

Conversation: **018**
With: **Frans Parthesius**
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Work

Richard Hall Amongst other things, I'm wondering about how one can work today. The world is quite different from the world OMA (Office of Metropolitan Architecture) emerged in. So, an aspect of this is thinking about how one can make the space for process in our more expensive, commercially driven world.

Frans Parthesius It's a good question to ask yourself nowadays. How to secure the freedom to move in those kinds of ways, in these times. I can imagine that it's more difficult in a way. On the other hand, you have more tools and media that you can use to your advantage.

You're able to go quite far in the process without too much risk. Actually, perhaps you're being forced to work the same way as OMA at this moment. That is of course an established office with responsibility to a huge amount of people. So, they can't afford to play around quite like they used to. But they keep these possibilities for play in particular kinds of work—curatorial projects, AMO and certain competitions where they want to push an idea forward—where they have less chance of scaring the client. Where they won't think it's too risky, advanced or out-of-the-ordinary.

Maybe you should do something like this: be very business-like on one side and make a secret room where anything can happen.

RH That would be nice. How did you come to be involved with OMA in the first place?

Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

FP Well, it's a long story. When I was at design academy, I was really interested in postmodernism without really knowing it. For art history, I had to write a piece, and I

found out about postmodernism in architecture. The idea that you could look back and play around with history, with whatever you wanted. But the strange thing was that at the same time what I usually found aesthetically pleasing and beautiful was modernist. So, I wanted to kick modernism out, but I loved modernism at the same time. As a student, you know you have big thoughts and silly positions. Anyway, I befriended an architect—Arie van Rangelrooy—and we had these discussions. Later on, he went on the Prix de Rome and was working on a competition. I said I'd like to help him with the model and got Vincent de Rijk to help me. It was a very bad model, but it was seen by someone. So, I got a call from Arjan Karssenbergh—a Rotterdam architect—who was working with Mike Guyer. They were doing a small competition. They got my number and asked if I would like to do something for them. So again, I asked Vincent to join.

By that time, we had set-up a workshop together. I was making models of perfume bottles—because I was working for a French company designing those, and I had to be able to make models—and Vincent for his ceramic and polyester work. And yes: we had the freedom to find something cheap.

So, we were kind of establishing ourselves in Rotterdam and starting to work here. Then, we heard someone on the stairs saying, 'Oh, all these people are coming to Rotterdam thinking they get big workshops, but those of us who really want to do something here are being pushed out'—this was halfway in the eighties. That was Hans Werlemann coming up the stairs! He was worried that it would turn into Amsterdam.

There was someone else who was being very precise working there, very silent, and that turned out to be Ron Steiner. He saw us working and he said, 'I like what you're doing guys', and we said, 'We like what you're doing as well. Very precise.' He said, 'Yeah, I work at OMA. We should team up there someday.'

So, that's how it started. A few months later, when we had kind of forgotten about this conversation, I got a telephone call: 'Hi, it's Rem (Koolhaas). Can you come

over to the office? Now?'. That was it: clank! It's a believable story, isn't it? That's how it went.

Vincent and I went over there, and there was a working model with a group of people standing around it. Rem turned around, 'Oh hello, hello. What do you think?'. That was the first thing he said, 'What do you think?'. I didn't even know what it was about! So, then you get the whole story of the NAI (Netherlands Architecture Institute) competition model. That's how we got involved.

RH That was in 1987 or '88?

FP I would say, '87.

RH And you and Vincent both worked on the three '89 competitions after that, right?

FP Yeah, and maybe there were some smaller things in between. Vincent has a much better archive than I have, so it's always easier for him to look back at the timeline. It was a combination of TGB (Très Grande Bibliothèque), Zeebrugge Ferry Terminal, ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie) and Frankfurt Flughafen.

Collaboration

RH I understand that your collaboration changed a bit over the years. With Vincent, but also with OMA. You mostly take photographs now, right?

FP Yeah, I take photographs. That started around the time I decided to stop doing models. The relationship between me and Vincent, to me, has always been a miraculous one. We would work together in silence and then stand back and look at what we had done and see what wasn't working out. We had this understanding without words.

As I said, we started a workshop together. My main practice was doing communication design. Later on, that grew towards exhibition design. In the workshop I did models for product design, but also architectural models. Almost exclusively for OMA. We also did stuff for Willem-Jan Neuterlings, MVRDV and Ben van Berkel—who was

working under his own name then but is UN Studio now. That was too interesting for me not to do.

But at a certain point I said to Vincent, 'Ok, we are completely dead after we do a model'—they were always so intense. There was always too little time, and we'd get students and friends to help out in the last few days, pay them all, and we'd be left with less than the people who helped us. 'So, it's all exciting and I love it, but only if we keep developing something new with every model'. The model making, for me, was not a 3D representation of a drawing, it was the 3D representation of an idea. Therefore, you had to put in the time to get the idea into it.

This is how I wanted to go: sort of cherry picking which models to do and discussing with OMA which would be the most interesting projects to do this for. But Vincent thought slightly different, because everything for him is about the workshop. The way he designs, his language, is by means of his workshop. That's really the central thing. That's also why his workshop is so exciting. So, we started the workshop together, but for me it was like a part-time thing, while for him it's like the core of his professional existence.

Vincent said, 'No, I like doing the models and of course we develop something new every time'. He was more into it. We kept going for some time, because we had already agreed that we would take it in turns to project lead every model. So, I kept building models, but Vincent also did some without me. I was a little less involved because he took the main responsibility.

Of course, Rem also saw that and did not like it. He would keep try to involve both of us and at some point, he said, 'I'll stop asking you to do models.' It was a very easy separation in the workshop because I said, 'Vincent, you invested in more machines than me, but let's keep all the machines here so I sometimes have a reason to come back and make something.' So, it was very easy. I just stepped out of making models, but I could come back to the workshop when I liked.

Anyway, I ended up working on the model of the New York Prada store, which was fun in the end. And then I stopped. I felt that was the end of my cooperation with OMA. But then, it was Rem again who invited me to do photography.

I learnt so much about photography from Hans Werlemann. He would come running into our workshop and I would hold up things towards the sun to move the light. He showed me all kinds of things. He had a total freedom as a photographer, and he knew what was behind good photographs.

Très Grand Bibliothèque (TGB)

RH Could you describe an example of a collaboration process with OMA? Perhaps something like TGB.

FP Well, by then we were starting to know the office, much more than was the case with the NAI. We shared the excitement about doing this. But it was also difficult. We didn't know how to handle the office: we were going to do this, and it was really exciting—we had this meeting with everyone—and then we waited two weeks for the drawings. We really needed to do something, and at the same time Rem was asking, 'What do you have?!' So, based on the conversations we just started making material studies and shape test. We put them all in a box and took them to the next meeting.

That was really a special moment because we put these things on the table, and Rem looked at it. He grabbed something, jumped up and he ran away. We didn't know what was going on, but the others ran after him. He went to the elevator, which had a light strip to one side, and he held this little piece of material in front of the light. We had just made these quick random shapes out of acrylic based on what we had seen in some drawings. There was one that was still kind of rough—the one he held in front of the light—which we saw worked for his idea.

Later on, we were in the workshop and the telephone rang—another of these weird telephone conversations—'Yeah, I'm in a gas station in France. So, what you need to do is make the voids. I only want to see the voids.' Clank!

We didn't even know there were any voids. But we knew the basic story: that it was just a grid of floors and walls and then it had all these big rooms in it, in weird shapes: reading rooms and so on. Those were his voids.

[TGB, plaster model and exhibition set-up photograph – OMA]

So, the idea only became visible as a model. I worked on it, but it was really Vincent's idea, to make the big plaster models. One shows the block with the holes and the other shows the holes as volumes. It could all be cast as one thing. I mean, it's really a piece of engineering. But only in that model is the concept really visible. I think the model we made originally for the competition was nice, but it was really a very classical model.

That was a model making experience I still cherish. Also because there was the excitement of the competition, and then the further excitement of making this second model for the exhibition in Amsterdam (at the Stedelijk Museum). In that exhibition especially—with the diagrams on the walls and the model—the whole concept was formalised in the room, it was visible. Even how the model was lit from the top and displaced with broken mirrors—which was also the way we used to photograph the models—was curating the idea.

So, yeah. It was a great project indeed.

Process

RH Compared to a traditional model making service, there's a different end result of course, but also a relay that happens in the process. Perhaps it's more accident than design, but the materials you prepared stimulated thoughts: they became part of the design process. There's an aspect of mutual improvisation here—Vincent also mentioned this—that seems quite important to OMA's process at the time.

FP Yeah, but it's really about how Rem operates. He's really very open. I mean, as I said before: 'So, what do you think?'. He invites people to say what they think, not

knowing what it's about. He's looking for reactions. All kinds of reactions. Anything you say is ok, it's valid. You might think, 'I don't want to say something stupid', but you can't. So, that's one of the things he does: he makes sure that input to the project can come from all directions. But he is still able to cut things out and decide what to respond to.

What he also does is challenge you. He tries to put something in your hands. Often, in the very first briefing on a project, he would talk about an artist or some specific work, but not explain anything. Sometimes you would know the artist, but often you wouldn't. So, you start thinking, 'Ok, what does he mean? Is it about the site? Is it about the concept? Is it about the material?'. But he deliberately gives you limited information so that you do something, and maybe go an interesting way with it or come up with something completely different. At least, that's what I suspect he does. What it guarantees is that you have to think about it; that you will come up with something that is not literally what he is asking for.

You should ask him why he operates like this.

RH What you're describing is quite remarkable: this ability to stimulate enthusiasm; to encourage people to do something outside of their comfort zone. But there's a process of curation going on. All this freedom and experimentation has an aim. It's pretty unusual to be able to hold that together.

FP Yeah, it is. But also, the people who go there are ambitious and talented—and often they will start an office for themselves after they finish at OMA. But it's always interesting to compare the work of their offices to the work they did at OMA.

For me—I can't speak for Vincent—it works like this: when a client asks you something you do not accept the brief as is. You need to analyse it: Why is it to be like this? Why do they want that? I'm looking for things that are interesting for the client, but also for me. It's like I say to students, designing is giving a present. If you know someone, then you give a present that's the exact fit for that person and

you're both happy. If you know someone really, really well and you give a present that pleases that person and pleases yourself, you give something of yourself—you're showing your real values. So, a good designer does what is good for the client, but a really good designer does it also for themselves. If the client is satisfied but you're not, that's no good. There has to be something extra in it.

I think OMA was also like this. They do not need to be afraid of people looking back to their history. They did it how they wanted. Now people can also use it. An important aspect of OMA is its obsessions. An office has to ask what its ambitions are, for this project and for the office. I really learnt that through this relationship with OMA.

Outsiders

RH As someone who doesn't come from an architectural background, how do you think your modelmaking processes differ from that of a typical architectural modelmaker? I'm not trying to compare in a better-or-worse way but wondering what your lack of architectural conventions might contribute to the process.

FP I think it certainly helped that both Vincent and I made use of the workshops at the Design Academy a lot when we were students. We thought it was important and natural to express ideas and concepts by means of 'making'. This meant that we were already thinking in terms of materials. So, if a drawing was shown to us—or even a programme—we could play with it; we can think how to materialise these building parts. Or, in some projects—like the Yokohama Masterplan—you need to go completely wild. In a way, that project was like graphic design, showing where things were. It also took us back to our youth, making small model airplanes and things like that.

So, to answer the question, a nice thing about it was, because it's true we were outsiders, we were aware that we were doing something—I wouldn't say new, because if you study the history of art and architecture, you'll find it all—but it was a consistent research to develop a language for

each project. We were always after a sub-language of materials, colours, how the model was made. For us, the question was what design ideas we would put into the model.

At some point, I started teaching at TU Delft. Not in architecture, but in representation. I did illustration and graphics. So, I was also there as an outsider, and they asked me and Vincent to do a lecture. We said, 'Sure, we'll try'. We were completely scared and shocked when we arrived at the lecture hall: it was filled to the brim! People were sitting on the stairs; people were standing outside the doors. I couldn't even get in myself almost! We were happy, but it was the modelmakers of OMA who were giving the lecture, so it was not our fame! It was the fame of OMA, and I also think that the students felt like something important was happening.

RH I think it's fair to say that it's increasingly rare for models to be made as representations of ideas. I think this is what's so important about what you and Vincent were doing. In architectural training—or maybe even in the mind of the typical architect—a model is a scaled down version of the building. One might try to convey ideas, but essentially the tendency is to treat what is being made as a miniature. My hypothesis would be that, for you, the product is the model, not the building. So, you're liberated to treat the model as a 1:1 object—a model of an idea rather than a building, as you say. I think this has enormous value in terms of communicating a concept on the basis of that media, rather than using models as a—often clumsy—way of approximating walls and columns and floors and windows etc.

FP Well, it's not so strange in OMA. As you were talking, I was just thinking that you should also talk to Hermann Helle. He was operating with OMA before us. He made the model for Melun-Sénart and cooperated on some things with us. He's really a fun character to have around, but also, he is not an architect. He is an artist. He would say, 'What is the difference between the models of a professional modelmaker and mine? Mine are not to scale.' For him, the important things are in the expression of the concept. Scale doesn't matter: the layout of the

plan would be more or less correct, but who cares about scale? Things can be higher, lower, thicker, whatever, but we were following the drawings, so in effect he is stronger in this conceptual dimension.

He was fun to work with. When he was working with us, he would work in scale, but the models Herman made were formed of 'ready-mades', where representation was more important than correctness in size; machine parts representing factories, matchboxes could be containers, brooms or giant nails forests.

Someone else who I think was really important in that time was a friend of Hans Werlemann: Claudi Cornaz. Claudi is a Swiss guy who would go around skating with a huge video camera mounted on a helmet. He was the first person to have a helmet camera! But he also did light effects and electronics on models, which would create incredible effects. They would put video cameras on the models, project it on a screen—with all the lines it makes—and then Hans would photograph directly from the screen, with all the intense colours and lines. It was amazingly suggestive.

So, I think that we were all outsiders, and I think this was interesting for the architect team. At some point Rem offered us a workshop space in their office. We thought about it but decided that we shouldn't do it. The distance is important. It's better for ourselves but it also means these collaborations stay special. In this way, there is also a threshold for the office to come to us with the things that they really need to outsource. By that time, they were already making quite nice models in-house.

RH This outsider thing—the distance—is really interesting. I can imagine that it's very important for OMA, having these interpretations from outside. There's a difference between the view of people who work intensely on a project every day, and the freshness of the outsider's view.

FP I hope so.

RH It also feeds into something I mentioned before we began: that the specificity of the products to ideas might have something to do with the range of participants and skills in the process. For example, the model you mentioned before by Hermann Helle has a super specific quality—and conveys the concept of Melun-Sénart very precisely—one imagines that you and Vincent couldn't have made a model quite like that. But equally, that he couldn't have produced the model you made for TGB. I don't know to what degree it is conscious or an accident of the process, but I think it's really amazing when these things align.

Accidents

FP I think so too. Something that Hans Werlemann taught me when thinking about photography, was to give chance a chance. This is applicable to any creative process I think. It's important to be both open to accidents, but also maybe to encourage accidents—to involve accidents in the process. I wholeheartedly agree with this. For Vincent and me, craftsmanship was always very important. To students, I would say, 'Don't learn from your mistakes, learn from what works'. This includes happy accidents. Craftsmanship can include accidents.

If I look at OMA projects, they did some interesting things in the Middle East, but I think these projects have too few constraints. There is money and space, and nothing else—so what can you do? Constraints are crucial in the really interesting projects. Even time constraints: some projects would be very different if there was more time.

At some point in every project there would be a crisis meeting. We would call the office and say, 'Ok, we were going to make the model like this, but that would need so many hours behind the milling machine. In the time that is left we can barely do one third of that.' And it would always seem that Rem was happy to have crisis meetings! Suddenly there were new constraints, 'Ok, how are we going to solve this?'. 'Let's not do this, and maybe we can make that bit more important.' We always went home relieved from a meeting like that. But not only that: it always made the model better; it made the project better.

Strategy

So, time constraints forced the whole team—not only us—to consider what is important. It was also the moment that we would ask, 'What are you showing us in your drawings and renderings? Why do you do exterior renderings when we have a model of the exterior?'. I used this lesson in my teaching also. I would ask the students to develop a presentation strategy and presentation palette. What is your media and how do they intertwine? How do they support each other rather than doubling up? How do you do what is necessary? I think this is still a problem for many architects really. If the competition requirements call for a model, five panels and a book. Then, these five panels are really important: they tell the story, they are what the jury look at first. So, they explain the project, the book is homework for the jury—to deepen their understanding—and the model is the thing that everyone can stand around and gives the first feeling of the outcome. Often you see that panels have images of the model telling the same things as the renders, so it's not working.

The other thing, when you make a model for an architect, is to ask, 'Are you presenting it personally or are you sending it in?'. Sometimes they ask, 'Why do you ask?'. But at OMA the question is, 'How are we going to use these things?'. How does it relate to the panels and the book? This is a design task.

At the same time, like in poetry, repetition or doubling can be really functional. But you have to know when and why to do it.

There's another part to this too: sometimes I am asked to make photographs of a model which will be used as the underlay for a diagram. So, some products can have a double role. Maybe there's also something interesting for you study in that. It is especially the case of OMA—I don't know if others do it—model photography is also part of the architectural illustration in the sense that sometimes the model is not even to be submitted, but to be used in the book because they want to show more than can be captured in the rendering that has to be submitted. It

could even be used on the sustainability page to show how certain things work.

So, sometimes a model can have a secondary life in the presentation material. Sometimes architects also do this to seduce, but what I think is interesting with OMA is that it should be used to explain.

Tools

RH Communication is an interesting layer in all this: the way that different media and combinations of media communicate. Related to what you said a minute ago, this is a conscious design activity in itself. At the beginning, you mentioned that my generation have many more tools available to us, but I don't think we're always so precise about their role. We tend to use them because they're available and convenient, but also uncritically without really wondering about their specific conceptual or communicative possibilities—or limits.

I'm going to be super boring for a second. Have you heard of BIM? It's essentially a coordination tool; a 3D model to avoid clashes and consolidate specifications.

Increasingly—out of expedience—architects are designing directly in this software. Part of me thinks this is pretty worrying, because it's essentially about assembly.

Composition is very difficult in that software, for example. But surely that in itself offers particular conceptual possibilities, within the suit of other means available to us?

FP Why should that be a problem? Same with rendering—why should it be a problem, as long as you have the freedom? Maybe you work in BIM, but first you make a foam model anyway to tell yourself how the volumes interact, to determine scale, to play around with things.

But it's difficult. I'm amazed that when you present something, if you give the client a physical model as part of the presentation, they are really happy with it and grateful because you have paid physical attention to the project. You have made a work of art for them. Even seeing the testing models is interesting for the client because it's

a memento of an important process. It's also a sign of attention. Anyway, I do think that clients think that's important, so why do you just give them renderings then? There remains something about the touch of a hand that makes a project more accessible, or even valuable, to a client.

One of the problems of rendering is that software we use can make it completely realistic—but that's only one possibility. I could also do a light study in the software, or I could do a light study on a foam block model. I think playing around is the important thing. Because you can do all these things in the software, it's easy to forget that you need to do what works for you.

It's the same for OMA. They can make very beautiful renderings, but sometimes they make something quick, 'Why don't we put that in?'. It's just an initial study but it shows the volume in such a nice way in a simple setting—it does something that a full render couldn't. This is important: you have a little accident and maybe it's interesting. Maybe it communicates something or shows the essence without distractions. So, use all the technology but sometimes stop it halfway or do something crazy. Sometimes the final rendering won't sell the idea.

Value

RH In your estimation, what is the value or success of OMA's work during this period I'm looking at?

That's a very big question. First of all, I think that it's really about research and development. But in a very free and bold way. It's hard to explain, but I'll try with an example: there was this year, 1989, when we did three big projects in one summer. Three very important international competitions. Rem called a meeting for the whole office, including some external people, like us. In the meeting, he said, 'Ok, we should practically pick one of these three projects. Doing three projects would be suicide.' He was looking at all of us. We decided to do the suicide. This suicidal tendency had a deeper meaning in that sense: every project would have to reinforce the other

projects. So, it was really one big project. Ideas could be applicable to more than one project or if it didn't work in one project, it could be tested in another one. It was also important that all three projects would benefit from the full skill sets in the office.

But for us, most important was just the curiosity of it. What are we going to do? It brought us all together, trying to find out. Could this pooling of energy be advantageous for all three projects?

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