

Conversation: 012
With: Ruurd Roorda
By: Richard Hall
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Ruurd Roorda I left in '86. I must have started at the end of '81. Herman de Kovel had just left OMA and Rem (Koolhaas) needed a replacement very quickly. Apparently, he remembered me as a student in Delft. So, he called and asked me to work for him. I was really very happy at the time!

I worked there when I was a student, from '81 until around '84. But there were intervals where I worked hard for half a year and then I studied for half a year and then I returned...things were a bit unclear in the beginning. When I graduated, I returned to OMA, finding out after only two months that it didn't work. Something changed in me, and maybe also something grew in OMA that I didn't feel comfortable with.

RH Why do you think that was?

RR It was just some sort of pressure that was running through the office. There were also some questions in my head: wondering if this was the office for me at that time.

RH Were you in Rem's studio at Delft?

RR Yeah, he had a studio. He did a competition for the Irish Prime Minister's Residence in Dublin. Once he finished it, he set the same assignment for the students. I don't remember exactly how many our group was, but we did that project in 1980.

Rem and Jan Voorberg came often for dinner in a restaurant where I worked. So, there was this other coincidental connection too: he was my customer. They ate fish there before they went to either Amsterdam or

meetings with Carel Birnie about the Nederlands Dans Theater in Den Haag.

RH Were you always based in Rotterdam, or did you have any involvement in the London office?

RR We did move to London for a few weeks at some point to do the competition for Parc de la Villette. I had a bed next to my drawing board in the London office for a very short time.

Office

RH How was the office organised during those years?

RR I can only speak for the Rotterdam office because the London office was very small. I think it was run by Elia Zenghelis and it was really separate from all the things that were done in Rotterdam.

Up until '82 or '83—until the time that Jan Voorberg died—Rem and Jan were the chief architects. When I worked there, there were four or five people next to them. Kees Christiaanse had a separate room and also separate things to work on. He was, I think, the third person in the office but he had his own projects. The Boompjes building—and the idea to put a piece of the bridge standing up—was the project he was mainly involved in.

When I entered the office Jan Voorberg and Rem did the Dans Theater and the IJ-Plein (Masterplan, School and Gymnasium) in Amsterdam. I think Jan Voorberg was very important for those two projects.

RH What was the relationship between Jan and Rem?

RR I know the story that Rem did the Hague Parliament (Dutch Parliament Extension) competition in '77 or '78. It was an open competition and, although the scheme was recognised as important, it wasn't given first prize. Afterwards, Jan Voorberg—who was living and working in the Hague—tried to help get Rem's scheme executed. He started a kind of action group and sort of did some PR for the office, possibly without being acquainted with Rem at

the time. Anyway, at that time they came together and apparently Jan recognised in OMA some attitudes that he missed in Holland. He was very keen on connecting while Rem was in Rotterdam, working on the high-rise project.

Because of the book, *Delirious New York*, some local politician offered Rem the high-rise project as a gesture of goodwill. I think that was the start of the Rotterdam office. Rem travelled from London, where he lived with Madelon and his kids, to Rotterdam each week. I think he was in Rotterdam from Tuesday to Friday, and then a long weekend in London. He possibly even worked with Elia on the Monday. At that time, Elia only had Greek projects.

RH Just to go back a little bit: what was it that attracted you to OMA in the first place? Other than Rem offering you a job, of course.

RR I can't remember exactly, but there was this fuss going on; people were talking about him at the time. Especially at the university. My friend and later business partner, Klaas Kingma, had been doing an internship at OMA in the summer before I went there—he made axonometric drawings of the Boompjes project—so, he probably explained to me the importance of the office or how the office worked. I was interested in Rem also as a spokesman for new things, which I liked very much. So, very soon I was kind of hooked on him as someone who brought interesting things into the world where I was about to start working.

There was this—I don't know how Rem calls it himself—kind of group of boys that longed for his attention. Almost like a love affair, I would say. I think Rem recognised this too. Anyway, you had people like Kees Christiaanse, Herman de Kovel and other students who graduated from Rem's studio, who were kind of 'groupies'. Well, that's my interpretation: they would probably disagree!

Parc de la Villette

RH Can we talk about a couple of projects that I believe you worked on—Parc de la Villette and IJ-Plein—and some

drawings that I think you made? I understand from Elia that you drew this.

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

RR Yeah, that's true. I drew it and it was made into a silkscreen. We put Letraset colour stickers on to highlight the confetti; the point grid. As I remember, one evening we went for dinner at Rem's apartment—that was the only time I went there, together with Kees—and then Rem explained the way he wanted it. How he wanted me to draw the trees, in elevation. It was based on very ancient drawings of palaces with gardens.

[Parc de la Villette, point facilities diagram – OMA]

I also recognise this. This is really a project that we all worked on. I think the point grid thing was done by Elia: the overlapping of grids based on the distance that was mentioned in the brief for certain services.

RH Based on the formula.

RR Yeah, but the mathematical formula was done later...

[Parc de la Villette, planting plan – OMA]

This is a drawing that I think was done by Jan Voorberg in the second round of the (by then limited) competition. Different elements were designed by different people. The diagonal building in the south was done by Kees. I came up with the circular forest. There was also this thing about how the strips should end, and I think I was the first one who drew it from left to right—completely endless. I also remember seeing Rem Koolhaas on the drawing board, drawing a small axonometric. The only time! Otherwise, I only saw him use big markers.

RH What conversations were had in this process? You've got many people coming up with parts. How did they come together as one proposal?

RR I can't remember exactly how it went, but Elia and Rem came in the office at certain points, and we would

have these conversations. If I'm correct, we did it with Alex Wall and Kees. So, the three of us proposed things, drew sketches and drawings. But the main, original idea of course came from Rem: this kind of Dutch flower landscape. That was his fascination when he flew over Holland, landing at Schiphol. He was flying over the coloured fields, and they returned here. Actually, you could also see them in the garden for the Irish Prime Minister's Residence competition.

[Parc de la Villette, circular forest study – OMA]

I think this was also done by Jan Voorberg after the first round, with the help of Letraset. It is based upon input by the French landscape architects Claire and Michel Corajoud.

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

This is a drawing done by Alex Wall and made into a commercial silkscreen after the competition: after we found out that we were not selected. Of course, we believed that we had the best scheme at the time, so we were very reluctant to visit Tschumi's realisation...

[Parc de la Villette, coloured pencil sketch – OMA]

I think this one is by Rem. I did very few sketches: I just drew everything!

[Parc de la Villette, programme collage plan – OMA]

This is the way it started. Cutting up pieces of the programme and trying to put it in on site. And then we discovered that the park had nearly no surface for nature. Everything was programmed.

[Parc de la Villette, overview painting – OMA]

This is a painting by Zoe Zenghelis with a strange red forest. I liked her colours a lot, but I remember someone else saying, 'Why a red forest? Silly'.

[Parc de la Villette, 'confetti' overview painting – OMA]

Isn't this beautiful?! Wow!

I remember that Rem once explained how they did the competitions before. Also, at the time we did this actually. There was a schedule for finishing off certain competition drawings, which were drawn by architects or students who worked in the office and then printed on plastic foil. From this thick transparent material, they were printed onto art paper, and Zoe and Madelon could paint such things in half a day!

[Parc de la Villette, model photograph – OMA]

This I worked on. I did all the trees here. We had a lot of help from friends. At some point, I discovered that the best thing to use was actual pieces of tree and greenery from the shrubs in the city. That was the best way to show what we wanted.

It was photographed by Hans Werlemann. He used mirrors to guide sunlight onto it.

IJ-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium

And of course, I worked on the IJ-Plein. There were lots of ideas to put public sports facilities in the in the scheme, and in la Villette, we condensed them into a strip of sports.

[IJ-Plein masterplan, layout sketch – OMA]

This is before I came. When I joined, the definitive composition of the housing blocks was already made. I think this is probably the work of Herman de Kovel.

[IJ-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium plans – OMA]

This is a drawing by me. This was one of the first architectural commissions of OMA to be executed. I remember. It was based on a scheme by Jan Voorberg that he drew diagrammatically. But then, when the commission came, Jan had already died. In '84 I worked on it. I

remember that I had problems fitting the programme and the desired collectivity of the school into a longitudinal figure. So, at this point I came up with the idea of putting a playroom in the middle, within a curved wall. Which, I think in retrospect, is not such a beautiful and elegant solution. But these are indeed my drawings.

RH There are a lot of sequential drawings like these for this project. Variations on the same theme—always in groups of fours and fives and sixes. It's very nice.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium isometric option studies – OMA]

RR They are by me! When I see this, it is really youth work. I think I was influenced by (Jaap) Bakema too. The positioning of windows very near the structure in fact also refers to some sort of structuralism.

RH There are also lots of these little diagrams about space sizes.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium programme studies – OMA]

RR I think this was a booklet concerning the programming of the school, cut into pieces. Maybe I redrew it, I can't remember.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium shadow studies – OMA]

Now, this kind of drawing is typical for the time I worked in OMA. They made these kinds of drawings for all the housing too. It's about the sun: it's an analysis of the shadows of the gymnasium on the school.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium façade studies – OMA]

There's a strange anecdote that goes with these colourful things. Rem telling me, 'Well, you can make things very beautiful with colour, but also very ugly!' That had to do

with the green panels in the bluish front elevation. I think he hated it! He hated structure hidden by panels. He was very good at giving criticism and at the same time flattering you.

Directors

That's something that is very good about Rem: he really is not dominant about wanting his thing. He wants you to come up with something that he can use. In that respect—in my experience—that's how he works differently from Elia. Elia is a very precise architect who wants things done in a particular way. There's one project that you haven't shown yet, which I worked on with my later business partner, Klaas Kingma, which is Koutavos Bay. That's a bay in Kefalonia, a Greek island, where Elia had a commission to do a shore park—something about cleaning up the water of the bay. I remember that we drew several compositions of making paths and adding trees around the bay. At some point we thought it was done and we were very happy with the composition. But when we saw the final project, Elia had completely changed everything. For me that was a big disappointment. Different from what I experience in the Rotterdam office.

RH Such anecdotes, with Rem extracting the best from people—and being able to curate people's ideas—have been consistent in the conversations. I think it's an important component of the 'ambiguous authorship' I mentioned earlier. Or at least a very particular attitude towards authorship.

RR Yes, everyone knew that he was the most important guy and we had to listen to him. Of course, he never told you, but it was clear. At some point he called himself Dracula: biting you in the neck and drinking your blood. Probably in this sense, he was inspired by Andy Warhol. He knew he was taking things from people—and he needed some fresh blood now and then. Ripping-off was constantly mentioned too. I remember he said at some point, 'We will rip them back if they rip us off'. This quote probably referred to Arquitectonica, an office that built many OMA-inspired projects in the 80s.

Techniques

RH Another thing there are a lot of in the archive are colour pencil drawings. In different projects, in different ways, but always using a very similar range of colours. Even the small collection at the Drawing Matter archive includes examples by Willem Jan Neutelings and by Kees Christiaanse.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium coloured plan studies – OMA]

RR We used Derwent crayons a lot. But also, Stefano de Martino used charcoal and pastel. He made terrific, coloured drawings with them. The prison drawings were all by Stefano de Martino. Very neatly done.

At some point that changed. They accelerated the drawing process. Which I felt was a bit of a pity because I liked the very neat ones with the beautiful sunshine in them and everything.

But these, by me? Awful drawings! This was the first architectural project I did at OMA. But nevertheless, we always tried to make nice drawings in the end. Although this scheme was not so convincing.

[IJ]-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium organisation studies – OMA]

This diagram on the left was the way we tried to make an argument for turning what we call a ‘pancake’ school—a structuralist school, which is mainly horizontal—into something vertical.

Exhibitions

RH You mentioned the Greek projects. Are there any other projects that you worked on or other memorable drawings?

RR For IJ-Plein we made a drawing in coloured pencil that took us two weeks to finish! We went with the whole office at some point—I think in ’82—to New York. Probably

someone explained to you there were two exhibitions, one in the Max Protech Art Gallery—they had all the paintings by Madelon and Zoe, and maybe some work by Stefano de Martino—and then there was this larger but somewhat less arty exhibition in the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies. So, we were asked to make some drawings.

There was this axonometric of the Willemsbrug, a coloured drawing by Gerard Comello, and I with my girlfriend, Marian de Bock—who is still my companion and also, I work with her today—together we made a colour drawing of Amsterdam IJ-Plein. We mainly coloured the water because we wanted to show the connection to the city centre. It was a very silly drawing, but it was very large, and it took us a lot of effort! But our trip to New York was very nice after that.

Value

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

RR Putting things together and putting people together; grasping their best ideas and making something new out of it. That’s important.

But, if you ask me, I think Rem taught me to think about things and write them down—to remain rationalised—and also try to get to my own weaknesses. For me, he has been very influential.

RH This thing about ‘rationalising’—being able to clarify ideas and have a story for a project—is very particular in OMA’s work. A desire to rationalise is not the same as being a ‘rationalist’, of course.

RR Not rationalist, like Rossi or Grassi? No.

RH Rationalism in that sense is dependent on *a priori* ideas, or givens, about architecture—typology etc.—which are then applied to a situation. I think that the process of rationalising, by comparison, is much more fertile because you can accept complex, external forces and try to make something coherent out of reality.

RR Yeah, I agree. It's about constantly questioning the brief to begin with. This attitude goes much further than I'm able to. That's also one of the reasons I had to quit! Sometimes complexity can be too much. Being rational for me is just avoiding doing silly and superfluous things: surely a hard thing, not to be tempted by silliness in this era.

Ruurd Rooda (*Den Haag, 1959*) worked at *Koldewijn-Drexhage (1987-1988)*, co-founded *Kingma Roorda Architecten (1989-2015)* and was an architect at the *Rijksgebouwendienst (1994-1997)*, before co-founding *ROORDAENDB* with *Marian de Bock*. He taught at the *Academies of Architecture in Amsterdam, Groningen and Arnhem between 1989-2023*, and has been a teacher-researcher at *TU Eindhoven since 2009*. In 2016 he published *Vital Architecture* with *Bas Kegge*.
