

Conversation: 015  
With: Marion Goerd  
By: Richard Hall  
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*Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)*

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

**Marion Goerd** I started in May 1990 and I left in October '91, I think.

**RH** What was it that attracted you to the office?

**MG** It started during my studies. I studied at the Technical University of Darmstadt in Germany, and I worked a lot at the urban scale. I remember that we were developing a design project at the university for a region in Cologne, and we discovered OMA's project for Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart in an architectural magazine. Of course, Rem Koolhaas was always a person who was exciting to follow in architecture. He was somebody very special, very different to the typical architects you met in Germany at that time. That was really interesting.

After I finished my studies, I was wondering what to do. Actually, I would have liked just to start straightaway with my own office, but that's impossible in Germany. You need to do some practice with other architects to get the permission to practice on your own. Then, I asked myself, why don't I contact the big architects I was looking at during my studies: so, I tried. I contacted Rem Koolhaas and some other architects, and I went for some interviews.

Unfortunately, one of my study mates, she got a position at OMA just before I applied. So, there was no further opportunity to go there at that moment. I had a nice interview, with Kees Christiaanse and Rem, but they said, 'Sorry, there's no chance at the moment, but maybe later'. I had the opportunity to go to Renzo Piano's studio in Genova. I went there for some time and one day Rem called me—actually, the secretary, Maja, called me in Renzo Piano's office. I talked to Rem, and he asked me

whether I was happy there. You know, what could you say?! So, then we got in touch again.

It was just after they won the competition for the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst Medientechnologie) in Karlsruhe, and they were looking for more people. That was the moment to go there. I moved from Genova directly to Rotterdam to start work.

*Organisation*

**RH** How was the office organised at that time?

**MG** When I came to Rotterdam, the office was really expanding. The office was in Boompjes, but it was too small, and they rented more space behind the next canal. It was a bit disconnected, but for lunch everyone always came to Boompjes to eat together.

In terms of projects, it was the time that they did the Kunsthal in Rotterdam and Xaveer de Geyter did the Villa dall'Ava from the Boompjes office. In the other office—where I was working—they got some second-hand furniture for us. It was really very simple. It was nice: it felt a bit like during our time studying at university. There, we had one team working on the urban project of Lille, one team working on the Congrexpo in Lille and one team working on the ZKM in Karlsruhe.

At the beginning, it was a small team for ZKM. There was me and an architect from Paris, Christian Basset—he came from the office of Dominique Perrault and had just done the Hotel Industriel before—there was a Dutch architect, Wim Kloosterboer, who I think was also working during the competition, and then Jacob van Rijs joined us. I think that was it at the beginning. After that the team began to grow.

We were in touch with Rem in a very intense way. At any time, he was sending faxes from all over the world with comments on our work. We had to send stuff back by fax. We were all just sketching and drawing by hand, but there was a special team of two or three guys for the ZKM that worked on the computer.

It's amazing to talk about that now. But we had the same in Genova, at Renzo Piano's office. I worked on the Kansai Airport in Osaka: I was hand-drawing a 1:200 elevation, which was like six or seven meters long—always moving the sheet of paper from one side to the other—and then we had one guy on the computer who set up the complex geometries of several projects. That was the basis of our handmade drawings. All other architects were just working at the tables on sheets of paper.

### *Drawing*

**RH** Could you talk a little bit about the role of drawing in the office during that time?

**MG** It was important to produce and to try out a lot. For me, it was really exciting to be part of that and to study different strategies and methods of communicating ideas and information for myself. Of course, when you have a look at the competition design for the ZKM—I'm just thinking of the photographs that Hans Werlemann did about the project—they did a lot with projection and collages and things like that. When I came there, the purpose of drawing was to make it happen.

As you might know, it was never built—but it was a big effort by OMA to get it. In the end, the director of the ZKM—Heinrich Klotz—refused to go further. He asked another architect to build the ZKM in a former military building in Karlsruhe. During the time I worked there, the office really tried to convince the director that it was serious; that they were able to do it.

[ZKM, interior perspective studies – OMA]

What you see on the left up there, is all done on a black-and-white photocopier. Luckily, the photocopier in the office had also white ink, so it was excellent to do some special things. But it was all very much like craftwork, what we did there.

**RH** What is being tested in these diagrams?

[ZKM, plan scenario studies – OMA]

**MG** I was basically involved in the upper museum floors, and Christian Basset was working on the big performance space on the entrance floor. There were floors with structural elements and other floors where there was no structure in the space itself. The floor plans on the second sheet were all about potential exhibition arrangements, relative to the structural elements on the four museum floors. They show different scenarios: playing with the size of exhibits; objects vs. projections; options for division into several different spaces; creating surprising options for movement in space. They study how to use the curved wall and the circular space: what dimension of artwork you could hang on the wall there, things like this, on the four different museum floors.

**RH** So, each diagram is a different scenario for each floor plate?

**MG** Right, and about how you would access the level and move through an exhibition; where do you leave the exhibition again and get to the next floor, or to the next staircase or ramp. It was also related to the daylight and artificial light conditions, all these kinds of things. They were really to analyse and visualise the potential of the different spaces of the competition.

**RH** How were the different scenarios determined?

**MG** Ah, I don't remember! I know that we talked about it, and I know that this was a long weekend I spent with Christian in the studio to finish this. It was really nice to do. It was a lot of fun to work on it and also to discover things in the process—about what the spaces could do, what could be possible in in these different spaces.

If you have a look on the lower part, on the right-hand side below, you have one floor with columns in it. Then we put the curve of the circular room into this space—like a sculpture of Richard Serra—to see what happens. Because it was a centre for media, it's also the question of where you have daylight conditions and where you have dark space, so you could do projections.

They're always playing with simple shapes. What happens if you put a circle in it? Or a right-angle? What sort of spaces could you create? It was just fun to find out the different options offered by the spaces in this architecture.

[ZKM, interior perspective studies – OMA]

These drawings were about the research area in the ZKM, where the artists have their research spaces. They were areas for relaxation and exercise. So, these were really to study the spatial outcome of the structural conditions of these spaces. Again, daylight was very important. If I remember correctly, it was half underground. So, you have the view of the two levels: from above and from below.

But I remember that Rem didn't like these sketches because they were too straight! It was too much Mies and too little OMA. After this, we had a sort of cave-like space.

[ZKM, plan studies – OMA]

Here you have the two floor plans. This is the northwest corner of this cube. On the left side of this corner of this edge, next to the Trafo building.

[ZKM, urban sketch – OMA]

I did this urban sketch because Heinrich Klotz also asked Rem to think about an art school that he wanted to have next to ZKM. In this red area you see the ZKM—the cube—and on the left, there was the idea to set up the art school. I did a really quick sketch about this art school, also with a model, but I'm not sure whether I could find any materials about that. I've never seen it in any publication.

**RH** I haven't heard about this sub-commission at all. But this is also quite an unusual drawing in the context of other material I'm coming across. It's also much looser than the other drawings you sent.

**MG** Yeah. I've also copied and scanned it a lot of times, so the colours are not really brilliant!

*Colleagues*

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

**MG** It's a pity, in this one book you mentioned—*The Project Without Form (OMA, Rem Koolhaas and the Laboratory of 1989)*—with Ron Steiner, Alex Wall, Kees Christiaanse and all these guys, I was always thinking there's one really important person missing. The only female architect in this team was Heike Lohmann. I don't know whether you've heard her name somewhere, but unfortunately, she died a couple of years ago. She was a full member of this team, and it was really sad that no one mentioned her name in this book. I think if you asked all these guys who worked on those projects, they all would remember her. That was a bit disappointing to me.

But during the time I was working there, there were very few female architects at the office. Of course, they had a female secretary and they also had Jennifer Sigler—she did the *S,M,L,XL* book—but there were very few female architects. Sarah Whiting worked on the Euralille project and she's now dean at Harvard University. There was also a Norwegian architect, Gro Bonesmo, who has her own studio now. She worked on one of the villa projects.

**RH** Do you think this was because the profession was more male dominated in those days, or was OMA particularly male?

**MG** Sure. But, in Renzo Piano's offices, there were definitely 50% women. So that was amazing. But on the other hand, if I remember well, most of the project leaders were male. So, the female architects were, let's say, one step below. But in Rotterdam, there were very few female architects.

**RH** Why do you think that was?

**MG** In a way, it was a really male atmosphere in the office. It was really tough and sometimes also, let's say, hard to survive! It was very competitive. Maybe it's not a good

expression to say it's a male atmosphere, but it was a really competitive atmosphere, definitely.

**RH** Why did you choose to leave OMA?

**MG** Oh, what should I tell you about that!? It was really exciting to work there. But it was also exhausting in a way. I think I was burnt out after one and a half years. I had a really good time with the other people working there, but I didn't want to continue any further. After that, I started my own office together with a colleague in Cologne.

It was also because sometimes I had some trouble with Rem, because we had different opinions about how to do things. I discovered that I really had my own ideas about a project. So, that was also the moment when I decided to have my own studio. I thought that now it's better to work on my projects and I'm not really good at working on someone else's projects any longer.

*Value*

**RH** What would you say is the value of this period of OMA's work?

**MG** It was a huge value for me. It was something very important, also for my own career. It was really great to discover how much energy you put into a project, and to try again and again and again. If it was still not OK, try it again or try another approach. To me, that was really important, and it was easier to do it there with Rem as a coach. He always forced you to give everything—and you gave everything.

It was also nice to work with this French architect coming from Perrault's office. Unfortunately, he couldn't stand the atmosphere of the city of Rotterdam. He came from Paris, so it was impossible for him in this dry Dutch atmosphere. He couldn't survive. It was of course also tough being a German living in Rotterdam. It was quite a hard experience as a German person living in Rotterdam. I never spoke German in the city. I was really afraid of reactions, because of what happened to Rotterdam during the Second World War—that the Germans destroyed the

city, the harbour and everything. At some point, I came there with my car with a German number plate, and you couldn't leave the car anywhere in the city because there was always something damaged. It was really a very anti-German atmosphere. You still have it now, but it's not as strong as it was during the 1990s.

Of course, the city was also very different then. It was really tough. The Dutch always said of the Netherlands: they make the money in Rotterdam, and they spend the money in Amsterdam. So, it was just a working town, a harbour town: a very, very tough city.

But at OMA, an important thing for me was to try out things where you would say, 'But that's not possible', in the first moment, and then to think, 'But how could it work?'. To leave conventions or traditions to one side and to really look for an individual approach on a topic or a site. I think that remains very important to this day. I wouldn't have wanted to miss my time at OMA.

Absolutely not.

It was also the time when OMA won big competitions and there were a lot of new architectural approaches being developed to different topics. For the sea terminal in Zeebrugge or the library in Paris, they really created new kinds of spaces—never seen before. Like really inventing something new. That was very exciting.

Of course, when I came to the office it was the moment that those big competitions were already done. Then, OMA was really trying to make this huge step into building the projects. Not only developing a design, but also to get them built. I think that was quite a hard step, and quite a hard experience when it was clear that the ZKM wouldn't be built. I can't imagine what the atmosphere was like at OMA at that moment. When that was decided—in 1992—I was already in Cologne. But that must be terrible.

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