

Conversation: **009**
With: **Mike Guyer**
By: **Richard Hall**
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Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Mike Guyer I studied from '78 until '83 at the ETH (Zürich), entered OMA in '84 and stayed until '87. So, about three years. It is indeed what you say: it was a really interesting group of people from different backgrounds; different countries, different languages. They were united there because of Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, because of *Delirious New York* and the visionary projects with the beautiful paintings by their wives—and the kind of dynamic which the office obviously had in the eighties. The Rotterdam office was livelier than the one in London. Unfortunately, I never met Elia personally, but I saw the drawings from the Mediterranean projects in Greece which were, in aura, quite different from the ones we developed in Rotterdam. It was interesting to observe the upcoming differences between the two offices.

I went there with an ETH background. When Annette Gigon and I started studying in '78, Aldo Rossi had just left. He was there from '76 until '78. The influence of *L'Architettura della Città* was tremendous, especially through his former students who became assistants at design chairs and researchers at GTA (The Institute of the History and Theory of Architecture, Zürich). Another group was strongly influenced by the developments in the States, by *Transparency and Collage City*, which Bernhard Hoesli together with Paul Hofer translated into their own design method. The work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown became well known through an important exhibition organised by Stanislaus von Moos. And, of course, *La Tendenza*—the new architecture in the Ticino—was highlighted. When I left school, Fabio Reinhart and Miroslav Šik just started their design studio, which led to Analoge Architektur.

In the middle of these tendencies, I discovered *Delirious New York* and the work of Rem Koolhaas. I also did some theoretical works about Russian Constructivists and the Vkhutemas—and tried to transform paintings of Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky into three-dimensional abstract models.

At this time there was a mix of scepticism, ignorance and curiosity towards the work of OMA at the ETH. In summer '83, right after my diploma work, I went to Rotterdam and started immediately to work at OMA. The office was quite small, I think around 15 people. But all the people you mentioned were there: Kees Christiaanse, Willem Jan Neutelings, Xaveer de Geyter, Ron Steiner, Luc Reuse, Georges Heintz, Aart Zaijer, the landscape architect Yves Brunier and others. This group in the office was assisted by people from outside: Hans Werlemann, Claudi Cornaz and the model makers. Matthias Sauerbruch was in Berlin, building Checkpoint Charlie, and Alex Wall in London.

RH So, you were only based in Rotterdam?

MG Yes, I was mainly based in Rotterdam, but I had a few visits to London and Berlin. I was also working quite intensively in France, because of the Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart competition.

Organisation

RH How was the office organised at that time?

MG It was quite chaotic, in a positive way. The office had the aura of an experimental, anarchic design studio.

Working in teams was essential. There was constant alternation between brainstorming sessions and focused individual work. It was a continuous rhythm of coming together, exchanging ideas, distributing tasks and working intensely alone—several times a day. The speed allowed only quick sketches, diagrams, plans or models. In this time the endless sequences of Styrofoam models were introduced. It was an ongoing wave, where different authorships melted to one big cloud. And in the middle was Rem, conducting the group in a very subtle and loose

way, but also making sharp decisions in undecided situations. This working attitude was common for the competitions, but not so much for the contracted projects, like the IJ-Plein (Masterplan, School and Gymnasium) buildings, the Nederlands Dans Theater, the Koepel Panopticon prison and others. Everybody was constantly working on different projects and was kind of floating in the office. As a project's deadline came closer, people were immediately concentrating on this one project until it was successfully.

It was an ongoing experiment, which often went quite well. We slowly developed this common design process, first in competitions for buildings and then for larger projects. With time, the teams were extended with people from outside: specialists, photographers, videographers, model builders and others. Finally, this working method reached a climax in '89, when La Très Grande Bibliothèque, The Sea Terminal in Zeebrugge and Das Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe were designed in one year.

Rem was present in all major competitions and focused on the important projects. He was deeply involved in the Nederlands Dans Theater; Villa Dall'Ava in Paris, together with Xaveer; and the Patio Villa in Rotterdam, together with George.

In the first year, I was mainly on the Panopticon Prison. Then I was involved in the competitions for the office building at Churchillplein, the Morgan Bank and the City Hall Den Hague; sometimes in the design process of the two houses; the installation at the Triennale in Milan; and especially in the Bijlmermeer Redevelopment and the competition of la Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart. The latter was the most interesting project I did at OMA.

RH You just listed quite a number of projects you were involved in. Were there any memorable drawings that you worked on personally?

Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart

[Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart, coloured plan – OMA]

MG Yes, there are the two main panels of Melun-Sénart: the black and white line drawing with 'Les Vides', the forest textures, the building typologies, the usage diagrams and the firm logos. And there is a drawing in very strong colours—printed black-and-white in *S,M,L,XL*.

In my memory, it is a beautiful drawing in oil pastel, that we did after several try-outs in one night—the three of us working on the same drawing. It was a conclusion for the line drawing and the sequence of the abstract diagrams in black-and-white.

[Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart, diagrams – OMA]

These diagrams explain the narrative in a clear way and are—in their graphic quality—the most important drawings of the project. They start with the analysis of the existing, show the sequence of the design decisions and end in a finalised diagram, where all the previous steps are placed on top of each other.

[Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart, model – OMA]

This model I know only from photographs. It was done after the competition, I guess to show the competition in a more explicit way for an exhibition with other projects.

Bijlmermeer Redevelopment

The other 'XL' project was the Redevelopment of the Bijlmermeer, which is very interesting from today's perspective on sustainability. Bijlmermeer was a modernist concept of the late '60s, with kinked 9-15 stories high slabs in a hexagonal grid. It houses 50,000 people in a large park, with separated circulations systems for cars and pedestrians. It was a product of the postwar society with a belief in unlimited resources. Rem always called the Bijlmeer 'the Las Vegas of the Dutch welfare state'. In the late '70s it became the home of a large Suriname community and of other immigrant nationalities. In the '80s the neighbourhood had social issues and a reputation as a ghetto—the crime rate was quite high. In this atmosphere of political concerns, demolition was demanded, but the city of Amsterdam

asked OMA—I guess because of its positive attitude towards Bijlmeer—for a redevelopment concept.

[Bijlmermeer Redevelopment, diagrams – OMA]

It was a very short design phase, followed by endless discussions with inhabitants, city planners, social workers and politicians. The Bijlmeer was conceived on early CIAM principles of the '30s but was finished in the early '70s—already 40 years outdated—and therefore heavily criticised by the postmodern Dutch architects. We strongly disagreed and tried to find strategies to show the values of this monument of Modernism.

In an important aerial view, we showed the modern Bijlmer in relation to the traditional centre of Amsterdam and compared typologies and densities in collages. The biggest issues of the Bijlmer were the lack of active public programme, the uniform landscape, the closed socle of storage and the disturbed relation to cars. In a series of diagrams, similar to the ones of Melun-Sénart, we illustrate the interventions. Instead of the garages we introduced open parking bands and added a strip of public facilities under the central metro station. A dense forest along the existing water—as you see here—became the main element in the hexagonal grid. Then we introduced in each hexagonal courtyard a specific programmatic element: urban gardening, sport fields, party pavilions, children's playgrounds. They connect with the parking bands and create specificity and identity. And, as a last move, we introduced other housing typologies: rowhouses, patio-villas, even towers.

They were all ideas—very conceptual—and would have needed a 'bottom up' strategy, connected to what was there, if the project would have continued.

But, in comparison to Melun-Sénart—which was an ideal vision, a discovery of the 'the void' to preserve parts of the beautiful landscape—the redevelopment of the Bijlmermeer was dealing with the existing: the difficulties of 15 years of use and the history of Dutch housing since the '20s.

Both, Melun-Sénart and Bijlmermeer were quick and dense design processes. But the Bijlmermeer was more complex, because we were confronted with the tough reality and a society which asked for destruction. It was clear for us to keep as much as possible and to transform the existing in a way that would have brought its hidden potentials to life: a modern neighbourhood in a green park, with lively public functions and open parking—a real alternative to the historic centre.

As we know, things turned out differently. After the airplane crash in 1992, more than half of the slabs were torn down and replaced by lower housing typologies. The generosity of the heroic monument vanished.

RH It's interesting because the Bijlmermeer project did have a consequent effect. There have been projects over the last decades in The Netherlands that adopted a similar approach of trying to evolve certain modernist estates, rather than condemn them.

MG Yes, in 2013 a consortium renovated the infrastructure and elevations of one of the last hexagonal slabs and sold 500 apartments for very cheap prices with an obligation to renovate the flat interiors. In 2017 Kleiburg—a 400m long slab—was renovated by NL Architects with changes in the circulations, elevations and openings through the base. The 560 flats were rebuilt to a shell state and then sold.

Looking back at the Bijlmermeer project, the insistence to keep as much as possible and the discovery of the quality of such buildings was closely watched by the younger architects. In the boom of the post-war period a lot of housing was built, and every city has such neighbourhoods. Now, in times of sustainability and a careful handling of resources, it's clear to keep, renovate and extend the buildings.

For Bijlmeer, I drew the aerial view I previously mentioned and part of the diagrams.

Koepel Panopticon Prison

The project for the Panopticon prison was designed at the end of the '70s. The beautiful renderings for the final presentation were drawn by Stefano de Martino. After two years the client decided to continue with the project and asked for optimisations. In '83 I stepped into the project and worked on it—with stops and starts—for about one and a half years. In this period, I made the sketches, plans and the model, from which you sent me the photographs. After the submission, the project was put on hold—and a few years later the operation of all three Panopticon prisons in The Netherlands ceased. The latest news is that the Koepel prison in Arnhem will be transformed into a hotel.

The Koepel prison was 100 years old. It was a monument with an impressive inner space, where one guard in the middle could watch all the cells. This manifesto of complete surveillance was rejected in the '70s and the central pavilion became a coffee place, while the guards were walking around. In the project, two sunken streets cross in the middle of the Koepel and lead to the grounds outside of the prison. Along the streets, collective facilities for work, sports, library and common rooms add a new layer of civilisation. Above ground, there are additions linked with the cylinder of the prison and the wall. In the proposed scheme, the spatial potential of the existing is very intelligently combined with contemporary needs. The new forms a socle and keeps the impressive inner Koepel space and the cylinder of cells. The result is quite poetic. As you see in the sketches, we optimised the organisation of the programme, materialised the different rooms and started to construct—always along the guidelines of the original concept.

Despite all the requirements of efficiency and security, I still believe in the possibility of transforming this vision into a beautiful building. Because of severe budget cuts in the mid '80s the penal system in the Netherlands was completely changed. Big new prison machines were built on the outskirts of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, and the old buildings were taken out of operation.

Realism

RH Previously, I only knew about this project through Stefano de Martino's drawings. I found all these other sketches in the archives [at Het Nieuwe Instituut] a few months back. I'd always assumed this was essentially a 'paper' project, so was surprised to see this level of practical consideration.

[Koepel Panopticon Prison, technical mark-ups – OMA]

MG Yes, the transformation of the visionary projects from the late '70s into real buildings was an issue. Some remained as projects or stopped in the middle of planning, others reappeared later in other projects. The vision of the Boompjes tower-slab—as a manifest for the city in the late '70s—is related to the very dense, powerful 'De Rotterdam' building of the 2000s: an assembly of two rows of towers stacked on top of each other which different usages.

The projects which came to the office as direct client commissions had a clear relationship to reality. For instance, in the design of the Netherlands Dance Theatre the vision of a modern venue, the wishes of the client, the budget restrictions and the building processes are reflected in beautiful, innovative solutions of space, material and atmosphere. In this regard, the Villa Dall'Ava is a masterpiece in telling the story of a modern living environment in relation to the client's needs, the site and the budget. Sometimes the conditions of reality were too harsh and prevented real innovation, such as with the buildings in the IJ-Plein Masterplan and the Byzantium in Amsterdam. At this time, the competitions like The Morgan Bank, The Hague City Hall and Melun-Sénart were based on real conditions, and we used the limited time as a free space for experiment and innovation. Looking back, the freedom in these competitions was something in-between the visionary projects of the '70s and the direct commissions.

RH This is something that I find fascinating about OMA's work. Could you talk a little more about this tension between idealism and realism?

MG The tension between the ideal and the real—or maybe better, the visionary and the real—is deeply rooted in Rem. He is a multi-talented person with a broad knowledge about society, history, art, literature and politics. He experimented with new forms of writing as a journalist; made avant-garde films; went to study architecture in London and founded OMA in New York; wrote *Delirious New York*; and designed—together with the others—these beautiful, visionary projects. He developed a unique ability to observe changes in society and to discover upcoming trends. Then, he felt that he needed to get closer to reality, started an office in Rotterdam and participated in competitions.

With the initial successes he got more interested in real urbanistic and architectural issues, in materials and constructions. The ambiguity between vision and reality created obvious tensions, but this was also a driver for innovation and shifting the boundaries.

As the office grew there were challenges of organisation, honoraria and salaries. This instability required flexibility and improvisation. The office was constantly reinventing itself. Everybody got involved in the best possible way. There was an atmosphere of ongoing ups and downs. We worked a lot, but it was a fantastic time. Because Rem was often abroad, the main communication in design were writings and sketches on endless rolls of fax paper.

Looking back, 1989 was the important year: the Berlin Wall fell, and OMA made these big projects I already mentioned. It was a culmination of all the efforts and experiments of the previous years. I wasn't there at this point and had already started my own office. I still keep contact with OMA colleagues from this time, most of whom made their own careers. In the early '90s a new generation of architects entered the office and OMA became really successful.

Value

RH What do you think is the value of that period of OMA for us today? What can we learn from it?

MG First, this strong will to shift boundaries led to the myth of the star architect. Rem, as a very charismatic person, initiated the trend but was also the first who criticised it.

But I think the search for ways to work together in pursuit of the best possible outcome under a high time pressure was very important. Although we were very different personalities, we were all young, hungry, curious and open for experiments. We exchanged drawings and diagrams and were writing texts in very close dialogue—and building models together. Only the results counted, we didn't care about authorship.

The installation for the 1986 Triennale shows an interesting mix of media that resulted from this process. As a response to the hype of postmodernism and the rebuilding of the Barcelona pavilion, Rem was really keen to invent a narrative of what happened with the original pavilion—this icon of Modernism. The fictional story goes like this: it got dismantled and transported back to Germany, was forgotten in the war time, being reused in East Berlin, then rediscovered and brought back to the West. We found the fragments and finally reassembled them in Milano.

Strangely enough we only got a curved space in the fascist Triennale building, and as a consequence our Barcelona pavilion had to be bent. The narrative was transmitted in a film shown in the pavilion with leftovers of the journey, collages and drawings. It was—intellectually—a really sharp concept but had some shortcomings in the realisation.

How do you convey this narrative? Is it a sequence of slides or a film? What do we do with the collages? How are the leftovers? Do the spaces work with the downscaling? Will our message be understood by the visitors? How is the appearance of the cheap materials? All these questions came up and were intensely discussed.

The collages and drawings you sent me included part of the presentation. But there was a lot more research too: historic images from Barcelona, the Nazis, East Germany

and photos which supported Rem's interest in the hedonism of Modern architecture.

As a last remark: I think that founding AMO ('think tank' of OMA) as a venue for research, experimentation and free-thinking, was clever. It helped OMA to concentrate on the operation at a global level. I guess it was also a response to the experiences of the '80s.

***Mike Guyer** (Columbus, Ohio 1958) ran his own architecture studio from 1987 to 1989 before co-founding Gigon/Guyer with Annette Gigon in 1989. Their work has received numerous international awards. He taught as Visiting Professor at EPF Lausanne in 2002 and at ETH Zürich in 2009. From 2012 to 2023 he was a full Professor of Architecture and Construction at ETH Zürich.*
