Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall Through which years did you work at OMA?

Xaveer de Geyter I entered in 1984. At that moment there was just six people in the Rotterdam office. There was still the London office, which I think was about five people, so somehow equal. It was also the beginning of the degradation of understandings between Elia Zenghelis and Rem Koolhaas. Rem was concentrating more and more in Rotterdam, while Elia remained in London.

But from the beginning, we had these exchanges. Sometimes we went to London to help finish a competition, for example. I remember one for Parc Citroen Cevennes: a competition that we lost. That was done entirely in London, with Zoe Zenghelis still producing work even. She made a very large painting of the park. In fact, I brought the whole package for the competition to Paris. I remember being in London in a very small cab, and this roll with the painting sticking out by about two metres. That is a very clear memory.

I stayed quite a long time. There's no specific date of leaving because leaving took me two to three years, in the sense that there were moments in that period when I only came back to do a project. I'd come back and stay for two or three months to just do a specific competition. There was a period that I was there part-time because I started up a small practice in Antwerp and started teaching in Brussels. So, there were moments that I was there for two days a week.

But I started in 1984, and that was the moment that the Parc de la Villette competition was definitively lost. There had been several episodes, and the last episode was this dreadful result. So, there was a slight depression in the office. There were only six people, including Jan Voorberg, who was Rem's partner in the Rotterdam office at that

time. I only knew him for one, maybe two years, then he went on holiday to Brazil and was killed there. That is the context, very roughly.

RH Which years were the transitional period, when you were leaving OMA?

XdG Let's say it started in 1990—maybe, I'm not exactly sure, it was nothing official—and I was completely gone in '92, I think.

RH What attracted you to join OMA?

XdG The situation in Belgium at that time was quite different from today's situation. Today, Belgian architecture—or Flemish architecture—is quite 'on the spot'. But that was not at all the case in the early eighties. In fact, I went to the architecture school in Ghent, and I remember the general situation was very negative. There was nothing very interesting going on in the Belgian scene, with a few exceptions only. There was no culture of competitions—there was more a culture of half-corruption. It was clear that at that time there were a few big offices in Belgium that got all the public contracts. They got these contracts not because of their quality, but simply because of their links with political parties. The biggest change in that whole situation was, in fact, organised by the European Commission who installed a system of competition—not only in architecture but in general—for public commissions.
That was the basis of a new culture where, slowly, competitions were introduced. This was accompanied by the introduction, in Flanders at least, of the Vlaams Bouwmeester (Flemish Government Architect)—which today is considered as being responsible, in a big part, for the amelioration of the architectural culture. The Bouwmeester is an architect who becomes a civil servant of the Flemish community for five years. They and their team basically organise—or help other administrations to do—public competitions.

But in the early eighties, none of this existed. I didn't want to stay in Belgium because I didn't see any good practices where I wanted to start to work. We also had to

do two years of practice before becoming a real architect, and so I tried my chances at OMA. This was of course not only because the situation was so negative in Belgium, but merely because I was very much interested in OMA's New York projects since my studies—as well as in similar offices, like Archizoom and so on. I also knew that Rem had sought contact with Archizoomin the early days.

In my fourth year of study, we had a course on architecture theory. We had to choose a number of books to read and interpret to show our understanding of them. These books had to be taken from a list. At that time we had discovered *Delirious New York*, and we asked to put it on the list, but it was refused because the professor did not consider it a serious work of architectural theory. Also, I wanted to do my two years of practice at OMA and the Belgian Order of Architects refused it, because it was not considered a serious office.

The consequence of that was that I simply did a 'false' practice for the Belgian Order of Architects. I made an agreement with a Belgian architect without ever going there—but he filled in the papers—and so my practice for the Order of Architects was completely fake. When I went to OMA, I hadn't worked in any other office. I was very keen to work there, and I was immediately accepted— which was a big surprise to me.

Office

RH Other than the occasional back-and-forth, you were based at the Rotterdam office?

XdG Yes, in Rotterdam. During the first years, I lived in Rotterdam and then, afterwards, I moved back to Belgium. I moved to Antwerp, which is about 100 kilometres from Rotterdam, and I went to Rotterdam on a daily basis for years.

RH How was the Rotterdam office structured at that time?

XdG Well, structured! It was rather not structured at all. In the very beginning we were only six people, so you don't need a big structure for an office of six. But it grew

steadily: when I left, in the beginning of the nineties, I think there was around sixty staff. I don't know precisely, but that was the evolution that the office went through in these ten years.

I always knew that in financial terms it was not very prosperous. It even went very negative at some moment. I also knew that the houses that we did cost about as much to the office as to the client. I'd been working for a long time on the Villa dall'Ava. From 1985 until it was built, I was the lead architect of that small house. Although in the very beginning I didn't really want to do it. I was much more interested in paper projects and paper architecture, but after a while, Rem asked me. The commission had first been handled in London—Elia did a preliminary design— but at some point Rem took the project out of the London office to Rotterdam and asked me to start all over again.

But how was the office structured in the beginning? Jan Voorberg was there to follow up everything that was practical, although he also had an important substantive role, and Rem was four days a week in Rotterdam and probably one day in London. There was no serious structure, but I think that has always been one of the qualities of the office: that it is not so structured and that it is not really hierarchical. Basically, people who came to the office, just had to find their place and create a role for themselves.

On the other hand, I could get along very well with Rem since the beginning and apart from himself, I was probably the only one in the office to speak French, and that's likely why he came to me with this Villa dall'Ava project. Before that—or simultaneously—they had done one other house, which is the one on the dike in Rotterdam (Patio Villa). That was a much more modest house in terms of budget. After the Villa dall'Ava, they did the villa in Bordeaux (Maison á Bordeaux) which was, again, one big step higher in terms of finances.

Preoccupations

RH What were the main preoccupations during those years?

XdG That is difficult to say. Probably to get away from the modernist language, and not be trapped in post-modernism nor in deconstructivism. There was this period around '89, when really new concepts were being developed for a whole series of competitions. I was involved in almost all of them: Très Grande Bibliothèque, Zeebrugge Sea Terminal—and Karlsruhe (Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie) slightly less so. But also earlier on Ville Nouvelle Melun-Sénart and later on the Jussieu library.

But all these were in fact mingled and some ideas moved from one project to the other. If I remember well, in '89 Zeebrugge was a little bit earlier and had to be handed in before summer, while Karlsruhe and the Très Grande Bibliothèque were a little later. There was a team consisting of people from both London and Rotterdam that got involved into this maelstrom of very interesting projects.

But in 1984, the very first thing I did was working on the housing project on IJ-Plein (Masterplan, School and Gymnasium) in Amsterdam. The whole urban plan was already fixed at that moment, and we started the architectural and organisational part of these two buildings. Then, steadily, there were other projects that were mingled with this daily activity. But as I said, I was always much more interested in doing competitions than in doing one house.

Drawings

RH It seems that there's a shift during that period in terms of the kinds of drawings being made in the practice. Could you talk a bit about the role of drawings during that time?

XdG I really think this has to be understood from project to project. In your email, you were talking about a so-called 'new' drawing method or kind of drawing, but I'm not quite sure which one Alex (Wall) was talking about.

RH I believe it's this kind of thing—collage elevations, or maybe more like flat models—Alex described a story of you making this drawing.

[Netherlands Architecture Institute collage elevation – OMA]

XdG I see. What I remember of this is that, this competition was started by a team without Rem being very much involved. But then, at a critical moment in the planning of the competition, he was convinced that what was being prepared was not good, so it was started all over from zero with a different team. I got involved in this team.

Basically, there were only a few weeks left and I remember that I did this drawing the very last night—we had to hand-in in the morning—which meant that the possibilities were very limited. We knew what we wanted to do more or less, and I was not able to do paintings or anything like that, so the only possibility I saw was to start from a very elementary one-point perspective that showed the entrance of the project, to suggest something of the spatiality and materials by using almost the real materials. Like one might use in a model. There is a piece of textile that you can see in the drawing, and it's simply a layering of different coloured papers, textures or materials. Simply, this drawing, or this method, was developed because of an absolute lack of time for making the kinds of beautiful drawings that they used to do.

[Villa dall'Ava inverted perspective sketch – OMA]

But first, when you mentioned it, I thought that maybe you were talking about this kind of drawing. This is a sketch, obviously, and there is a poster that was derived from this for the first exhibition that OMA did in Antwerp, at De Singel.

Basically, it's not an invention at all. It's a regular perspective drawing that is inverted, simply meaning that what is in front is small and what is in the back is big. It is a very ancient technique that was used in China. The reason I used this was that there is a very specific spatial

configuration of the house and the materials. This sketch was made before it became clear how everything would fit together—and we couldn't show it in a normal perspective. That's basically why this was inverted: in order to understand for ourselves where the concrete would stop, where the corrugated aluminium would start, where the openings are, and so on. In fact, compared to a traditional perspective, one sees more of the facades together.

But as you can see, this has nothing to do with the collage for the Architecture Institute. So, my message would be that original ways of representing projects were often derived from practical issues, like shortage of time or, in this case, not knowing how to make different materials fit together.

[Très Grande Bibliothèque, competition panels – OMA]

Of course, there are very different things that we developed, like all of this stuff. I was intensively involved in this one. This is a very bad copy of the panels that were handed in for the Très Grande Bibiothèque Competition. As you can see, no drawing at all to show the eventual architectural qualities. It's all diagrams, basically.

These are two of the three panels that were allowed. The middle panel—the first panel that you see—shows all of the plans; some plans slightly more developed; all of the sections; and the facade drawings in a very elementary way. That was basically all of the material there was when we handed-in this competition. Everything that you can find on the internet or in *S,M,L,XL* was produced afterwards. That also goes for other competitions, such as Melun-Sénart. That was basically a set of three drawings, and the very nice models that one can find were in fact all made afterwards.

[Jussieu - Two Libraries, competition panels – OMA]

The same goes for Jussieu. These are two of the three panels that we handed in. And so, in terms of diagrams, this was developed during the competition [the folded diagram on the right-hand panel], the folded-up street.

But then there have been many drawings afterwards that were not at all in the competition material.

[Jussieu - Two Libraries, x-ray isometric – OMA]

For instance, this one was drawn afterwards. Also, all the elaborated models came after the competition was won.

Retroactive

RH What was the impetus for making e drawings and models afterwards?

XdG I think simply, in the case of Jussieu, we won the competition and so we had to start to convince librarians and other people from the client side to believe in the project. I mean, when you see those panels, only architects can understand what the intention is. It was a time when representational drawings were almost not done.

RH Are there specific drawings from this period that you consider important in this sense?

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

XdG I think the diagrams of Melun-Sénart are important. These diagrams were developed during the competition. I also must say that of some drawings, it's not always clear who finally was the author, but I'm not so sure that this is the most important thing. In the case of Melun-Sénart, I did some just for the competition. There were basically only three drawings of which I did this plan.

In fact, the competition was done in Paris together with a local office. The OMA participants were Mike Guyer, Yves Brunier and myself. I think each of us three did one of the of the main drawings of the project. All of the diagrams and the explanation were developed together with the local office.

You were asking why drawings were developed afterwards. As I mentioned, in some cases like Jussieu, it was because we simply started the real project after the competition.

But in many others, like Très Grande Bibliotheèque, it was pretty abstract altogether when we handed-in the competition and it was really necessary—but also useful for exhibitions that came up—to materialise things better. So, the big models for Très Grande Bibliothèque were made after the competition. The same goes for the model of Melun-Sénart with all the little wooden blocks. I guess that was even years after we did the competition. But of course, they all helped a lot to clarify what our intentions were.

RH This is really interesting. These are competitions with a set of deliverables—the stuff you submit. But in OMA's work, there seems to be a strong impulse to form a coherent project from each body of work. Even if this means clarifying intentions, filling gaps or even correcting things retrospectively. So, the competition or commission—which is normally understood as 'the project', with all its scars and compromises—is only part of the material that makes up the 'OMA Project' for each.

This is a very inspiring attitude and, I suspect, has its roots in the earlier 'paper' projects of the office, wherein every project has to be a thesis—or sometimes even a kind of manifesto.

XdG Yes. It is especially funny in the case of Très Grande Bibliothèque. What we handed in was quite abstract and could only be understood, I think, by specialists. But of course, it was a very interesting concept.

Before the jury—there was an official jury with lots of different kinds of people, so more technical people, but also librarians and architects—the crucial factor, at that time in '89 was Francois Mitterrand. The competition entries were exhibited at the French Architecture Institute that was housed in the Rue de Tournon in the centre of Paris. I remember very well, it was in a classical Parisian building with a forecourt and Mitterrand passed by to see the projects, so they cut off the whole street from traffic. Every architect had to stand next to their panels, and—if I remember well—there was more than ten. We were not allowed inside, we were standing in the street as pedestrians, and these limousines arrive. Mitterrand goes

in the building. He goes from one stand to the next, talks for a few minutes with each architect, and then leaves again.

It was said that the decision was already taken then and not when the jury came together. I can very well imagine with the material that we had at that moment, that Mitterrand couldn't understand anything of what we were trying to say.

But it's probably interesting to look at some of the other projects.

[Morgan Bank, entrance collage – OMA]

Morgan Bank. Yes, I did some of the collages there also. So maybe that's a kind of introduction to the more famous one of the Architecture Institute. I did the one of the entrance, where one looks from outside into the entrance lobby. This one with a water jet coming out of the marble wall.

Instruments

RH A side observation: the people I've been speaking to so far, with the exception of Kees Christiaanse, were more involved in the London office. It's interesting to compare the drawings made in London and Rotterdam at the same moment. In Rotterdam, there seems to be shift from the pictorial to something much more tectonic—something about how situations are assembled.

XdG Yeah.

RH I really enjoy the immediate relationship between the way these drawings are made and the way the physical materials or spaces are arranged.

A similar thing is going on in the fake perspective sketch you shared earlier. It is trying to convey an idea, which isn't necessarily to do with static imagery, but rather how the building—and the relationship between the parts of which it's made—can be understood.

XdG Yes, absolutely. These drawings are also instruments for ourselves. In this particular case, to see what the relationship from outside to inside could be for a bank building. We didn't care that much about the intelligence of the jury to be able to understand these kinds of drawings or not.

Projects

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, nighttime collage – OMA]

As I said, in '89 there were these different projects being developed at the same time. That's quite well described in *S,M,L,XL*—at least for some projects—and it is also said there that one of the ideas for ZKM (Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie) afterwards became a kind of main issue for Très Grande Bibliothèque: this kind of floating public thing in a sea of more technical devices. But Zeebrugge was also done at this time. At one moment, I made a night drawing of this project, which was simply a facade drawing that was coloured in. But the atmosphere was not at all conceptual or anything; it was trying to give an impression of the potential atmosphere. Lots of mist and quite vague silhouettes standing together, because, as you might know, this project was planned to be on the far end of one arm of the harbour in Zeebrugge that is, in fact, more than one kilometre into the sea. So, climate would play a very important role. But there are also collages like this, indeed.

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, daytime collage – OMA]

Very recently there was an exhibition in Antwerp, in the Architecture Institute, about the competition culture in the last 40 years in Belgium. As I explained that culture started only in the late eighties. Zeebrugge was one of the projects shown, and in fact they discovered the model that had been resting somewhere in an office at the Harbour Authority, and the transparent head of the model was completely changed: it became brown and almost opaque because it had been standing for many years in sunlight. Which was quite funny. But for the rest, the model was pretty much intact.

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, internal cartoon perspective – OMA]

These sketches were very much related to one person. I introduced a friend of mine, Luc Reuse, and he came to OMA to work for several years. He was very good, in minutes basically, to show you things like this. He made a lot of similar sketches for Euralille.

XdG That's the same person. Very soon other people started to make the same kind of drawings. So, in the case of Euralille, there's also an American guy, Mark Schendel, who worked together with Luc and others on Lille, and after a while, he was able to do more-or-less the same drawings. So, it's not always completely clear which one was done by the Belgian guy or by the American.

We didn't care so much about authorship because all of these drawings that you show came out of a kind of necessity: doing competitions, getting very short of time, being forced to present it in a few days. That's merely coming from the fact that there were no computers—or almost none. As you might have seen, for Très Grande Bibliothèque, there were some computer models that are also used in *S,M,L,XL*. These were developed during the competition. But altogether we decided to make the panels entirely on the basis of hand-drawn plans and sections. We didn't really trust computers yet, at that time.

[Eurodisney, internal cartoon perspective – OMA]

XdG I'm not sure. Yeah, could be. I remember it was not really a project. Some weekends I went to Rem's house in London, because it had to be produced in a few weeks. We were asked by Disney themselves, and then I think we worked on it for not more than three weeks. Basically, we were thrown out in the next phase because Robert Stern, who was one of the architects, had convinced Disney and

the CEO— Michael Eisner at that moment if I remember well—that no European architect could ever understand the real spirit of Disney. So, all of the European architects, with the exception of Rossi, were thrown out, and they went on with American architects. I think it is by Luc, but I'm not sure. It's certainly not me.

[Eurodisney, site plan – OMA]

This one might have been made by me, but again, not 100% sure.

RH I wanted to ask about this kind of drawing, for Villa dall'Ava too, which also uses these conventions in terms of hatches and stipples. They also appear in some of the early drawings of your office.

XdG Yes. At that time, we used Letraset and things like that. But here it's a kind of mimicry of Letraset. Letraset drawn by hand.

[Bijlmermeer Redevelopment, sketch – OMA]

I was also working on this. I forgot about these ones. That also could have been me.

[Bijlmermeer Redevelopment, diagrams – OMA]

These for sure. Basically, this was mainly Mike Guyer and me, I think. But as I said, it's not always clear any more for me, as we did not care about authorship. There might be some drawings that were made by more than one person.

RH This next project I don't think is very well known in general, but these images are incredibly beautiful.

[Biozentrum, model photograph – OMA]

XdG I agree. That model might have been Ron Steiner, but again not completely sure. We made the model ourselves. I remember us using a haircomb to make the fields. They're made in foam—the building is a collage of the roof—but the surrounding fields are textured by things like haircombs.

I also worked on Euralille, but I remember I only worked one week on it, with Kees Christiaanse. We went to see the client for the first time and then the first thing we did was a kind of charrette. Then afterwards, I was not involved anymore. But many years later we did, with our own office, a small piece of it as urbanists. The first part to link Euralille with the surroundings.

Authorship

RH I want to go back to something you mentioned a few times: that authorship didn't matter. Could you elaborate on that?

XdG One of the things I was very much impressed by before I was at OMA was the quality of Stefano de Martino's drawings. Just before I joined, he made very nice drawings of the prison in Arnhem and Parc de la Villette— but that period was more or less finished. It was so specific to that person. Afterwards, people at the office were not as well skilled as him and could not make the same kind of drawings. That was typical for OMA, I think: there is lots of freedom for different participants and one has to find one's own place—which in fact implies that you bring in your own style… if that exists at all. You have been talking to Alex Wall. He did this very famous poster of Parc de la Villette, which is a completely different and naive way of drawing compared to what Stefano de Martino did.

RH Yes. This is part of why I'm interested in this non-authorship or multiple-authorship issue. The heterogeneity of ideas and material that it produces, and the possibility to match a representational technique to an idea by drawing on the pool of skills available. That requires a variety of participants.

XdG Absolutely.

Value

RH What would you say is the value of that period of OMA for practice today?

XdG On the one hand, it was a very open structure, certainly at the beginning. Everybody brings in what they have in them. I think Rem was absolutely functioning as a catalyst, and very clearly the central person. But it was a system that was very open to ideas from others—which did not necessarily lead to a project that was authored by a specific person—but that basically led to new things as different ideas were confronted.

I think if we inherited anything in our own office, it is this way of working. It is often explained as: if the cleaner has a better idea than the architects, then that's what we will do. So that is an attitude that remained in our office.

But on the other hand, it's very clear that this period towards '89—or let's say this development from being a rather modernist architecture office and then '89 being a culmination point—resulted in the office being able to go one step further than the modernist attitude, I would say. Because the context at that moment was already—since quite some time—postmodern. But I think that what OMA did in that period had simply nothing to do with postmodernism or anything. It was rethinking more extreme forms of architecture on a programmatic basis. I think a big value of that is that we were not at all concerned about style.

How do such things happen? I think there is an ambition, but there is also the context in time: it was a very particular moment where, in the summer of '89, all these different, but very daring demands came together. I mean, we were invited to work on Très Grande Bibliothèque and Karlsruhe and so on. So, at one moment it becomes clear that we are into a new episode of the world.

Xaveer de Geyter (Tournai, 1957) founded XDGA in 1988, with architecture, urbanism and landscape practices in Brussels and Paris. XDGA has been the subject of five monographs, has won numerous awards (Mies Van der Rohe Award, Bigmat Award, Flemish Culture Award for Architecture) and three travelling solo exhibitions. Xaveer had been active in academia throughout his career, including roles as a Guest Professor at Sint-Lucas School of

Architecture, The Berlage Institute in The Netherlands and ETH Zürich.