

Conversation: 003  
With: Kees Christiaanse  
By: Richard Hall  
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*Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)*

**Richard Hall** Through which years did you work at OMA?

**Kees Christiaanse** I was there from 1980 to 1989 and became a partner in 1983. When I joined the office was very small, maybe three or four people plus Rem (Koolhaas) and his partner, Jan Voorberg, who was active in the Hague's politics and organised a strong lobby to create momentum for OMA's Hague Parliament Extension competition entry to get built. That is how he met Rem, who then asked him to become his partner in the office in Rotterdam. Initially they were a duo partnership, extended with a group of students from Rem's studio at TU Delft—to which I belonged—who were asked to help set up the office as a concrete practice. After three years, in 1983, Jan Voorberg unfortunately died. He was killed in a favela in Rio de Janeiro, he apparently wanted to visit the Pedregulho housing by Eduardo Reidy. After Jan passed away, I engaged in the management of the office and set it up as a limited company. The initial members of the office became equal partners in the firm. I worked both as the managing director and a designer until 1989, when I quit the firm and founded KCAP.

**RH** What attracted you to join OMA?

**KC** The architecture department of TU Delft in the mid-1970s was partly 'taken hostage' by leftwing students and assistants, who were—like in many European schools—primarily occupied with politics, sociology, and social housing, and less interested in design. Architectural design as an independent discipline was thought to be decadent. I was in design studios with Jakob Bakema's and Aldo van Eyck's teaching staff, in a group that was very motivated and interested in architectural design. We studied Adolf Loos, Jan Duiker and the Smithsons (Alison and Peter), Frank Lloyd Wright, Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra, but also the Modernista movement in

Barcelona and of course Dutch Modernism and the Amsterdam School, as well as the Bauhaus and German Expressionism. At a certain moment, five professors—Bakema, Van Eyck, (Herman) Hertzberger, (Francoise) Choisy and Gerrit Rietveld (the son)—threatened to leave the school due to the inner political situation of the faculty.

Then Gerrit Oorthuys invited Rem as a guest-teacher to Delft. We were fascinated by *Delirious New York*, OMA's drawing technique and the re-installment of the discipline of design which Rem propagated. A lot of the group from the Van Eyck studio then moved to Rem's studio. This was a studio where we went back to the roots. The main things were conceptual thinking, theorising, designing, and visualising, as well as model-making. We felt very at home there and formed a kind of enclave around Rem, whose nickname was the 'boring fascist' (coined by Peter Cook).

I remember Rem giving a lecture on Mies van der Rohe. The most dominant leftwing activists of the department took the seats on the first row, with the intention of subjecting Rem to a cross-examination in the Q&A—probably in order to let him understand that he did not belong in the department. But the lecture was so solid, inspiring, and innovative, that they were flabbergasted and timidly asked polite questions afterwards. Over time this renewed focus on architecture and urban design got momentum and later, after we'd already left the school, it became much more influential. Eventually, Rem's teaching gave the architecture faculty at Delft a new impulse and the richness of the current architectural culture in the school is partly indebted to him.

*Preoccupations*

**RH** What were the main preoccupations and ideas that were circulating in the office at that time?

**KC** Actually, the office was very much preoccupied with trying to figure out how to transform from a paper architecture group into a practicing architecture firm, without losing the former's qualities. Rem called this 'The

Children's Crusade', meaning inexperienced people trying to quickly conquer a successful position in the profession.

One of the main underlying themes of *Delirious New York* was the tension between architectural and functional diversity on the one hand and urban coherence on the other. *Delirious New York* was also a fresh way—partly fundamental research, partly narrative—to describe and criticise urban and architectural development (which sometimes wasn't appreciated: I remember Bertrand Goldberg, the architect of Marina City in Chicago, saying that he didn't understand a word of *Delirious New York*). Rem's approach was, in a way, a fresh way of practicing research by design and combining research and journalism, maybe partly explained by his background as a journalist for *HP-magazine* (for which he interviewed Le Corbusier at the end of the 1960s).

Thus, we started to investigate grid cities and urban design guidelines and their effect on public space, architecture and programme. I found that fascinating—this is still the most important theme in my work as an urbanist: 'Control & Laissez-faire'. I try to create an overall concept and vision for an area, secure urban coherence, and at the same time allow for freedom of development. This thinking is rooted in that period in the early-1980s. We worked mainly on large-scale projects, like the waterfronts of Amsterdam or Rotterdam, less on individual buildings. We also were—from OMA's initial start in New York and London—engaged in the international competition culture, which was rather weak in The Netherlands at that time. OMA participated in a lot of international competitions and discovered that this was a world in itself which, as side products, delivered work via teaching, drawings and models in the form of art, publication in international magazines, contact with the international architecture scene and finally...commissions.

OMA originally consisted of only two couples—Rem and Madelon (Visendorp), and Elia and Zoe (Zenghelis). Elia, in one room with some AA (Architectural Association) students (among whom Zaha Hadid) that mainly did competitions. It made its reputation by creating a new

approach to architecture and urban design; new architectural concepts, which condensed into a new way of visualising, in drawings, paintings and models. This tradition initially was continued in the office's practical projects. We also derived income from selling art and producing silkscreens, in addition to the few real commissions in the beginning. This beautiful side of the work gradually transformed under the influence of the increase in real building projects and of course the introduction of computer-aided design. Painting was phasing out in the period from '83 to '86. The office in Rotterdam became a real practice, while the London office gradually terminated, because it didn't manage to secure commissions and sufficient income. I think this had not only to do with partners of different approaches or working in different territories. It had also to do with Britain, which at the time had a very closed architectural community in which it was hard to penetrate.

#### Offices

RH Do you know roughly when the London office ended?

KC It must have been '86 or '87, I guess.

RH So, there was a crossover of around five or so years between the London and Rotterdam offices?

KC Yes. Stefano de Martino and Alex Wall were working in the London office, but they started to increasingly work on projects that were acquired in The Netherlands or on the continent. They frequently came to Rotterdam. For instance, Ron Steiner moved from London to Rotterdam. Later, Matthias Sauerbruch worked in the London office on the project for the Checkpoint Charlie Apartments, part of the IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung) 1984 in Berlin. For the execution he moved to Hans Kollhoff's office and later founded Sauerbruch Hutton in Berlin.

#### Drawings

RH: In the shift from drawings as a conceptual instrument and as a commodity—as something that could be used to build a reputation or be sold—towards drawings used for

making projects, was there a shift in the types of drawings? What kinds of drawings were being produced when the office became professional?

**KC** Being in a children's-crusade, we had to become professional overnight. The culture of the office led, in the most interesting cases, to a complementary merging of conceptual and technical drawing. There were draftsmen entering the office who made technical drawings, which fascinated us, because we thought that that was 'the real thing'. This influenced the way conceptual and spatial visualisations were produced. I guess the visualisations became, on the one hand, more focused on their narrative and explanatory role and, on the other hand, they had to be produced faster, because of the time-schedules of real projects and the increasing workload, which also led to new techniques. The meticulous character of the original OMA drawings and paintings, which were very time-consuming, did not work in this new condition. Also, I guess technical drawings became more narrative and conceptual under our influence.

**RH** So, at a certain point painting ends. But it seems that other methods, like collage, continue and maybe become even more important?

[Exposition Universelle 1989, collage – OMA]

**KC** Yes, the collage is a very old medium—photoshop-avant-la-lettre—with which you could imagine atmospheric environments very quickly in an effective way. Collages were used from the beginning of OMA: think of the Exodus project from the mid-1970s and the collages for the Spears house in Miami. Initially we worked mainly with photo-collage/drawing combinations, as you can see in the Expo '89 project. Using collages was already a tradition in architecture, for instance Mies van der Rohe used the technique extensively. Also, several predecessors of OMA, like Archigram, Superstudio and Cedric Price were very skilled in collage techniques. It was a logical and natural process to use collages, but it's true that in later projects, like the competition for the NAI (Netherlands Architecture Institute) and the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, a different kind of collage emerged in the form

of scaled plans, facades and sections, executed as three-dimensional reliefs, containing materials like balsa wood to make window frames, corrugated cardboard and Perspex foils. They became more precise tools of architectural representation than the earlier atmospheric collages.

**RH** The collage elevations are more constructional in a way; they have a more direct tectonic engagement.

**KC** Yes, and they were a practical tool in meetings with clients and contractors to visualise a building's materialisation.

**RH** The other kind of drawing I noticed a lot of in this period are extraordinarily precise line drawings. Particularly line drawn perspectives and isometrics. What was the impetus for that kind of almost exaggerated precision?

**KC** I think this originated in the 1960s English and Italian avant-gardes, the Italian rationalists, and the New York architecture scene of the early 1970s, when architectural drawings began to be made consciously as art objects; as carriers of conceptual messages. It led to the so-called 'paper-architecture' period, which was also partly the result of young academic architects not pursuing real commissions.

As Rem was studying and teaching at the AA in London and the IAUS (Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies) in New York, this approach was part of OMA's vocabulary from the beginning. The isometric drawings, of which the 30-degree angle ones were sometimes quite distorted, also served as a design and analysis tool, while the perspectives were at the same time research into the real appearance of a design and a communication instrument to stakeholders. In the emerging computer drawing culture, we also found it a sport to make hand perspectives that looked like computer perspectives.

**RH** Could you cite some examples?

**KC** For instance, the silkscreen for the Boompjes Tower-Slab project in Rotterdam by Rem and Stefano. It is a bit like a medieval triptych: there is one large main image, with a number of explanatory images and diagrams circling around it, that support the information of the main image. It's like Dutch maps from the 17th Century which contain vignettes mounted around it that explain certain aspects of what the main drawing is telling you. The difference is that the OMA silkscreen incorporates the images as rather free parts inside the overall composition of the piece.

**RH** What kinds of drawings were you making specifically? Are there any particularly memorable ones that you worked on?

[Boompjes, worms-eye isometric – OMA]

**KC** I worked on drawings and perspectives of the same project, on the elevated tower-bridge. I made a kind of underwater isometry, and I made a watercolour perspective together with Madelon Vriesendorp for the backside of that project. I experimented also in photographic representation with the help of models, together with Hans Werlemann. I was involved in the drawings for the Parc de la Villette competition: how to render the systems of overlapping spatial typologies for different functions and amenities, in surfaces and layers. There is a drawing for la Villette—the layered plan drawing—which is simultaneously a very precise layout plan and a strongly evocative image.

It was a very inspiring period. I personally find the la Villette competition the most important project that I ever worked on. We experimented with the basics of urban design, control and laissez-faire, as well as the graphical representation of it.

#### *Projects*

**RH** What other projects were you involved in?

**KC** The main project I worked on intensively from the start was the IJ-Plein (Masterplan, School and

Gymnasium) neighbourhood in Amsterdam-Noord. It was the first comprehensive urban design and architectural project for OMA Rotterdam and an important source of income. I took over the project lead from Jan Voorberg when he passed away. The project consisted of the urban design of the whole neighbourhood, accompanied by very intensive stakeholder management with politicians and the surrounding population. The work included the selection and supervision of the architects of the housing projects and amenities. Consequently, we got the commission to design an architectural ensemble—IJ-Plein Oost III—consisting of around 200 social housing units, a neighbourhood centre, a supermarket and other amenities. This was my main project for quite some years, because it lasted from 1980 until around 1986. Later, OMA also got the commission for the primary school in the quarter.

[Boompjes, elevation sketches – OMA]

As noted, I worked on the competition for the Parc de la Villette and also on the studies for the Exposition Universelle 1989 in Paris, which never took place. I worked on several projects for the Rotterdam waterfront. In general, I focused during my OMA period on urban design and affordable housing projects. I did not work on large public building projects, like the Arnhem prison (Koepel Panopticon Prison), the Netherlands Dance Theatre, the competition for Très Grand Bibliothèque in Paris or the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, nor on highly individual projects like the Villa dall'Ava. I gradually specialised within the office on urban design and housing and thus this also became later the focus of, my practice, KCAP.

I also had a double role: I was largely responsible for the management, while Rem was concerned with content and networking. The best designers, like Xaveer de Geyter and Mike Guyer, were concentrating on designing. In 1989 I left OMA, as I realised that if I stayed, I would always be number two, three or four and tied to a double role between manager and architect. My ambition was to be an urban designer and architect. Of course, most talented people did not stay forever in OMA. The interesting thing about OMA is that it is a combination of an office, a school

and a research lab. One of its great merits—largely Rem’s merit—is that it produced a huge spin-off of successful offices around the globe.

#### *Collaborators*

**RH** With that in mind, who else was making an important contribution in terms of representation and ideas while you were there?

**KC** I think in all representation and visualisation until 1987-88 Rem was quite dominant. He mainly did sketches and tutoring; developing to a large degree the design and visualisation concepts and quite precisely guiding the designers. He was very demanding, but an important character trait was that he kept open to better ideas. In the 1980s, Stefano De Martino, Xaveer de Geyter, Mike Guyer, Willem Jan Neutelings, Alex Wall and Fumi Hoshino were the more outspoken designers in the Rotterdam office. Xaveer de Geyter designed the NAI competition entry and the Villa dall’Ava in Paris; Alex Wall drew the cartoon poster for Parc de la Villette; Stefano de Martino designed the Boompjes tower-slab in Rotterdam, the prison in Arnhem and the first Dance Theatre version, as well as the drawings for the town hall competition in The Hague—that was his temporary return in the office—but they were all in an intensive conceptual exchange with Rem.

**RH:** This relates to what I was alluding to in the introduction: the role of Rem as a director and editor in the design process. Is that something you could elucidate a bit?

**KC** In the essential projects of OMA, Rem’s conceptual and design-guiding role was indispensable and dominant. He was very demanding and not interested in compromises. He was also willing to take a lot of risk. He was conceptually superior to all of us and very inspiring, but also not easy to work with. However, as I noted before, the great thing about Rem in comparison to many of his renowned colleagues is that he was not interested in whether a good idea was his or someone else’s. He always had a nose for—and opted for—the best idea, independent

of its author. As he could do this, his leadership was accepted by the team, and it reinforced the willingness of the designers to work as a team. This is a kind of spiritual and intellectual generosity that not many people dispose of. And in the end, this character trait made up the unique quality of OMA, which produced so many successful designers.

To explain and reinforce the power of a project’s conceptual basis, a project-related type of visualisation was always developed, which would convey the essence of the project. For example, the tryptic silkscreen for the Tower-Slab in Rotterdam, the model for the Parc de la Villette competition, or the model for Melun-Senart. These approaches were extensively discussed and tested. There were intensive, amusing and rich discussions on what, why and how it should be represented. Sometimes this would result in a competitive charette.

**RH:** Could you talk a bit more about this competitive aspect?

**KC** As I said, the working method led to a situation where nobody was supposed to be the sole author of a project. And, as Rem ‘conducted’ the conceptual part of projects, people got engaged and developed a competitive mindset within the team. The most important thing was the extraction of the best idea. This is also the most important thing I took with me into my office. I think it is just great that you create a situation in which people’s contribution is valued, but there is no place for little superstars. Too much self-consciousness was punished by quality.

#### *Value*

**RH** What do you think is the value of that period of OMA?

**KC** OMA put architectural design back in the middle of the profession. The work that was produced, the ideas, the way of working had a worldwide impact on architecture and design culture. If you look how many offices all over the world have been established by people who worked in OMA, who also translated their experiences into their own work in a way that was somehow still relative to what was

done at OMA. It's just amazing. It's an enormous legacy, a major transformation and re-acknowledgement of the role of design, visualisation and communication in architecture and urban design.

***Kees Christiaane** (Amsterdam, 1953) founded KCAP in Rotterdam in 1989 (and Zürich in 2004). He has been guest professor at the Berlage Institute in The Netherlands, Chair of Architecture and Urban Design at TU Berlin, Chair of Architecture and Urban Design at ETH Zürich, Programme Leader of the Future Cities Laboratory at ETH Singapore and is now a Distinguished affiliate professor at TU Munich. In 2009 he curated the International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam, and is a co-founder of the Swiss Network for Ukraine.*

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