

Conversation: 021
With: **Herman de Kovel & Paul de Vroom
(with Jet Christiaanse, sister of
Kees Christiaanse and wife of Paul
de Vroom)**
By: **Richard Hall**
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Paul de Vroom Rem (Koolhaas) asked me to join in 1980. He wanted me to put the work that I had done for my final diploma project to use on IJ-Plein (Masterplan, School and Gymnasium): his first big commission. After that, I worked in another office temporarily to earn money to pay for my diploma project. I returned in 1982 on a freelance basis, because I was already trying to start an office together with two companions. Sometimes I was away because my own little office needed me—and Rem’s was also not big at that time.

So, I was on and off until 1984. After that, I also returned if there was an ‘alarm call’ to help with something. But that was the period.

Herman de Kovel I only worked there for one year. I met Rem Koolhaas at TU Delft, where I was studying. I did my final diploma project with Rem and Jaap Bakema—he was the professor and Rem was the guest teacher. I finished my studies in January 1980 and then I went to Berlin, where I met Rem again. He told me that he was going to start an office in the Netherlands, and he asked me to join.

I came back in the autumn and then he started the office. He had no office space, so we started in Jan Voorberg’s apartment—that was his partner at the time—in The Hague. Then he rented an office in Rotterdam where it was just me and Jan Voorberg. Rem joined us three days a week in Rotterdam and the other days he was in London.

After two months we needed extra people. Rem knew about Paul because of what he was studying for his final project, and I asked Kees Christiaanse to join as a student

worker. We knew each other from TU Delft. As you know, Rem makes no distinction between students and qualified architects. It’s all the same for him. So, Kees started before he finished his studies. It ended up taking him seven or eight years before he was able to complete his diploma.

I only stayed for one year because I was a little bit disappointed that we had no buildings to build. I was asked to work on IJ-Plein, which was an urban planning project. After half a year I thought, I would like to be an architect in the future, so I wanted to do some building—and after one year I left. I only worked on IJ-Plein and helped with the presentation for the Kochstrasse/Friedrichstrasse housing competition in Berlin.

RH You were both invited by Rem. What was the attraction—why did you agree to join OMA?

PdV We were busy organising an Avant Garde Architecture and Art exhibition at TU Delft. Gerrit Oorthuys—an architectural historian at the university—was a friend of Rem and introduced him to us. He said, ‘I have a friend who is doing great things with architecture’. No one in Delft knew of him. We were working on this exhibition and in came Rem Koolhaas—a very tall, shy guy—we talked, and we all thought he was really quite interesting. He already gave some small guest lectures at the school, but only on a temporary basis. We were nearly finished with our exhibition, but Herman thought Rem was so interesting—we all did—that we decided to include him.

Herman gave Rem Koolhaas his first interview in his life as an architect. He did it in the canteen of the university building. So, then Rem fell a little bit in love with our group! We were doing different things and that’s why he kept in contact with us.

Eventually, it became more official because he got his first Dutch commission. He took me to a bar and asked me if I wanted to work for him. He also said, ‘I’m going to have to go to Berlin. I want to see Herman’. But, it was very

informal—it was not a real organised thing—we already met all the time.

As students, we also arranged to get him an official position at the university. He was appointed to support students working on their diploma projects. We put the individual subsidies we got from the university together so that we could afford to have him every other week as the mentor for our group. From then on, work and study were always mixed. We studied with him, but working for him was the first thing we did.

IJ-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium

[The Blue Box, photograph – Paul de Vroom]

RH Can you tell me about the Blue Box?

PdV This is essential for my connection to Rem Koolhaas. When I met him, I was working on an urban research project together with my fellow student—and later office partner—Dolf Dobbelaar. We were investigating iconic urban planning, and these plans were collected into a suitcase because I was homeless. I needed a suitcase every night to work when I stayed with friends.

[The Blue Box, panel – Paul de Vroom]

This is the panel—a triptych—where I combined as much information as possible about a selection of 22 urban planning projects.

I constantly felt the need to include more and more information. Here you can see the panel with concertina folded tourist postcards. I added these so I could include more content. It was meant as a grid of information that allows you to compare everything at once. You can analyse the information without hierarchy.

That's what I really wanted to do: to compile all this information and use it as a tool for starting to design.

On the right-hand side you can see that I started to make objective projections of grids—I was obsessed with grid

systems—onto my final diploma project site, without designing anything. This very much intrigued Rem, so he asked me to use the same kind of method for IJ-Plein.

[IJ-Plein, urban prototype studies – OMA]

These are some of the systems I projected, you can see: left above, Ildefons Cerdà's Ensanche in Barcelona; below, Tony Garnier's Cité Industrielle; right above, Ernst May's Siedlung Westhausen; and underneath is the planning Le Corbusier did based on the Unité d'Habitation. I projected something like 22 of these projects.

Together with Rem and Jan Voorberg, we decided which ones we would choose for the IJ-Plein. Of course, not everything is usable in a specific location, so we agreed on which were suitable and we projected them onto the site.

For IJ-Plein we also went to Amsterdam to use this technique with the residents. In The Netherlands, people from the neighbourhood had a big say in the development process. That was really the democratic way of Holland in the '80s. It was all about talking to each other. We went there in the evening and introduced these studies.

HdK To add to what Paul is describing, IJ-Plein is in Amsterdam North, on the other side of the river. In those days it was like another city—it was nothing like the centre—there were only garden villages, social housing and some industry on the water. This area was becoming available for development and OMA were asked to make an urban plan for 1,300 homes, if I remember correctly. One of the difficulties of the site is that there is a tunnel below it, where you cannot build, along with other constraints from the old port. Paul and Dolf Dobbelaar's study tested the potential of this land based on famous historical examples. It gives a feeling of what is possible: if you make it high-rise, you only need three blocks for 1,300 apartments; if you do it like Barcelona, you get this many homes, and so on.

As Paul mentioned, it was a participation project with the people from the neighbourhood. That was quite important. As Rem has previously described, the

Elderman—Jan Schaefer—asked him to do this project, despite him having never done any housing nor being an architect who was used to dealing with participation. The other architect that they considered was Ralph Erskine. He had a lot of experience and did a lot of projects with participation, but he didn't speak Dutch. So, the Elderman chose Rem, despite his lack of experience, on the basis that he could speak the language!

About two evenings every month we had to go to Amsterdam and show the residents the studies we had done, to explain our thinking. So, a lot of the drawings for IJ-Plein are not real suggestions but were made to aid these meetings. The urban planning department of Amsterdam—the DRO—had already made an urban proposal, and sometimes you see their drawings, not OMA's. Sometimes, the drawings we made in the office were actually of the project by the city council. But we came up with other proposals too. We showed them what would happen if they made bigger blocks or smaller blocks. You must understand the drawings with that in mind: many were drawn for discussions at neighbourhood meetings and were not always serious proposals.

PdV The way we did it—with these projection studies—was considered quite unique at the time. It also influenced the planning department in Amsterdam very much: they tried to use it as a tool for their new planning areas too. I very much like that they inherited this from a student!

RH: Did the residents understand the studies you were showing them?

PdV The drawings were very easy to understand. It was not complex: by looking at them all, you can see the differences and have a discussion.

Once, we showed the Marina Towers in Chicago and they said, 'Chicago! We don't want buildings of Al Capone in our city!'. There was some discussion, and at the end Herman said, 'Well, at least we talked about architecture this evening! Don't you think it's fun, architecture?'

We were not accustomed to dealing with real neighbourhood inhabitants. It was a bit like being thrown to the lions—for Rem also. But it went well because we made it visual. They started to think about what the place could be, and they had the freedom to choose. They knew we were not trying to convince them of one plan.

Office

RH Herman, to go back to the question: what was it that attracted you? Why did you accept Rem's invitation?

HdK I admired him. It's as simple as that. I studied in Delft in the 1970s, when the most important teachers were Herman Hertzberger and Aldo van Eyck. A lot of other architects were teaching there but were less important in the discussion. It was either all about the *Forum* way of thinking, or it was people just teaching building.

Then Rem Koolhaas came. He came from the Architectural Association in London, and he had quite a different way of thinking about architecture and urban planning. In TU Delft, Rem introduced the idea of thinking in 'concepts': conceptual thoughts about the programme of a building and its place in the city. This was very liberating for the students in Delft. Suddenly you could think and work on a much bigger scale. The *Forum* architects worked from a different perspective and usually started with the small scale. Rem brought a totally different way of thinking, which I really liked. He was the young guy on the scene. Of course, he had already made that beautiful book, *Delirious New York*. I admired all of this, and that's why I wanted to work at OMA.

I had gone to Berlin to work for the architect Joseph Kleihues at the IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung). It was OK—I liked it very much in Berlin—but then Rem started an office in The Netherlands, and I wanted to be there.

RH Paul, since you were there longer, how did the structure of the office change during those first few years?

PdV Well, I was not officially working there. Initially I was only helping out with my projection study. But Herman and I went to find a place where OMA could have a real office. We found a place in the centre and Rem and Jan Voorberg decided to go for it. We started totally from scratch. There was really nothing! Some stuff was leant to us—Herman brought his own drawing table—but otherwise there was nothing there, just a table and some chairs. We were sitting there in one room, and if someone official came, we carried the table into another room where Rem could play the role of the office Director.

Our attitude towards the profession was to bluff. It was bravado! Rem was a star at romanticising what we did. He was mythologising our role from the beginning. He would say, 'We are on a mission!'; 'We have a child's crusade!'; 'We have to conquer the architectural world!'; and things like that...

Jet Christiaanse 'You are part of a cosmic adventure!'...

PdV 'You'll thank me. I've invited you to form part of a cosmic adventure!'.

In the beginning, I wanted to go back to finish my studies. Rem said, 'OK, you can put your drawing table over there', 'You don't need to pay—but you don't get money either—the only thing is that you must help us'. I thought, I will never finish my studies!

I decided to complete my diploma first and then see what happens. At that time, Kees was already part of OMA and we lived in the same squatted house. Rem was often coming to that house at night to work. So, there was something already very familiar. But when I was working elsewhere to earn money back from my diploma, Kees phoned me and said, 'Drop your pen. OMA needs you now!'. I said, 'No, I've promised to work for another architect, and I need money'. But then, after three weeks, I went to OMA.

It continued in this informal way for a while. There was Xaveer de Geyter, Arjan Karssenbergh, and that was about it. Maybe five of us at most—and Rem was away a lot. He

was in Holland from Tuesday to Friday. But he always had a lot of obligations, so he depended on us. He coached us a bit on how to do it, but we were only entering the professional world—we didn't know anything.

He would always say that we had to be naughty and arrogant. Once I was in a meeting for the De Brink apartments project in Groningen—two apartment towers—and he phoned me. They brought a telephone in during the meeting! It was really funny. The only thing he wanted to know was, 'Are you arrogant at the moment?'. I was alone in the meeting, and he really cared about this. He always thought I was too polite on the telephone.

The strange thing is, normally employers want experience. But with Rem, it really worked in your favour if you were self-taught, lacking experience...if you had no work experience that was regarded as a bonus in the office! What I learned from this—like we did with the IJ-Plein study—was to use architecture as the main tool to convince the various parties. Our strong points were being crazy about architecture, drawing all the time and doing things that could be shown to other people. This is also what we did with our own office later.

At a certain point, OMA was getting bigger commissions and Rem said, 'Well, we have to be an office'. Sometimes they would call, 'Please come to the office. We have an important client coming', 'Take some paper from the drawing table and walk around looking very serious, very busy'—and we staged an act in order to look like a real office. Again, we did the same in our own office too: putting something on the wall in empty rooms, 'this is the meeting room, this is the canteen'. After the people went, we could leave the rooms empty again.

This bravado was really fun. When you're young you like it, because none of us had experience either. We just made the most with what we had. But I didn't stay so long—just a few years—because the office didn't grow so much. It was hard to get the first projects built. Plus, Rem had a second life in London. We were just a group of five people, that was everyone we needed.

Jet, my wife who is here, she was also doing all kinds of things. Kees' brother was also the secretary. We all did it together. And, of course, we didn't get paid at that time. It was our life. We had lunch—which was also our evening dinner because we could not afford anything else. But we did not need to because we also went to the office to eat, even on Sundays when we were not working. Kees and I would go there from our squatted apartment to eat breakfast together.

Collaborators

It was a good period. Everyone who came at that time was not so known. Xaveer de Geyter was there...

HdK Willem-Jan Neutelings...

JC Stefano de Martino...

PdV Stefano was coming sometimes from London. But, at a certain moment, Rem wanted people who could deal with building.

Mike Guyer was there. He was a kind of semi-trainee. But there was no hierarchy, so everyone was quite busy doing the projects. It was a very informal atmosphere—and we thought everything we did with incredibly important.

The most dramatic event—and it's a known story of course—was when a phone call came in one day that Jan Voorberg had been shot in Rio de Janeiro. He wanted to see a building and he was shot by robbers. That was quite a dramatic moment. Rem needed a partner and he looked for other people. In the end he decided to ask Kees.

HdK Kees was already quite important in the office. In the first year I was there, he already started organising things. He had contacts. It was Kees who asked Hans Werlemann to take photographs. He organised a lot—perhaps even more than Jan Voorberg. Kees grew into this role of being a kind of manager. Later, he was even doing the finances, because there was very little money and Rem isn't great at paying bills and that kind of thing.

PdV Yeah, Kees cleaned up the economic situation of the office. It was in so much debt, partly because Jan Voorberg didn't deal with taxes. Somehow, he didn't consider it to be obligatory, so we had big debts for such a small office. Kees cleaned it all up, which meant the office could grow more easily.

Naivety

RH I'm intrigued about this Child's Crusade? Kees mentioned it too. I find the combination of naivety and confidence astonishing. You can see it in drawings like this.

[IJ]-Plein, overview isometric – OMA]

HdK I made these empty isometrics—and a lot of others like them! But this is not a real proposal. It looks like this one is probably the blocks from the Amsterdam planning department's scheme, maybe modified a little bit. It's really a drawing where we're thinking about what to do. But usually, when you see these kinds of drawings for IJ-Plein, I made them. This shows the scheme in the context of the old garden village next door and the river IJ.

PdV In terms of drawing—especially for designing and repetitive work—we used all means of representation for the cause. There were models, collages, drawings, and there was no preconceived office style. Draughtsmanship was more akin to the art world: never technical and rather naïve.

[IJ]-Plein, line drawing perspectives – OMA]

In my case, when I came back, I worked on the housing for IJ-Plein and Rem really liked the simplicity of my drawings. I made drawings in order to convince him—because when he was away, I would just work on my own and I wanted to show him what I had in mind—so, I made very, very simple drawings.

I made these kinds of drawings by hand. We did not work with computers. Later, when they were published, people

said, 'Oh, OMA must have good computers'. We were the computers!

I always used central perspectives. I liked that they are not about impressing anyone, but just to give a feeling of what kind of space it would be. Rem really liked that at the time. Especially because people like Zaha Hadid were becoming very popular, and when she came to visit, he wanted me to place my drawings on the table as a counterweight to the spectacular drawings that were coming out of deconstructivism.

Rem was always thinking of the next move. To be different from what other people are doing, and what other people expect him to do. He always made it just the opposite of what was in fashion.

Realism

HdK But not only. It also had to do with Rem's interests in those days. People like Stefano de Martino had been making very beautiful drawings—he was a very good draughtsman—but Rem was irritated by this at the time. It was too much about aesthetics. The drawings were beautiful, but Rem really wanted to get projects built. He needed people who were very practical.

At a certain point he even got a bit angry with Stefano because he was only making beautiful drawings. Stefano is someone who thinks that if something makes the drawing more beautiful, he can change the design a bit for the sake of that drawing. But when you work with contractors, they're looking for information. So, Rem needed more practical information in the drawings—not just beauty.

RH: After the 'paper office' in London, the pursuit of a 'real office' in Rotterdam seems quite forceful—even if it had to be slightly faked. It's interesting how aggressively realism was pursued at a certain point.

PdV Yeah, but in the beginning the office had a real income from the silkscreens. Even within the office, if there was no money Kees would say to me, 'We cannot pay, but please take a silkscreen'. The Floating Swimming

Pool or the Raft of the Medusa. Nice, but I cannot eat this! I really needed money. But that was the income of the office for some time. There was a draw with all these silkscreens, and anyone who was interested could buy them. We lived off that because there was not much income from the projects. Getting things built was much slower than he had foreseen.

HdK It is true, in the Netherlands, Rem was well known as a paper architect from London. But he wanted to build. That's why he got irritated with the beautiful drawings. Everything had to be practical in those days, but later on it changed again of course. This whole episode has everything to do with his fame as a paper architect.

RH: It seems that IJ-Plein, and some other early projects in the Dutch office, are almost like demonstrations. There is this kind of super-*Sachlichkeit* (objectivity) mode, soliciting pragmatism to an almost perverse degree.

Drawings like this show nothing but the architectural idea and yet, as you say, they are not artistic. They're all about organisation.

More than just an attempt to engage with the reality of building, it's almost like reality is hijacked and put to work for the architectural 'cause'. I know projects like IJ-Plein have a mixed reputation, but I think they served a very important—if brief—catalytic role in the history of the office.

[IJ-Plein, type drawings – OMA]

HdK In a way, yeah.

Value

RH In retrospect, what would you say is the value of that period of OMA for practice today?

HdK It's a difficult question. After this, Rem never talked about IJ-Plein again. Even in *S,M,L,XL*, there was no place for IJ-Plein, while it was quite important at the start of the office in Rotterdam. I think he was a little bit disappointed

about how ‘normal’ the whole project was. But for housing in the Netherlands, it was quite an important project. A lot of people looked at it. But I think it was not where he saw OMA’s future. Looking back, I also believe that the quality of the realized project is poor. Especially the triangular part of IJ-plein. Of course, it’s all social housing, but in my opinion the knowledge was lacking in the office to manage the architects of the sub-projects.

PdV The reviews in America were devastating—they really hated the project there. I heard about it from Alex Wall, who was still connected to what was happening in the US. It was really sad to hear. Because of this, I think Rem decided not to continue with this kind of work. As Herman said, he didn’t want anything to do with this part of his past.

This was quite difficult for us—not that we only wanted to work in this way, of course—but he was so radical in his shift. He’s always radical. When he stops with an influence or a direction in his work, he stops completely. Including with people. In real life, that’s not so nice. But of course, we didn’t depend on him. This was important, but we could go our own way.

I’ve kept all of those young experiences in my memory—and also used these experiences, these tactics. They have been very helpful. He gave us freedom, especially when we were still being controlled by the university in Delft. We will always be thankful for that.

That is the value of his contribution to us. But it is not that I would have wanted to follow this or be part of it forever. I was glad that I found my own direction. He has done so many things that I like and don’t like. But that’s just my opinion.

HdK I think it was all very naïve to be honest. When we started on IJ-Plein, Rem had no experience—we had no experience—and everyone was waiting for OMA to make something special. Perhaps that’s why he called it a ‘children’s crusade’. I don’t know if he would still do it like that if he had to do it all over again.

For us, it was quite an opportunity to work on a big, real project while we were so young. But what I’d hoped for was to get experience in building. Nobody knew! So, at that time I was not satisfied with working in this office.

PdV I have the idea that when we worked there you had to find it for yourself. There was this specific guy—like in my student days—who could always put his finger on the point where the project was weak. That was Rem’s big talent. I’d take his comments home with me and think, ‘God, I’ve been working for a whole week, and he immediately shows me what’s wrong’. That is something individual. It’s not a method you learn. You learn a way of working—and you mix adventure, architecture and real life together.

This is a lesson I’ve used a lot. I worked in Moscow for many years before the war broke out, and I used what I learnt to get an enthusiastic reception for my projects. That helped me a lot. But in Holland, the atmosphere is less romantic. It’s a calculation. No one gives an opinion: they always say, ‘I’ll look at it later’. This is a setting that doesn’t allow for much adventure.

Paul de Vroom (*The Hague, 1953*) practices as an independent architect from 1977 to the present. He co-founded Dobbelaar & de Vroom architecten in 1977. He was the founding partner of Dobbelaar, De Kovel, De Vroom Architecten (DKV) from 1984 until the office closed in 2013. In 2014 he started a cooperation with Studio Sputnik under the name Team Paul de Vroom + Sputnik that continues to this day. From 1992-2019 Paul de Vroom was a guest professor at the leading schools of Architecture in the Netherlands and abroad. He gave lectures and workshops in cities like Madrid, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Toronto, Milan, Sofia, Moscow, Dushanbe and Jakarta, including the notorious series of ‘Terrace Lectures’ for the TE’TSAB International Summer Workshop in Barcelona. He was a jury member of various international workshops and competitions, a member of the editorial staff of the Dutch magazine Forum and a guest editor for the British magazine Time-Based Architecture (special edition on DKV Architecten and on Barcelona).

Herman de Kovel (Rotterdam, 1953) leads *De Kovel* architecten in Rotterdam. He was a co-founder and partner at *DKV architecten* from 1984-2013. Between 1990-2022 he was a guest lecturer at various institutions, including the *Academie van Bouwkunst Rotterdam*, *TU Delft Faculty of Architecture* and the *Berlage Institute*. He is a member of several advisory commissions, including for Rotterdam, The Hague, Dordrecht and Delft.
