

Conversation: **010**
With: **Luc Reuse**
By: **Richard Hall**
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Luc Reuse I worked at OMA from 1986 to 1990. When I joined, the office was around fifteen to twenty people.

RH What attracted you to the office?

LR I studied architecture at Sint Lucas High School in Ghent, but I did not have the intention to become an architect. I was more interested in music and art. At some point my girlfriend—now my wife—who is a dancer had a place at the Dance Academy in Rotterdam. At this point, I did not know who OMA was—I had never heard of them—but I knew Xaveer de Geyter. We were kind of a group who knew each other in Ghent, also with Stephan Beel. Xaveer heard that my girlfriend was in Rotterdam and recommended that I try my hand at OMA. So, I went with just some drawings and paintings. I met Rem Koolhaas and, to my surprise, was able to start immediately!

So, there wasn't anything to attract me in the beginning because I didn't know them. Later, it was the experimentation—the freedom—of how we worked that I valued. But also, the social aspect: it was very convivial. We would go out to eat and drink together. There were people from different places—France, Japan, Germany, America—I never had to speak Dutch there.

I had my second architectural education at OMA.

RH Your story is quite unusual: you weren't taught by them, nor had you studied their work beforehand. You're kind of an accident.

LR Yeah. In the late '90s I started my own office with some friends, and I realised that there are young architects who think very strategically: 'I want to work with that guy,

then I want to work there or over there'. But in my case, it was not like that. It was not that I knew OMA. It just happened. I'm very happy that it happened because it showed me how projects are approached there: the intense programmatic study of the question. I learned a lot about that, and I also used it a lot in my own practice.

Organisation

RH How was the office organised when you were there?

LR Well, there were no computers. Or maybe one: I think there was a small Macintosh. It was the beginning of computers, but we were still working on the big drawing tables. I still believe in the drawing table. Today, of course, I work on computers, but I taught in the architectural school at Ghent, and it has always been a very important thing for me that you use your hands to explain your ideas. For me, it's still the quickest way to explain something graphically or schematically.

But how was it organised? You had Rem and Kees Christiaanse—and a certain tension between them. The office was on the edge of becoming bigger and they hired an older guy from a bigger firm to help. There was one or two people for the administration and the rest were designers in different teams. But I think OMA was badly organised! Especially financially, at that time.

You could basically do what you wanted—it didn't matter, all was good. We worked all night; DHL came; we sent papers. No one ever asked, 'How much does that cost?'. That was never the question. It was the result that was important: the intensity of the results. But at that time, I was young, not busy with the business of an architecture office or worrying about other people. It was very, very open.

I can imagine that now it's a completely different story with project architects who have a lot of different responsibilities. There were also certain people in the office who were very technical, who knew how to make details.

And that's a point: it also depends on your own skills. Ron Steiner was the magician of model making. When you wanted to do something, you asked his advice. Then the French guy, Yves Brunier, worked on landscaping. He died sadly. He was incredibly quick at drawings—it was incredible to see him working. So, it depends a little bit on your own ability, and then you were put into a project because of what you could do. But everybody was asked for their opinion. It was not militarily organised!

I think for an office like that—of that quality—you need that freedom and that experimentation. The freedom of taking the wrong direction too. But it costs an incredible amount of money! In my own practice, when we did competitions, there were moments when you need to let go and see what happens, but you also need people who can pull it back and make decisions.

I have to say Rem was very good in this. It was the first time I met an architect like that, who could get the best out of you. He was a very good listener; very observant. His ideas were always very authentic, but he was also very open-minded—'Why don't we do that?'. It was very nice to work for a guy like that too, because he was not someone who came in, 'I want it like that'—he let things go, and then he took it back in a very gentle way. And he was always right in the end.

But I had no experience in other big offices at that moment, so I cannot compare. When I left OMA, I worked for three years with Stephan Beel, and in the meantime, I started my own practice. After some years I met some other guys with whom I started a new office. So, OMA was my only international experience of working in an office or working on projects like that—of that complexity—at that time.

RH You just touched on Rem's way of getting the best out of people. Could you describe a little bit more Rem's role in the office at that time?

LR Because of his own agenda, he was very absent sometimes. He had to travel a lot. So, it was sometimes difficult when you had a question to address with him. But

when he was there, you made sketches or showed him proposals and he would say, 'No, I think that's not correct. You should look in that direction'. I always had the feeling that a lot of things could happen, he let a lot of things go on. But at certain points—and you can see this when he makes sketches—he would make things clear or turn it into something that you hadn't thought about. He was thinking on his own and could make sketches that captured the essential things about a project.

Pragmatism

How does he come to that? Maybe to look and see what happens. There were a lot of young heads, trying and making mistakes and retrying and retrying, and suddenly it happens. But, as I mentioned earlier, there was always a very profound study of what the client wants, of the programme. This is still—in my whole career and to my students—a lesson, that an office like that can start from this very realistic basis. What is there in the brief? Analyse what the client wants. For me, everything starts there: a respect for the client and their question. Not starting by dreaming your own dreams. No. What is in the brief? Read it. Reread it. That was very important.

When there was a brief for a programme of 100,000m², you made a model of 100,000m² to start. If a block fell on the floor, 'Oh, there's a block missing, it has to fit'. There was a number of square metres that were needed: that was the goal, no less. Do you agree?

RH I do, actually.

LR I liked that. Very pragmatic. No fantasy. What is there. Then after that, when you understood the programme, then it got loose. But you had to understand the client's question first—because it was their money.

I know that there are a lot of architects—great architects—who don't listen to the client. They go off dreaming on their own and then it's an incredible battle. But I didn't have the feeling that there were big battles in that office. Understanding the question is very important for an architect. To know that there is a question. Then, it

depends on your creativity to make a fantastic project from that dull question—but you have to answer that question in the first place.

RH It's good to hear this. I think it is part of the magic of OMA. A very particular attitude towards finding out what is hidden inside the brief; what can be identified as the basis for an adventure that exceeds the brief.

LR Yeah. I always thought that was one of their strengths too. A client is not an architect. They're the ones with the money and they have other things to think about—and maybe also their own clients or bosses. If you can show your client that you understand their question and that you can then translate their problem into a specific, maybe unexpected, project—why not? That's the creativity, of course. That is that whole office's way of thinking. And they still think like that, I'm sure of it.

Cartoons

RH I understand from, from Xaveer that you were often making these large cartoons?

[Zeebrugge Ferry Terminal, interior cartoon perspective – OMA]

LR Yeah. Although I didn't work on the competition project itself. I was asked to make some drawings at the end. The main idea for these drawings was to capture what I would see if I moved my head like this [moves head in up-and-down motion]. It's a wide angle, but it's not constructed. I visited Frans Parthesius—who was making the model—to understand the interior, and that was the inspiration. So, there's no perspective construction: everything could fly.

I made sketches from which you could understand the building as a whole: one drawing that captured what you would see as you moved around. When you construct a perspective, you have to choose a viewpoint, but this is more intuitive and allows you to see as much as possible.

RH Were you drawing in this way before you joined OMA?

LR I always made drawings since I was a kid. I also painted a little bit, but I was never professionally doing it. I can't remember a time that I was not drawing. I still do it. Like I said, I taught in Sint Lucas for 27 years. Computers were forbidden in my studio. You had to show it with your hand and paper. I still believe the quickest way to communicate, other than writing words, is by making a sketch on a table.

But I don't remember how I came to make drawings like this in OMA. You start making drawings and you see what happens. I also have to say that I'm not afraid to make them. There was no stress at that moment. Although sometimes you have to make it over new or look for a different way. I also made drawings like this for Euralille and other projects.

[Euralille cartoon perspective – OMA]

But this one was not by me. I think that was Eric van Daele. But, in a certain way we all inspired each other. I also believe that everyone can make a drawing. You don't have to be special to make a drawing. You just have to dare to make it and to try.

RH Don't you think it's interesting—given that Zeebrugge is before Euralille—that these drawings you made helped to instigate the style used for later work?

LR Maybe. There was an exhibition at that time in Paris, and there were two books—one on Euralille and one on OMA—only containing sketches. I remember I was in Paris with some other people and Rem was in Rotterdam. Rem asked me to make a sketch for that and send it by fax because he lacked some drawings. At that time, we communicated by making little drawings and sending them back-and-forth by fax. Some of those fax drawings were printed in that book.

That was very archaic. I liked it very much that way. Now it's sometimes too complicated; just too much design and too many colours or whatever. For a drawing like that, a computer cannot do what you want. You need to be able to make mistakes because they help to tell the story.

RH Right. These would not communicate what they do if they were correctly constructed perspectives. They describe an experience.

[Zeebrugge Ferry Terminal, interior cartoon perspective – OMA]

LR It was never meant to be to be perfect. What is happening when you are entering this thing? I mean, it's hardly a building. It needs to be communicated in a different way.

Eurodisney

RH I know that you worked on the Eurodisney project with Xaveer. He said you might have made this one.

[EuroDisney, interior cartoon perspective – OMA]

LR No, no. I never saw this drawing before!

I worked with Xaveer on Eurodisney. Maybe it's a drawing by him, but I don't remember. Xaveer and I worked on this and made a lot of sketches, but I don't remember this one.

RH This is one from the Drawing Matter collection. There are a few of you who were making cartoons, and I'm trying to work out who did this. Everyone denies it!

LR Everyone denies it! No, I don't remember it.

[EuroDisney, elevation sketches – OMA]

I remember the concept of that big cigar floating there. I think I might have made these sections though.

Sportsmuseum

[Sportsmuseum, interior perspectives – OMA]

These drawings were all made by me, with crayons. They were also made very quickly. One of my favourite techniques is one-point perspective. I was so used to making these drawings, it was very simple. For this

project, it was also important to have the height and width and depth correct. I like that it makes the drawings quite quiet. Sometimes two-point perspectives have too many complex lines, but one-point makes it very easy to understand the project. It was also a long, long building with things happening under and beside it. I used this type of drawing a lot in my own practice because it was very easy to set it up and to make things understandable. It makes a drawing that is very quiet, very calm.

Frankfurt Flughafen

[Frankfurt Flughafen, elevation studies – OMA]

This is in Frankfurt: a competition that we won. I drew these facades, using a spray technique with Chinese ink.

RH As I understand it, there is this idea with the brick slowly changing from black to white along the length of the facades?

LR Yes. Some of these are studies of the highway side and some of the courtyard interior. On the highway side, Rem had this idea to convey movement.

City Hall The Hague

[City Hall The Hague, aerial sketch – OMA]

This is the City Hall. This was the first year I worked at OMA. I made some chalk drawings. Alex Wall drew a lot of that. I made these birds-eye ones—I was just asked to make some sketches.

I think the bird's eye view was used for the poster. I heard that one of the larger, more abstract things I made was shown at Max Protech in New York. I made a lot of sketches of that building to try find the right angle, but I was fairly free. No one was telling me what to try, I was just seeing what the building wanted.

Projects

RH Are there any other memorable drawings or projects you worked on?

LR ZKM (Centrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie): that was made around the same period as the Zeebrugge Sea Terminal. I also made comparable views of the inside of ZKM.

I worked on the Furka Blik Hotel in Switzerland. I remember I worked a long time on that project. There were telephone calls with Marc Hofstetter, the client, for hours and hours and hours...

Colleagues

RH You've mentioned quite a few of your colleagues. Who else was making an important contribution while you were there?

LR Mark Schendel. An American guy who was a very good friend of mine. He worked mainly on Euralille now he has a big office in Chicago: Studio Gang.

I worked with Eric van Daele. He worked also on Euralille, but he is more urbanism oriented.

Authorship

RH Could you say a little more about how authorship was addressed during those years.

LR It was never talked about. I certainly never questioned it. I know that I made drawings that Rem signed afterwards, like he made it. But maybe that's normal in that world, I don't know. I know that there are some drawings from the Hague City Hall in a gallery in New York—in Max Protech, I think—that are under his name. I'm mentioned as one of the collaborators, but not as the maker of the drawing. I don't know if that is usual or not.

They were made in the office for a project of the office. We made the drawings to win the project. It was nobody's

drawing—it was part of a bigger entity. In my own practice, when we publish a project, I found it very important that all the people who worked on the project were mentioned. In an office, it's never an idea of one person. It's a collaboration of people—sometimes in different roles—but it's never the idea of one person. Even if one person has an idea and does the work, it's always influenced. You are influenced and you take on ideas, and I think it's important that the boss of an office respects that by mentioning all the names of the people who worked on the project.

RH It's an interesting thing to unpick a little. OMA is not one of those mythical practices where 'the architect' sits around waiting for inspiration, does a sketch and passes it down the chain to be translated.

LR Yesterday, I heard an interview with a music group. A singer is always at the front of the stage, and everyone adores the singer. But the music is made by the drummer and the bass etc, and they work as a group. Musicians know that, but a lot of people don't appreciate that. Sometimes, it's even a producer in a studio who puts it all together—vocals also—and the singer is a kind of puppet.

But this is also the problem of the press. They always look for a kind of star or a main person who has the idea. I must say, I never had the idea that Rem was a person like that. He doesn't need that because the things he says are so authentic. But the media always look for one person to simplify the issue. There are also all the engineers, there are landscape architects. There's also a bunch of people who aren't even OMA.

RH It's slightly absurd when you understand that many people in the architectural press have trained as architects before they enter journalism. Yet they still perpetuate these myths. As you say, they have this kind of requirement to identify someone who can be heroised or villainised. It's very strange.

LR It's strange. Especially because when you show that it's a group, it's so much more interesting. There are so many more stories that can be told about that project. I agree.

Value

RH What do you think is the value of this work today?
What is it that we learn from this period of OMA's work?

LR It was the time that the office was confronted with bigger programmes or bigger buildings, like Très Grande Bibliothèque in Paris. It was a kind of struggle with how to compete in the world of big practices and engineering companies when you have ideas. But today, it's difficult as a very big office because there's also a kind of a business thing. You have to pay the rent and you have to pay everybody. It's so complicated. How do you manage that?

Personally, I learnt that the way to do a competition is to analyse the programme and start from the client's question. I didn't learn that in school, I learnt that at OMA. I think that's a good attitude, because an architect is not an artist. Ours is another kind of work. We do work for people or for the city. They have to use it. You have to make sure that it works. That's your life. That's your responsibility.

I remember fifteen years ago; we had never built a school in my own practice. Suddenly, we had the question for a competition. As an architect, you don't know everything. You have to listen to the people who wrote the brief. I think that when you do that at the start, the client is pleased that you respect their view. So, the main thing I learned at OMA is that you begin by talking and listening and seeing.

This was also my starting point when I began working with other people. Everybody I worked with accepted that. It was a very understandable way to start a project. Analyse the brief and analyse the context. That's what there is, start from there.

But you are also a professional, of course. There are mistakes in the brief. That's normal. But if the client understands that you have analysed the dossier, they can accept your advice. Let's say someone wants a cultural centre, and there is a budget and number of square-metres. The first thing I do is divide the budget by square-

metres and realise it's impossible. We show this calculation to the client and show them comparisons and options. We discuss the price and the size, because they realised the project would fail without this conversation.

I don't want to tell fake stories to clients. No, it's like that. It's quite down-to-earth, no? But that's also my nature.

RH It's interesting how this artistic-pragmatic ratio shifts over time. Both are always there, but I think the projects where these amazing ideas are explicitly stimulated by practical requirements are very exciting.

LR Absolutely.

***Luc Reuse** (Ghent, 1955) worked with Stephane Beel from 1990 to 1994, practised under his own name from 1990 to 1997 and co-founded evr-architects in 2000, specialising in sustainable architecture and urban planning. He left the studio in 2022 to three younger partners. From 1992 to 2020 he taught architectural design at Hoger Sint-Lucas Institute, and later at KU Leuven.*
