it was quite a thing to unpack it and put it together. It was shown in Barcelona, at the architecture centre in the middle of the Gothic Quarter. But, for long-term storage, Rem was in contact with DAM, the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt,

and convinced them to have it in their collection. They accepted the boxes, unpacked them and they were shocked. When they were told it was a 1:200 model, they were expecting something the size of a table, not half a room. But part of the contract was that they had to maintain it, take care of it and have it available for any exhibitions it might be used for all over the world. Rem did a pretty sneaky but clever thing there!

There was a full team of assistants at the water tower working on this, and I would pop by maybe once a week to cast an eye over it. It was amazing to see them making it. But it was a model I did not physically participate in... thank God! What a work. It was great that Hans could photograph it. If you have a model like this and it's not documented when it's in prime condition, it's impossible to recreate.

Morgan Bank

[Morgan Bank, site model – OMA]

This is really Georges Heintz, a collaborator from Strasbourg. I made the 1:500 hyper-detailed model for the competition. The context is just foam blocks painted grey. The trees are sawdust, polyfilla and glue, painted green.

Very simple stuff. In the back you can see the Hilton Hotel. This in the New South—the plan of Berlage. Wim Quist ended up winning the competition.

I like this project a lot as well.

RH It's really not well known. In fact, I think some of the 'sober' OMA projects cause confusion or just get ignored. But this, with the inverted corner, is really smart.

RS Yes. You know Denys Lasdun did a building behind the School of African and Asian Studies at the University of London, off Bloomsbury Square going towards Kings Cross. This bronze-aluminium building with tinted glass which has a beautiful concrete corner like this. The rest is a very long block with an almost Miesian facade. But for me it was fantastic because across the street is this long

row of Georgian houses. It was like the translation of this rhythm and colours into modern architecture. Then, on the backside, towards the campus were these extensions coming out with emergency stairs, almost like a waterfall cascading out of the building—that's the facade you see from the School of African and Asian studies. So, it has two sides to it: one is this kind of Bloomsbury Street side; the other is the campus side. But for me, the highlight was the corner.

City Hall The Hague

[City Hall The Hague, isometric sketch – OMA]

RH You mentioned that Jean Nouvel thought ZKM (Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe) was the project of the century. I think this is.

RS It's funny you should say that because Richard Meier won the competition, and it was a total scandal. The city councillor who promoted the competition really had Richard Meier as a kind of shoe-in. Stirling dropped out and we took his place. So, some weeks had already gone by, and the deadline was coming. This was all done very quickly. It was only a very small team, but it was crazy because Kees Christiaanse came round giving everyone on the team a white envelope with some guilders in it—like a pre-bonus! This was unprecedented for OMA, but he knew there'd be a lot of late nights. Thank you very much!

But when it was exhibited for the judging, Richard Meier said ours was the ugliest building he ever saw! Later, I was doing a competition with Steven Holl in New York, working in this abandoned department store full of studio start-ups, on the Westside, 20th Street. One of the guys who was working with Steven told me how much he liked this project, and I told him this story. He said, 'I think it's a masterpiece', and I said, 'Well, Richard Meier thinks it's ugly', and he said, 'You'll have to take that as a compliment'!

I always knew it was a great project. For me, the strongest part of the project was that towards the old centre of the Hague, it had this stone facade—the same materiality as

the old buildings—but from the side where it's seen from the train and with the other modern offices, it's all curtain wall. Not quite schizophrenic, but certainly bipolar. Being totally modern but resonating with the city in material terms. Quite powerful.

[City Hall The Hague, 1:500 model tilted – OMA]

At this moment a student from Harvard University had a scholarship to travel around Europe and she came to our office. Her portfolio contained no drawings, only models. Beautiful work. So, we got her in to work on this project. She helped me on the 1:500 presentation model.

[City Hall The Hague, gypsum model test photograph – OMA]

Later on, Herman Helle, a very interesting artist who lived at Utopia made this model. He was kind of a wild guy, who later become famous as a comedian. But as a sculptor, he made this 1:200 plaster model with gypsum, for partition walls. Then, with a little peg and the back of a hammer, one indent for each window. Amazing work. Then, Hans Werlemann put in tiny little squares of reflective tape to make it look like the lights were on for the photographs. Real magic.

RH I'd assumed the windows were cast in. I didn't realise they were tooled.

RS Yeah, a hammer and a die. Different dies for different-shaped windows. A masterpiece. Such a bold way of making it—immensely powerful. Compared to Herman's, ours was quite anal-retentive. The complete interior of the public townhall... and it's not so big. It's just made from standard ivory-coloured styrene, with some white plastic columns and the sunken ice-skating pit from acetate.

[City Hall The Hague, typical floor plans – OMA]

But the plans are also great, the way it dematerialises as you go higher. Lots of possibilities for different sizes of office.

RH It's a beautiful concept, this kind of lamination of typical plans to make an atypical plan.

RS Yes. You know, Rem got the team together and right away we were in a kind of charrette to produce ideas. Rem didn't have an idea at the time. Neutelings was leading, and we were all doing our sketches, which Rem would take home on the weekend. Then, on Monday he came back with the project on a piece of A4 paper. There it was. But he would never have arrived at it without the process and the other people involved. People sketching and working on concepts.

Rem was really, in an almost contrarian way, looking at what everyone was doing and thinking about how to come at it from the other end. He needed to see all the possibilities to determine the opposite. Again, maybe the 'paranoid critical method'. Salvador Dalí kicking in again!

I heard also from Martin Van Schaik—who was working in Xaveer's office in parallel to his teaching in Ghent—that when Xaveer had no clue what to do, he'd have people producing options in isolation. Not together like OMA, but really separately, like a mini competition. Then he'd pick a direction. So, in a way he continued a similar process to OMA. The difference is, it was like putting three cats in a sack and having them fight to the death—and on Monday hoping that one is still breathing!

Value

RH What would you say is the value of OMA's working method during the years you were involved? What can we learn from it for practice today? What did you learn from it?

RS It's not easy to answer in a simple way. I have a lot of good memories from my work at OMA because of the collaborations, with all sorts of different people. However, if it was a project that Rem was deeply interested in everything would be subservient to that. On the other hand, if it was just a job in the office that he didn't care about, that was actually when you could really do something openly in a team framework. Maybe it gets

built or maybe it doesn't, but you still feel that you're making a strong contribution.

Because OMA was set-up in a particular way it became attractive to a whole group of people from very interesting backgrounds. There was always a whole pile of portfolios that people would send. When we had a competition or a project that had to be done quickly, we could just pick one off the top and call them up. Or someone would come to visit, maybe stay a couple of days and then it's 'Ok, you're ready to work, do you want to do something?', and they're around for a couple of months or years. Yushi Uehara came like that, Mike Guyer came like that—people just get sucked in. Being in the right place at the right time. The time I was there was a kind of hotbed, but offices have their trajectories. Or they go through certain phases. OMA came up in the 1970s and then it had a golden age. Well, I can't talk about the last twenty years because I've been divorced from it. Maybe I should take a look so I can draw my own conclusions...

RH That would be interesting: to see what changes, what's consistent, but also how the world in which that kind of architecture is made has changed.

RS If you look at *Oeuvre Complète* by Le Corbusier or Aalto's monographs—any of the great modernists—you see that the best architects evolve over their career. It's the same for OMA. It has its own evolution. Someday, there'll be someone who can put it all together.

Did you say you spoke with Elia? One of the guys who worked with us in London, Ricardo Simonini, was in Rem and Elia's unit at the same time as Stefano and Zaha. He once told me that Rem was an interesting teacher, but Elia was inspirational. I think Elia even got a European award for teaching.

RH Yeah, the RIBA Annie Spink Award.

RS Yes. He's highly regarded as a teacher. Rem, while he's spent years as a professor in Harvard, does it for research reasons. I'm sure it must have been interesting to be a

student of his at Harvard, but I think it would be exciting to be a student of Elia.

I think Rem is very good at picking a subject that fascinates him and getting students involved in very deep research—landscape, shopping or whatever it may be—and getting them to produce a really interesting document together. He's very good at being a team leader or director. In fact, at a certain moment when Rem became less hands-on in terms of designing, I saw him becoming more like an art director than a kind of chief architect. That's a very interesting role of course. You've got an overview, you can see how things are going and at a certain moment you might merge things together or throw something into the mix.

RH I've been wondering about different models outside of architecture that one could compare it to. One thinks of the way Andy Warhol's Factory operated, for example.

RS Yeah. Well, Rem was a 'student' of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol. One of his greatest honours was a full-page photograph of himself in Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine...

RH Is that right?!

RS He mocked the way architects think people want to live. Rem was asked where his ultimate accommodation would be, and he said: 'A suite in the Waldorf Astoria'. So, Rem loved that!

But with Rem and Elia, I always found it funny: this neurotic Mediterranean character with this rational, stoic Dutch guy. Totally sober. He would reluctantly celebrate with a shot of vodka from a bottle in his freezer! He always hated the whole wine thing, all the connoisseurs. He was a beer guy. The two of them were like oil and water.

RH In a project like the Irish Prime Minister's house or the Dutch Parliament extension, this discrepancy is really where the magic is, no? Those incompatibilities being actively interfaced and synthesised.

RS Yeah, absolutely. There was a certain moment, Elia told me—I don't know if it was social or invitation—but Kenneth Frampton came by in the middle of the design process. I wasn't there at that moment, but Ken gave a little crit of the Parliament project. It was formed with a vertical and horizontal slab, one was the public domain, and the other was offices, linked by a meeting hall. At the very first stage, it was just an extension across the ground floor of the slab. Ken suggested it should rise up and go across with a space underneath. That third view broke through and helped them.

Most of us designers are either dyslexic or impatient. Then there are writers and scholars who couldn't design their way out of a paper bag. Then there are a few people who are right in the middle, those are the really successful ones. Rem is great writer and some of his texts are so funny I have to laugh out loud. They're so short and sharp. Rem has this rare talent of seemingly giving compliments that you realise, after a few minutes, are daggers. That's a skill. But Rem could write—and his father, Anton, was a famous writer—and he could design. It's a combination that can be put to great use. Writing about his own work too.

Rem made a text called, 'Our New Sobriety'. In his little library in the studio there was this American economist in the 1950s who wrote a book with the same title. It became the title and theme of our installation at the Venice Biennale—the Strada Novissima—with the white curtain. I can't remember what project we were showing, but he had a swipe at Leon Krier; describing medieval guys making horseshoes, occupying Leo's buildings. 'Our New Sobriety' is only a couple of paragraphs long. I read it in Venice, and I was laughing like hell. It was so funny and so beautifully written.

But when it comes to the drawings, there's the design work and there's the presentation work. The presentation side gets very well known. That's how Rem and Elia really got a lot of attention, because of the beautiful paintings by Zoe and Madelon. That was a very clever way to promote themselves at that moment because magazines were looking for great front covers. Now, I don't really

follow it, but this whole evolution from hand drawings to computer renderings seems to have changed all that. I guess sketches are still important. But there's definitely a shift from draughtsmanship.

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