

Conversation: **008**
With: **Willem Jan Neutelings**
By: **Richard Hall**
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Willem Jan Neutelings I started there in '81, actually very early. Rem Koolhaas was teaching at Delft in the late-seventies, when I was there as a student. He was living in London and had an office in London, but he was coming once a week to TU Delft to run his studio.

I attended the studio, and it was quite amazing. It was a completely different way of thinking about—and working with—architecture than what the Dutch architects were doing at that moment. Delft, at that time, was mainly influenced by Structuralism—like Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger and so on—so, Rem's studio was like a fresh wind. When I heard in 1980 that he opened an office in Rotterdam, I was very interested in going there and doing an internship. Which, actually, was quite difficult at the time. Before the internet, when an office had a new address, you had to wait a year before it was printed in a telephone book. So, it was rather difficult to find where he was.

Then, when I joined, there were only four people there. It was a very tiny office. It was basically Rem Koolhaas, Jan Voorberg—who was his partner at the time, who died later—Kees Christiaanse and Herman de Kovel. So, I was number five.

Actually—a funny anecdote—the reason why they asked me to come there was that they needed 'dummies', because there was a client coming for a new project and they wanted to appear bigger. So, my first day I just spent pretending to make a drawing, in front of a drawing board which was actually empty!

I stayed from '81 to '83—permanently for about two years—and then, from '83 to '86, I was there on a freelance

basis. Whenever there was a big competition or something coming in, they would call me, and I would go there for a few months—or half a year—to work with a team. So, I worked on many different projects in different teams, also with the London office, which still existed at that time. Often when there were competitions, we went to London for a few weeks. Or, at other times, people from London came to Rotterdam to collaborate on certain projects. In London, there was Alex Wall, Stefano de Martino, Ron Steiner, Elia—Rem was going back and forth—and occasionally other people. Even Zaha Hadid collaborated with the office.

So, it was between '81 and '86: really the early years of the office in Rotterdam. This was still in the 'paper' time. We didn't make buildings. There were projects, but they didn't materialise. It was before the big 'boom', that came in the nineties.

RH So, you were a student of Rem's, before you joined?

WJN Yes, I participated in his studio. I think most of the people that worked in the office then came out of the studio.

RH Over the course of the five years that you were involved, how did the structure of the office change?

WJN Jan Voorberg was a partner in the beginning. The anecdote is that Rem Koolhaas came second, I think, in the competition for the Dutch Parliament Extension in around '78. That was his breakthrough in Holland, where he got known. He didn't get the project, but there were people in The Hague who were supporting his scheme. One of them was Jan Voorberg. So, that's how Rem met Jan. He was an architect of his age, and he became the Dutch partner—doing the practical things in Holland. Jan was shot dead in Rio de Janeiro on holiday. Then, Kees Christiaanse did a lot of the managing tasks in the office during the Eighties.

RH: Was the office still relatively small when you left in '86?

WJN We moved to a much bigger office, and we were twenty to thirty people at that time, I think. That was also the moment when the office made a step from just doing projects and competitions to starting to build. So, some more technical people came in to do the execution drawings, and to do construction and surveying and things like that.

Netherlands Dance Theatre

I worked on the Nederlands Dans Theater at that point—which was first in Scheveningen, later in The Hague—and that was one of the first major public buildings that got built. I worked on the preliminary design and the final design, but then I left before they started execution.

RH This drawing—which I believe you made—is for the Scheveningen version of the scheme, isn't it?

[Nederlands Dans Theater Scheveningen, context cartoon – OMA]

WJN Yes, that's right. The model is also the original scheme in Scheveningen. The circular theatre you see in the centre is the existing Winter Circus, with the new theatre next to it—but it was actually too big. It went out of certain lines and had problems with tramways.

[Nederlands Dans Theater Scheveningen, elevation – OMA]

This picture is of a second variation, which was smaller. There had been several versions and then, when construction was about to start, the project was moved to the Hague city centre.

At a certain point, for political reasons, they wanted to combine the concert hall—which was also in the design phase—with the Dans Theater. It was a financial decision. Since they were both paid for by the city, they forced the two organisations to go together. Actually, the client also liked it because they preferred to be in the city centre.

The problem was that it was quite a deviation for us, because we were very far with the project. Also, this was a very difficult site—it was too small—so, there was a lot of trouble to redesign it.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, worms eye isometric – OMA]

What you see here is a drawing of how it was built. We can also see immediately the complicated drawings we were making. It's an axonometric, but it's seen from the bottom up—as if you're underground, looking up towards the ceilings. It's a way to look inside the building...up. But one of the interesting things to understand is that we used many different techniques. They were all mixed in parallel with each other—many techniques which I think people don't do anymore actually. Well, they were fashionable at the time.

You had all kinds of isometrics and axonometrics. Also, the famous cavalier perspective, which is an oblique axonometric where you see the elevation like in a Chinese drawing. But there are many such techniques that we used. Stefano de Martino was especially good at that. I think this might be a drawing of his...I'm not sure.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, worms eye sketch – OMA]

Then, of course, we worked a lot with coloured pencils. We loved Derwent: an English brand of very good quality—very greasy—so, the feeling in your hand was very nice, and it stuck very well on paper. Many of these conceptual drawings were made. The idea is that you do not draw something to look like a photographic impression, but you draw it to understand your thoughts and your ideas—and you try to convey them.

Concept

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, lobby sketch – OMA]

I don't know who made this one, but it looks like Rem, I would say. What you see here is the foyer—the yellow-golden line—and then there is this column forest under the red central area, under the main auditorium. Then there is this floating blue thing—the floating champagne bar—and then the cone on the right is the restaurant. It's an idea about a sequence of public spaces, with different shapes and forms. It is really a way to communicate with others, or maybe more to organise your own ideas, to get a very 'crisp' guiding idea.

At this time, there was a very strong emphasis on what was called 'concept'. Not in the perfect English meaning, but it had a sort of Euro-English meaning: the concept was some guiding idea that you had to follow. I don't know what a good translation of it is. It is not a 'concept' in the sense of something that is made from a 'conception', but it's more about the sort of 'freezing' of an idea that can be materialised in some way.

In this way, you try to materialise the idea through a drawing: the drawing is trying to capture and explain the idea. It helps you to think and communicate. For instance, what is interesting is that all these forms and shapes are circular—rounded-off—in opposition to the very squarish building you saw in the upside down axonometric. So, you see that there is some sort of idea. It's even the idea of colour.

But there are many of these kinds of drawings. You have to imagine that you would make a whole number of them—everybody would make them—and then we would discuss them; hang them on the walls and talk about it.

At the same time there was a secret artistic pretension, I would say. In the end, they look sort of like El Lissitzky's *Prouns*. We studied a lot of the Constructivists: (Ivan Illyich) Leonidov drawings, El Lissitzky collages and (Aleksandr Michajlovitj) Rodchenko collages.

There was an artistic idea about drawing, in the sense that we sold the drawings as 'art'.

That was a very interesting thing: in the late-seventies and beginning of the eighties, there was no work. So, you had all these so-called 'paper' architects. The only thing you could do—because there was nothing to build, there was a crisis and there were hardly any commissions—was just make drawings. They made very beautiful drawings too because they had a lot of time. Then they sold the drawings. I remember we used to joke that we were 'drawing money'! Whenever you made a drawing, immediately it would be taken off your drawing board and sent to New York to be sold.

I even remember that I went—in '81, '82 or so—to a big show of architectural drawings at the Max Protetch Gallery in New York. He sold drawings of Zaha Hadid and all the rest of that generation—who made many, many beautiful drawings. They were sold for quite some money: a few thousand. I remember that, with three people from the office, we went to the show, and we had huge cardboard tubes filled with precious drawings that we had to get through customs. When we arrived at JFK Airport with these huge tubes and the customs asked us, 'What is this?', we had been prepared: we were to say, 'It is architectural renderings'. So, we told them, 'These are architectural renderings', and they would just say, 'What?! Go on, go away'. What fools would bring big tubes of paper all the way to the United States? But, of course, the paper was worth a lot of money: we were smuggling them to Max Protetch.

So, the drawing had the role of trying to get your ideas together and trying to communicate within the team, but the drawings were also something nice, which could live on their own in the world. People might like the drawing even if they don't know what's behind it. It has a character; it has something special.

This is very different from architectural drawings nowadays. Today, everything is so direct. Everyone expects a photorealistic image of a building, as if the building is already there. I mean, this is getting more and more problematic: you don't even know anymore whether you see a drawing or a photograph.

But this kind of drawing was not so much meant for clients or for other people. They have an autonomy.

RH It's true, contemporary drawing practice—and rendering in particular—has somehow sacrificed this conceptual dimension you're describing. From my view of architecture, this is a real problem. Without conceptual clarity one misses the point of architecture... in my opinion, anyway.

WJN Yeah. It has to do with the people too. I think it's true that computer drawing gives you another mindset, but I always had a problem in the Nineties when people were talking about these blob things. They were very proud because they could get blobs out of the computer. But I told them, 'You can also get a 90-degree angle out of a computer!' It's you, yourself, who is making the computer do it. There's this misconception that computers are making architecture and not the people. You can also do conceptual drawings on a computer.

RH Yes!

WJN But I must say that I'm a bit old-fashioned in that sense. I'm not sure it's true, but I still believe in the hand-eye coordinated drawing, which means that you feel the composition with your hands. I think your motor system—with proportions, let's say—can feel the length and width. There's a more direct connection between your body and your brain—between your eye and your hand—than with a computer. The movement that your hands make when you use a computer mouse, or a pad or whatever, is different. That's why, when using computers, I always try to use a computer pen today. I use the iPad a lot when drawing, but with a pen because it feels closer to the pre-computer way of connecting your hand and your brain.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, isometric cartoon – OMA]

But anyway, this drawing is one that I made, I guess. Sometimes there's a name on it, but it happens not so much.

This is a drawing of the version in The Hague, where we merged the concert hall and the dance theatre in one building. But of course, it never happened because there were two clients and two architects. This is a very simple drawing with a felt pen—a fine liner—on transparent paper. We used fine liner a lot because it was an easier way to ink. Before you would use pencils, but the pencils of course didn't give a lot of contrast, so then you would 'ink' the drawing with a Rotring pen—the old pens to line drawings—but you can't do a real hand drawing with them: it's too scratchy. So, the other option is to use fine line pen. The felt pen was an invention from the late fifties and the sixties, which then became more common. That was the easy way to do it. But the problem with these felt pens is that they're not light resistant. So many of these drawings have disappeared because of the ink fading.

But this is also a conceptual drawing. This is an axonometric, describing an organisational principle. It tells you about the special roofs over the two main halls as a background, with some smaller objects in the front.

Cartoons

RH Alex Wall mentioned that you were often making these cartoon-like drawings. Why was that?

WJN Well, first of all, when I came in the office, there were people that could make incredible drawings. Stefano de Martino was incredibly good. Really beautiful art drawings, with a lot of coloured pastels. But everybody had their own speciality. Of course, Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis were painters. These were real paintings, which they used, for instance, in *Delirious New York*, but also for design projects. There were people that were extremely good at models. Actually, you talk about drawings, but the models were more important as tools for the design than the drawings, because the models are three-dimensional. Ron Steiner, for instance, was a very, very good model maker.

I was raised in Belgium and Belgium is the home place of cartoons, and the famous Tintin. So, I always made these

kinds of drawings already when I was younger. What is very interesting in cartoons is that, with very few lines you immediately know that you're in New York or China or Yugoslavia or whatever. They are able to capture a situation or context in very few lines and—not only the context itself—but also the spatial concept, the emotion or the atmosphere of the scene. That always amazed me.

Strangely enough, in the seventies when I was taught architecture, we were taught to draw in a very complicated way. The architectural drawings in the seventies were extremely complicated. You needed to do a lot of lines. If you had a lot of lines, it was considered very interesting... and the lines had to cross! I really didn't understand why drawings had to be so complicated. So, I always liked cartoons as a drawing method to explain something. That was very rare, and since I was better at that than other things, I started to do that. Many people joined the office with their own specialities: one was doing this, one was doing that.

As a result, interestingly, the office did not have a single drawing style. There were other offices, let's say Richard Meier or whoever, in that period that would produce the same type of images the whole time, the same type of drawings in the same type of technique. Of course, that is a very efficient idea: it makes it very easy for an office to be recognised, because they always do the same. It's also easy for collaborators in the office because they know what they have to do. You don't have to choose colours. You know that if you're in Meier's office, you do only the white or black...it's easy. So, it has that advantage.

But the advantage of OMA was that you got many, many different ideas; different techniques; different individualities—and you can use them for the appropriate purpose. You see that such a drawing is a completely different drawing than the other drawing or the drawing before. Every technology, every technique has its own merit—and it also allows people to express themselves. For me, it was easier to express in this type of drawing than in a complicated pastel perspective. At the same time, Stefano de Martino could do that perfectly.

I think that was a deliberate idea of Rem, to have all these different people in the office and to assemble from all these ideas, rather than to shape everybody into one single system. I think that worked very well. I don't know how it is now, but I think it worked in the beginning. It was really very successful because it also attracted people to participate.

One thing I did a lot was make scenarios, and the cartoon allows you to do a scenario. You could do a strip of six drawings, and you could put text with it or even balloon texts on it, and you could see transformations: you could see night situation or different programming or events taking place. This scenario thinking was very important then, but also in my own office later. Especially for public buildings, we did a lot of scenarios of how it could be used. Therefore, cartoons are very, very interesting because they can easily communicate a scenario to the public, with the combination of text and drawing.

It's strange because in architectural drawing you never use text. What usually happens with architectural presentations is you get a huge text of a few pages—which is completely incomprehensible—and then you get a number of drawings. But what is interesting, if you read a comic book, you get immediately the text with the drawing. That gives you a very easy way to explain your idea. I think it's very good for communication. Also, the cartoon works the other way around: you are forced to make something very simple. If you can't make a cartoon of the building, the building sucks, either because it's too complicated or there's something missing. If the building concept is clear, you can easily make a cartoon. That's something I found out. It helps you to see if your proposal is OK, if it makes a good cartoon.

RH The relationship between cartoons and diagrams is very strong in that sense, isn't it?

WJN Of course. The cartoon is a sort of diagram. But there's a little difference. A diagram is more scientific—or pretends to be more scientific. You can measure it. Usually, it tries to quantify something. Cartoons retain a naivety. This naivety helps you to communicate and it also

gives you a little bit of humour. It might also work against you in that sense, that people don't take you seriously enough. But at the same time, often they immediately grasp the idea.

Communication

RH This alludes to something else that some of the others have mentioned: the importance of communication, between yourselves in the design process, but also to non-architects. Cartoons are a good example, as they're understandable by almost anyone. But it seems like other methods were used with this aim. Even, perhaps, paintings in the beginning: understanding that pictures are more communicative than conventional architectural drawings.

WJN Yeah, that is true. Although it's also untrue. Some of the drawings are very accessible, but some—like the drawings of Stefano de Martino—are not very easy to read. They're beautiful.

RH Like this?

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, worms eye isometric – OMA]

WJN This is a drawing that is difficult even for me to understand, and I worked on the design of the building for years! This is a bit of a circus act, of course: you are left with the idea that it must be something very incredible, but you're not really sure what it is.

I remember when I first saw a lecture by Zaha Hadid in the early-eighties. She was very impressive, but completely incomprehensible. She made beautiful—sort of Constructivist—drawings and paintings, and then she would put the slides in the lecture and say, 'this is the pool and this is the office and this is the garage', but you only saw sort of moving coloured triangles and squares.

Beautiful drawing, but completely not meant to make the building understandable. At the same time, that was also charming. I guess people don't do that anymore. It seems to be that this sort of artistry was more appreciated in the

seventies and eighties. I guess now people appreciate more photographic imagery. I don't know why.

You also have to imagine that at that time, there were no computers. So, you couldn't make a computer drawing, but you couldn't even print colour. There was only an original because it was very expensive to multiply it. There were no prints made at the time, the originals were sold as art pieces. What we did have was the black and white Xerox and the fax machine.

That's why, of course, the drawing as a physical object and as a single original was so important. An image had a much bigger value because it took weeks to make, and it was very expensive to transport. So, it had quite a different meaning. Architectural drawings before the computer were a bit like paintings before photography.

Consultants

RH Shall we look at some more drawings?

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, structural sketch–OMA]

WJN This is an interesting drawing. It's about the structure of the roof of the Dans Theater. I wonder who made this. The roof was designed by a structural engineer called Stefan Polónyi. He was an engineer from Cologne. Actually, we got him through Oswald Matthias Ungers, who had a good connection with Rem at that time. He was a very good structural engineer, and he invented this roof. I'm not sure if the drawings are from his office, I would say probably made by somebody in the OMA office. But I'm not sure who did it. Are you aware of all the authors of these drawings or not?

RH No, not all of them.

WJN I mean, there were many people working on it at certain moments, so it could be anyone. But here we see the roof. The trick of the structure is that it is a sort like the roof of the Gaudi school (Sagrada Família School) in Barcelona, but its curves have alternating axes on either

side, so it becomes a rigid form. The trick was to use corrugated metal and the curvature to make a structural arch. It's very clever and very cheap to make—and also good for acoustics.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, elevation study – OMA]

But here you can see the different styles of people working on the project. This is a facade drawing, maybe by Frank Roodbeen—who was my first partner, later—but I'm not sure. It's a study of colours and composition.

Process

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, perspective cartoon studies – OMA]

I can confirm that I did this! I recognised the handwriting. So, again, it is a sort of cartoon-esque perspective of the entrance. These drawings were made in the office to study things. While one was studying the entrance, the other one was studying colours or composition or proportion. This is studying all of the objects coming together in this nodal area around the entrance. You see, they're probably not even the same; probably the proposal is slightly different in the two drawings. But we would make these studies and then, after one day, we would hang them on the wall and people would come up with different ideas and they would juxtapose them. Somebody would say, 'This is better' or 'That's better' or 'This is a problem'. So, it was really always teamwork. Four or five of us working on it: one making a model, one doing cartoons, others working on plans—and so on and so forth.

We would come together a few times a week with Rem and have a brainstorm. One would take a certain direction or another direction and many, many alternatives were made. The whole way of working was based on alternatives. You would make ten or twenty versions with small variations. In the beginning very different variations, then smaller and smaller variations until you're on the level of colour and shape and so forth.

Although variations are not very efficient—let's say 90% of what you make is lost—it is a very good way in the sense that you're able to see the different things next to each other and you're able to compare them and to criticise them and to choose which way to go. For Rem, that was a good method because he would get ten different variations and could pick one or combine and elaborate on the ideas.

But what is very important in such drawings is that the drawing is a materialisation of the idea, and it becomes a physical, autonomous object. It's an autonomous thing in the world that has its own life. Of course, now forty years later, I see different things in it because I forgot things, or I have different experiences. But what is interesting is that the drawing has an autonomy which comes out of your body—out of your hands onto paper.

It's a bit like making music. You're looking for the rhythm. You're looking for the melody. It's a search. The drawing is a search in a way, but it's searching while practising—and that makes drawing so interesting. It's like if you play guitar, you're trying to make a song while you're playing, or you start to improvise. And then in a team—if you play in a band, there is the rhythm section, the singer and so on—you also have to adjust to the others. So, in this sense, the different drawings are like the different members of the band trying to work on the song. Everyone is improvising and improving until it comes together in the finished song.

RH But the autonomy you're talking about is slightly different to that, isn't it? Because what you also get at the end of this process, compared with music, is that each one of the experiments results in an autonomous product.

WJN It's not quite the same, but you could have different versions of a song which are not yet finished. In the recording studio, you always have these 'lost tapes', which are different attempts at recording: takes one to twenty. Then sometimes they cut pieces out of different recordings and put them together. So, there's some similarity, I think.

But what is important is that the drawing is a tool. It's not something which is final. I think that's also very different with a lot of drawings you see nowadays, they tend to always seem final. It's a real problem. I don't know if you know, but I stopped being an architect: I'm not an architect anymore, I'm a pensioner now! I stopped two years ago after forty years. I thought that was enough. One of the things that I found difficult in the last ten years of my work was that clients were really expecting finished drawings all the time. They would always be expecting something which is completely finished and where every detail was fixed. And you could really look at it as if it was a picture. That became a big, big problem. Also with competitions. In the eighties and nineties, you would give a very schematic idea of what you would like to do for a building, and then you would later elaborate it. It took a very long time to elaborate it. Now you're forced in the first weeks to be completely perfect and precise. It makes it much more difficult, as everything has to be perfect; nothing can be a 'work in progress'.

Before, we could get away with just showing a drawing like this to a client and expecting that the client would use their imagination to understand the drawing. Like everybody has a different interpretation of a song, you would interpret a drawing. I think the meaning of the drawing has really shifted in the last thirty years to a great extent.

At the same time, drawings seem to look much more like each other. Partly because everyone uses the same software, but there's also a pressure to make the same type of drawing now—the drawings that are popular. I think that wasn't the case in the eighties. The ideology was much more that every office would have a recognisable style, each with a very different way of drawing. The way you draw was considered an asset; it was very important to have your own style. Even if other people couldn't understand it.

Nowadays, everybody seems to want to have the same style. That is a very interesting thing. It has something to do with the fact that everything is about the building now. We thought of the design as being autonomous from the

building in a way. It didn't necessarily have to become a building. It was an architectural idea, not in the first place a building. But now, immediately, from day one, I think architects try to show a building which is realistic, and that is quite a different way of using drawings.

RH It's also interesting in the context of what you mentioned before: the kind of inherent inefficiency of OMA making lots of variations. On the other hand, one could argue that the current expectation that one pretends to have a finished building designed every week—simply to appear competent at progress meetings—with apparently coordinated plans and updated renders each time, is its own kind of inefficiency. It's an incredible waste of resource and inhibitor of design quality compared to investing in idea development. It's a false economy.

WJN You're right. What struck me over time is that when computer drawings were introduced and became more sophisticated, we didn't work shorter hours. You would expect that the computer would help us to make drawings quicker, but what happened is that people started to ask for bigger outputs. They started to ask for more drawings and more variations: 'But can't you change this and this and this?' and 'Can you bring that tomorrow?'. 'This is a lot of work...'; 'Yeah, but you have a computer so they can do it quickly'. The computer made it more complex and, in a way, less efficient. Of course, repetitive actions are easier, but that was always the case. It is true: it didn't make it more efficient.

I once saw Piano and Rogers' drawings for the Centre Pompidou competition entry—you should take a look if you have the chance—on the original panels in some exhibition a few years ago. It was really amazing. It was so naive and childish and such bad drawings that nobody would ever accept it now. But they won the competition with this crazy idea and with such drawings. So, it seems that clients also had very different expectations of drawings, and clients were much more able to understand—or to imagine—what it could be from a simple drawing, rather than from a very precise photographic image.

Techniques

RH Let's continue through some of these.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, interior studies – OMA]

WJN Maybe I made this one. These are interior corners. A lot of it was tested in perspectives. But the models are much more important. A model, in a way, is much easier because this perspective gives you one viewpoint, but you can't move around. We never used them as presentation models, but always as a tool for research, as a design tool. In the models, you could really shape and make a lot of different variations. We also made tonnes of different models and often photographed them. We had special tools for that. We used an endoscope. It was always a very sacred moment: we would give Rem the endoscope and he would sort of walk through the model looking at it through this little lens. It had a little wheel so you could adjust it to the height of the model. You could really walk through the model—like now you make a video of the 3D computer models—and it was very convincing.

You could also make photographs. Hans Werlemann was the one who always did the photographs for OMA—really incredible photographs. They were very imaginative. You really had a credible feeling of being in these buildings. So actually, the models were more important.

But also, everything was hybrid. Often it became a collage, or part of the model picture was integrated into a drawing, or a piece of a drawing goes into a model and so forth. I have to say that if you only look at the drawings of OMA, you sort of miss 50% of the of the working method. I would imagine it's complicated, but I would advise you to look into that because there is a link. For instance, one trick, which we did often, is to trace a photograph of a model. So that allows you to have a direct perspective. The back-and-forth between these different technologies and techniques is very interesting.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, auditorium sketch – OMA]

This is from my hand also. It's strange that I would never recall them, but if you show them, I remember them. But if you wouldn't show them, I wouldn't remember them! These are studies of the interior of the main hall.

This is a good example of the variation process.

RH These are brilliant. Spot the difference.

[Nederlands Dans Theater The Hague, elevation options – OMA]

WJN Yes, let's try to find the six differences. Oh, it's about the structure of the curved roof. You see that the beam is different in each. Actually, it was option 'A' that was chosen in the end. But these variations, of course, are also connected to structural possibilities and building costs.

City Hall The Hague

[City Hall The Hague, isometric sketch – OMA]

Here, you come to the City Hall of the Hague, in '86. Actually, this was the last project I worked on. I was the project leader of this project. This is one of the projects where I came in for a few months to do it—and it was a very exciting time. It was one of the first major competitions in Holland for a public building. Actually, before that commissions were given to friends of politicians and so forth, or they were not made at all. So, this was the first major international competition. It was very important for our generation—the younger generation—the fact that you would start to get competitions, and foreign architects coming to do projects. That had a huge impact because it lifted the quality of Dutch architecture in general. People started to demand a higher level of quality than before and of course, for my generation it was easy to adapt to that, to bring something different from the older generation.

That's why my generation had a lot of success in Holland. Many offices started, and then architecture started to boom in the nineties. That had a lot to do with the international competitions. Also, politicians started to

understand that if they made nice projects with international architects, that would help them politically. And then, of course, if they couldn't pay for international architects, they would hire young, local architects for the competitions.

But anyway, the thing about this competition was it was done together with developers. So, it was not an architecture competition, but a competition for developers that would have to do a total offer. The City Hall would remain the developer's property, and the City would lease it from them. It was one of the first of this type in Holland. In England it was much more common. But in Holland it was a new system, which is more difficult because you are designing with a developer next to you, directly steering on money.

The funny thing was that Rem was not invited. But he wanted desperately to take part. It was a competition on the invitation of developers, not of the city. You couldn't submit as an architect. So, he phoned the Alderman and he said, 'Can I also join your party?'. Then, there was a sort of wild card because one of the developers pulled out and another young developer came in at the last minute—and we came in with them. What was interesting—and here you see this very well—the concept was that it was a sort of small city skyline. The trick was you would take the standard office span measurement used by Dutch developers—which always gave sort of stupid offices, just slab blocks—and the trick of this project is that we took three of these offices and put them next to each other. Then, we got a very deep building about 45 metres deep—so we cut off these tower shapes.

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

This way you would have floorplans that would have a lot of variation with different kinds of floor plates and spaces: bigger and smaller ones. It could even accommodate vertical or horizontal organisations.

What is extremely interesting is that Aldo van Eyck was on the jury, and he always hated Rem. He hated postmodernism. But here, he loved it because suddenly

you see that it is structuralism, it's pure structuralism. It looks like a van Eyck fifties orphanage or whatever. So suddenly the two opponents found each other in this project. He was very much in favour of it. But then Richard Meier won, for all kinds of reasons.

I think one of the reasons that OMA were usually second place was because they were too advanced. Juries were too frightened to give the first prize because they didn't believe it. It was too advanced.

[City Hall The Hague, urban overview study – OMA]

But anyway, here you see a lot of different drawings of the same thing, the same idea. Some of them were just used for internal research. Some of them were used for the competition presentation.

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

And there are lots of pictures of this model—a huge gypsum model. It's like three meters long. And this was made by a sculptor, Herman Helle. A very nice guy—we worked with all kinds of people—and he sculpted it. He sculpted all the windows. I think that this is maybe even before it's finished because there were many more windows. This was a try-out. You can see the little windows and he just chiselled them out.

And you see the windows that look like they're lit up: in order to get this effect, Hans Werlemann glued little pieces of sliver paper to the chiselled windows. He put a lamp on it, and then you get this effect of a night picture. But I think this photo is a try-out. It's very interesting: this is really pre-computer, so we had to find all these tricks to give this sort of twilight effects. It was really weeks and weeks of chiselling to get this image.

What is interesting about it is that the model—because that's also a problem with computer drawings in the end, it's software on a hard drive—you make this for the picture, but you also get the model. In the end, you can show the model also. You have a double product, which is

nice because it's always nice to leave something on the table with the client after the meeting.

What you also see in the photo is that all the colours are not Photoshopped. Photoshop did not exist yet. So, you had to really make them in the studio by doing tricks with colour filters on the lamps. There was hardly any post-production. You had to get it right the first time.

RH I think this is an absolutely extraordinary project. Really, one of my favourites.

WJN Yeah, it's a pity it didn't get built. It was good.

Media

[City Hall The Hague, urban overview studies – OMA]

Here you see all the different mediums. This Derwent pencil drawing might well be a picture of the model that was traced. So, what is he studying? He is studying an idea that the different building parts have different colours. Something we abandoned later, I guess, because it was too obvious.

Sometimes you make drawings that don't show anything new, but it's like practicing your guitar. You do the riff a number of times in order to be sure and maybe to find things that you haven't found yet. They're all the same, but they're different.

This is a still drawing, I guess by Stefano de Martino. But maybe it's too rough for him?

Actually, you should talk to Luc Reuse. He's a Belgian. He later started an office in Ghent. He made very beautiful drawings, also coloured drawings, but in a rougher, more expressionist style, which I like a lot. De Martino's were always very neat. They're very precise, but Luc has a sort of expressionist style—and he also did cartoons, by the way. He was in the office sometime after me, I think, parallel to Xaveer de Geyster. We were the first batch from Belgium.

I'm not sure how many people did these! I didn't do a lot there of these kinds of drawings, I was mainly focusing on the management, but also on doing plans and sections. I was into the figures and the plan organisation.

[City Hall The Hague, elevations and sections – OMA]

These are line drawings. We had some tricks: we could do a copy trick using Xerox. We had a system where you would have a transparent plastic film, which was adhesive, and you could print on it with the Xerox machine. You had to be very careful because sometimes it stuck completely and ruined the machine. But if you do it well then you could cut it and glue it on and you could use a sort of collage technique to do textures efficiently.

What is also interesting is that these drawings are line drawings on mylar. So, first you would do a pencil drawing and then you would trace it with ink. But you didn't get a lot of chance to change it, you had to be very precise and immediately do the right thing. While you can continually make changes in the computer drawing, with this technique you only have one or two chances. You would have to scratch the ink out with a razor blade. If you scratch it, of course, you scratch a few microns off the paper. So, you could then draw again, but you could do that twice before you had a hole in your paper. So, your ability to make a change in the drawing was only, let's say, one or two. Which meant you had to be very sure that you were doing the right thing. It was also a different attitude because you knew that you couldn't do the whole drawing again. There wasn't time for that. It had to be right the first time.

Collaborators

RH Who else was making an important contribution in terms of representation and ideas while you were there?

WJN Ron Steiner. He's still in Rotterdam and he has a studio. What happened is that he quit at a certain moment, then he worked with the State Architect in Holland for some time. And then he started to do freelance work—mainly model making because he's really

the best model maker you can imagine in the world—and he kept doing that. He makes really precious and incredible models. He made the presentation models. If you see very precise models from OMA, it's his work. Not the sort of chunky heaps of styrofoam, those are all kind of study models. But the very precise models are his work. They're incredible.

He also made some drawings, by the way. He was a very good draftsman. Especially the line drawings were very special. But mainly models. One of the problems, of course, at OMA was that if you were good at something, you were stuck because they kept wanting you to do more of the same stuff. So, he was making models until the end. And he still is.

Alex Wall and Xaveer de Geyter were important. Alex made very nice hand drawings, also in a cartoonish style. There is a beautiful poster of the Parc de la Villette competition in Paris, drawn in a sort of 'Aztec' style with lots of small people doing activities in the park, juxtaposed on top of each other, rather than in perspective. Xaveer had an interesting way of making collages, sort of two-dimensional images with backgrounds and foregrounds, to suggest perspective.

Hans Werlemann was the photographer. I think it might be interesting to get his view as an image maker, making photographs rather than drawings. In a parallel way. He was a wizard between the model and the image. Not just photographs, but really impressions.

Value

RH What do you think is the value of that period of OMA? Of the work that was produced, the ideas, the way of working.

WJN I think it's very valuable. In our office, Neutelings Riedijk, we worked in this way until today. We never changed that system. I think many offices—many of the offspring of OMA—are working in this way. If you look at Xaveer or Kees, or if you speak to Mike Guyer, most of them have continued with this sort of teamwork,

workshop way of working. Producing a lot of models and drawings and trying to compare them.

Of course, nowadays people make more computer drawings. But I see other types of drawings coming back now. There are many young architects, especially in Belgium, like Kersten Geers and David van Severen, they come from Xaveer and from our office. They're a sort of second-generation OMA that never worked with OMA, but they worked with the offspring. You see that they continue that. If I go to OFFICE's office, I will feel like being in the OMA office in 1980—it's the same environment, even the way that it's usually an open plan office with some open cupboards and then some models hanging around, people cutting stuff and things hanging out. It's very much the same.

We tried to keep the idea of walls in our office, so that you could hang everything. Every computer drawing would be printed and hung. The problem with the computer is that you can't work very well as a team. You can work as a team in the software of course, but it's not like seeing what the other is doing. It's a strange *cadavre exquis* effect. So, we always printed drawings each day, hung them and then stood around the drawings to discuss them. The physical discussion as a team is a very important thing with the drawing as an autonomous element on the wall, rather than something you see on a screen. Also, the zooming in and out is a problem. In a certain way, it's handy and it can help you, but the problem is you're never in the same scale. So, when you print it, you have to print to scale and then you discuss it in a certain scale, all together as a team.

I had no experience before OMA, so I don't know how it was done, but what I experienced at the beginning of the eighties—this way of doing things, having an open studio with teams and so forth—I see that back in all these OMA people and even in the second generation. I think it's similar and I think it works very well because most of these offices are relatively successful. There must be something to it.

It's also a sort of collective authorship. Of course, Rem Koolhaas is the big author, in the sense that he was always steering it. So, there is a sort of hierarchy and there is Rem as the main motor. But at the same time, I think the team is a collaborative and collective work structure, with a sort of collective authorship. I must say, I always felt that I was part of the authorship, rather than that you work for somebody in the background.

Everybody seemed to like the projects. I know from other offices where I had friends, they say, 'I hate the projects I'm doing'. They work on projects they don't like and drawings that they don't like, which is quite miserable. I never had that feeling at OMA. Everybody was engaged and was happy with the result. That has something to do with this collaborative way of working, I think.

It's not to say, 'Now you have to draw this triangle'. Instead, let's see what things come up and then people are slowly taken away together in a direction. Also, of course, Rem was very persuasive I would say—not in a bad sense, but in the sense that he could make a narrative that you really believed in. You could believe in it, no matter how crazy it would be.

I never thought about it, but this collective authorship is an asset that probably makes these offices better than offices that just make stuff without interrogating it or doing analytical research. But it's true, at the same time, it's not super-efficient. It's not super economical. But the results are interesting.

One problem I find is that this conceptual thing has gone too far in the next generation. If you look at BIG or MVRDV, they took this to a level of super-conceptualising that misses the subtlety that is present in an OMA building. A way of dealing with the details and so forth. In their work, that is gone. It has to do a bit, I guess, with the scale of these offices. They get so big that I think they lack this collective feeling. Today, if you go there and you see all the people sitting behind a computer screen like an insurance company or a call centre, it gives a very different feeling!

RH This is also where OFFICE are quite interesting. Obviously, they're critical of the whole 'concept' thing. But at the same time, they do work with a certain conceptual process—and have very sharp ideas. They are actively the opposite of an office like MVRDV on the one hand, but one gets the sense they are developing from an earlier version of the same culture. Before it mutated into the 'Super' thing, perhaps.

WJN That's a new generation, indeed. My generation exaggerated the whole thing—also because we were living in a booming time before the financial crisis—and now I think people are living in a less optimistic time. So, they are more sober, which I think is good.

RH I totally agree.

Conditions

WJN But actually, it's interesting. I was just thinking about it. You should make plans of the offices. It would be very interesting to see how the spatial organisation of an office interferes with the outcome. It might give you clues about the drawings that were made, because it's so different. I was usually doing small ones, say on an A3 sheet, so I could sit on a flat table. But someone like Stefano de Martino, he would need a drawing board because he was doing enormous things. So even the physical question of making these things is interesting. There's a whole world around how you make them: the sort of space you need, the tools. Do you make them standing up or sitting down. If you do a big charcoal, you can't sit. You have to be standing like an artist. Your body moves in a different way. This physical aspect is interesting, you have to be careful not to touch the drawing. I think there's a whole world around the way a drawing is made, and the way people behave around the drawing.

Looking over someone's shoulder. That's interesting. If you look over somebody's shoulder, who's making a charcoal it is very different from somebody who's looking at a computer screen. It's difficult to explain, but these differences might have more of an importance for the kind

of architecture that comes out of the process than you think.

RH It's a really interesting thought. Also, it's interesting, even in a very kind of localised way, to think about the differences between the London, Athens and Rotterdam offices. The difference between working in an apartment, a studio or an office. Different conditions for different kinds of work, but also different work from different conditions.

WJN The professionalisation has something to do with it, yeah. The size of the office. The first OMA office I worked in—for three or four years—was relatively small, which means that you're in one space with everybody and you can see the movement of everybody. Already, Boompjes—the second office—was so big that that you didn't know what half the people were doing, because they were around the corner. The bigger an office gets, the more communication changes.

Willem Jan Neutelings (*Bergen op Zoom, 1959*) co-founded Neutelings Riedijk in 1991, having previously practiced under his own name (1987-1990) and as co-founder of Neutelings Roodbeen (1990-1991). He retired from architecture in 2020. He has been a guest teacher at the Berlage Institute in The Netherlands and Harvard GSD, and has lectured internationally. He was a member of the board of the Netherlands Architecture Institute from 2004-2008 and has been a member of the Belgian Royal Academy of Arts and Science since 2010.
