Conversation: **014**
With: **Vincent de Rijk**
By: **Richard Hall**
Location: **Werkplaats Vincent de Rijk, Rotterdam**
Date: **29.09.2022**

Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)

Richard Hall When did your collaboration with OMA begin?

Vincent de Rijk The first years we were involved in OMA were completely chaotic. But at that moment they were on to some clear concepts. It started with the NAI (Netherlands Architecture Institute) competition, in 1987 I think. I had moved from Eindhoven to Rotterdam with Frans Pathesius—we studied together there—and a small group of friends. They had the idea: 'We have to move out of Eindhoven and go to Rotterdam. It's the up-and-coming place'! I was not aware of that, but I thought, 'Ok, I'll go with them'.

The reason to come here was that everything was incredibly cheap. The first day, we went to the city to ask for a house and they brought out a map with 500 houses, 'You can choose what you want'! They were all in really bad condition and had to be renovated, no electricity—but for free!

Here, we had a huge workshop for no money, nothing. Only the cost of electricity. Which was actually already difficult to pay for at first! So, we built a wall around the meter, and when they came to read it, we looked around with them a bit, 'Sorry, no idea where it is. Maybe its behind there, but there are a lot of rats'! So, they never checked it! Then we had no costs at all: not for rent and not even for electricity.

I had one friend here already, a guy who studied the year before and moved to Rotterdam. I went to visit him and there was Ron Steiner—the modelmaker—trying to finish the model for the NAI. He was making it with a team, but it wasn't going very well. Some of the interns had the idea to make it out of concrete. But the roof was sloped. I asked, 'How do you do the columns?'—they would not be able to drill all those 1mm holes in the concrete—but, they hadn't thought about that. There was only one option: fixing them to the roof. But the roof was angled, so every column was a different length, and never perpendicular to the roof. A nightmare.

So, we accidently got involved in that, working out how to make it work. We put all those columns in with the team—it must have been hundreds—and then the next morning Rem (Koolhaas) came.

All the columns were on the roof—which was my idea—and Rem asked, 'Can you take the roof off so I can look inside? I want to see the column grid.' I said, 'That's not possible'. That's something I learnt quickly: don't tell Rem something isn't possible! He just ripped off the roof and the model broke. It had to be handed in the next day. So, we worked the whole day and night to remake it. The roof still could not be taken off, but at least they could take some photographs without the roof. That was the first thing we did.

Then, a little later, he had four big competitions: TGB (Très Grand Bibliothèque), Karlsruhe (ZKM, Zentrum fur Kunst und Medientechnologie), Zeebrugge (Sea Terminal) and Frankfurt Flughafen. He came to us and said, 'Ok, I understand you have no experience'—Frans Pathesius was also there, who was actually much more experienced than me—'but we're doing four competitions. You can do all the models and then you'll learn along the way.' The pay wasn't great, but at least we could try to understand more about the office and its way of working.

Zeebrugge Sea Terminal

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, model – OMA]

We did these four competitions in a really short time. For Zeebrugge we only had one day to make the model. I made a plaster shape, and I vacuum-formed over it with an electrical heater. I'd done it at school many times. You don't need a proper machine, for a simple shape you can just use heat and a vacuum cleaner. So, we made the shell

and cut some openings. Xaveer de Geyter was the project leader, and he gave us some 'advice' on where these openings might be… he was drawing it on, and I was cutting it!

Those projects were the beginning for us. Then I sort of understood better how to improvise when necessary. Everything was done in such a short time because the planning was so bad. Most people in the office were not really anticipating the project: they were just doing stuff until someone told them what to do. That doesn't work, because then nobody knows what to do. Nothing happens and everything is last minute.

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, form option models – OMA]

I said to Xaveer, 'I just need a few hints. Is it round? Is it square?', 'No, it's not square', 'Ah, so its round…', 'Well, maybe.' So, I just made an egg! We had to finish it on Easter Sunday. Everything was closed but Xaveer was still in the office. When he came here to check, he laughed so hard about the shape. He said, 'No, this is too much like an Easter Egg!', 'You have to make it a bit flatter.' But there was no drawing or anything to scale…

RH So, accidentally, these informed the shape of the building?

VdR No. Xaveer was describing it.

RH But no drawings?

VdR No, he was referring to radar things on a boat and stuff like that.

RH And you interpreted that verbal description and came up with these shapes?

VdR No. It was Xaveer.

RH Ok…

[Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, model with projection – OMA]

VdR This was the other model with the facade projected on. I don't remember why we did this… maybe for the exhibition in Barcelona. The first model was not made of plaster, but we did make the plaster shape first, for the vacuum forming.

Anyway, the first version was sent away for the competition, and I never ever saw it again: we did not win, and it was never sent back. It was gone and Rem needed it for the next exhibition. So, then we made the plaster one that could be projected onto. A nice thing about it was that the projection was on one side—so you could see the facade—and then you walked around it and it became purely a form again.

RH Xaveer told me that the competition model had been found. It had been in the client's office and the top had gone brown.

VdR Yeah, only a few years ago. I was with my students in Belgium, and it was in an exhibition. It's true: it was completely brown. I guess we used shitty plastic!

You can also see in the image, some bits were not properly fixed… but really, it was going out of the door while everyone was still sticking things to it! Hans Werlemann probably made the main picture. He was there; we were in his place at the waterworks (Utopia).

The competitions around that time were really chaotic!

RH The four competitions you mentioned earlier, were all in super-quick succession, right?

VdR Yeah, but that was on purpose. Rem had planned that we would do a series of competitions and then we would be able to pick-up the way of working. That was the deal. He said, 'You can always come to me if you have questions. But first, try to solve it with the team—and if there's really an issue, come to me.' He mainly stayed out of everything, just involving himself intensely for little moments. I think he's still doing that. He would have the team start and then he would react. He was not instructing people what to do. Once you know that, you have to develop a plan

with the team. But most of the time, they are very inexperienced. Every now and again, there were people—like Xaveer—who could communicate with more authority and became project leaders. For them, this worked pretty well, I think.

Très Grand Bibliotèque (TGB)

But for TGB, it was Rem himself who told us how those models should be.

[Très Grande Bibliothèque, competition model – OMA]

RH There are two models for TGB, no? The competition model and the famous plaster models for exhibitions.

VdR Yes. Well, actually we made many models. First, the small model for the competition, but then I mentioned to Rem that it would be nice to make a plaster one, because it had to do with positive and negative. Originally, he hated that idea!

RH Why?

VdR Because he hates plaster models. They had already had some failures in the office with plaster models. A big mess. It doesn't come out right and everything looks like shit. But I learnt to work with plaster in school, so I knew it was possible.

The complexity in the small model didn't allow you to read the concept. Maybe it's a nice sort of cloudy facade, but it's more like an 'image' than the concept. It looks like a big block with a strange translucent facade, so it doesn't really convey the idea. Images like this are probably why it had no chance of winning! A cube of 100 x 100 x 100 metres with no special features or anything that makes it interesting. In essence, the concept was interesting, but it wasn't communicated in the first model. We didn't manage. I was a bit disappointed about that: we felt that he had a good concept, but we couldn't make it.

Then I thought, 'Well ok, what if we do it in plaster?'. But Rem didn't think it was a good idea. Then, he had this show come up in the Stedelijk Museum and he came back, 'Now you can do the plaster model. I want to have it 1:100!' So, that's a cubic metre. I had to prepare it really well: where the separations were; what was first; how all the inserts would work; and how the positive model and negative model would look together—because they're meant to be seen together to communicate the concept.

[Très Grande Bibliothèque, plaster model process photographs – OMA]

That was tricky, because only one day before the opening of the show both models were still together, inside the cast. So, we had to open it and put it back together. But for me, it was a successful model: it looked great in the exhibition, and it was showing the concept really well. The museums really liked it too—and it was not too expensive to make. Actually, for a cubic metre model, it was very cheap.

Then Rem said, 'Ok, we can sell these things!'. He sold them to Centre Pompidou, MoMA and three or four other places. So, we had to keep making them. In fact, at MoMA, I made one there in New York. It was easy money. Rem sells it to the museum for quite a bit of money and every time he paid me 10,000 for it. For me, it was only three days of work, and hardly any material costs because I already had the formwork. So, it was a really good deal. It also compensated for all the other competition models that we made with no budget, taking many days and nights of work for something that we probably wouldn't win!

We did a lot of things cheap. But he didn't forget that. When he had the opportunity to compensate us, he did. That was nice, but also smart: that's how he could run the office. If all the models had to be fully paid, that's a lot of money. Eventually, after having made a number of these copies, he said, 'Well, I don't need the money now. You can have it'! So, for me, it was also profitable. It only really cost my time.

Side Job

RH You're an industrial designer by profession, but you've got a big reputation in model making. What has the impact of this accidental career been on your work—and maybe on your business?

VdR I've always seen it as side job! Products and ceramic stuff have always been my focus. That's the reason my workshop exists—and that is what I teach. Model making was only ever a small part of the time. It's not regular work: maybe I do one intensely for a few days, but then no models for months. Even more so now. There was a peak, but now I'm not involved in model making so much anymore.

The way of working—even at OMA—is very different. Plus, now they have a nice model shop, with good people working there, so they can produce a lot themselves. There's a lot made in-house now—which is good. I always told Rem he needs to start his own model shop.

As the office grew, we could not do everything. They came every week asking for another model. It was impossible: I had other things to do. Also, I think the models don't play such a big role in the competitions now. It's more the computer models. It makes sense: they need to make them anyway; why not use them for presentations? It's completely logical. The pity is that we miss the opportunity to make these more improvised, less detailed objects. That's what I don't like so much about renderings: they're too realistic.

Materialising Concepts

RH The models you make always have this strong conceptual dimension—they're never pure representations. They also have a very particular aesthetic and material quality that I think comes from your industrial design background: from not being an architect. Other architects—other ex-OMA people in particular—have come back to you for that. Is it possible that you're partly responsible for a certain aesthetic in Dutch model-making?

VdR No, I don't see it. If it is like that, it's more to the credit of OMA than me. Their projects are always conceptually strong. There are also always people from the office helping me; giving input.

RH I'm thinking more about the materialisation of the concept.

VdR Oh, that's because I work with casting materials. First, plaster and clay, then with resin. But it was actually Rem's idea for me to make volumes from coloured resin blocks. He saw some stuff in the workshop and through we could use it for models. I didn't think of that myself!

RH I think you're being modest.

VdR But it actually was Rem's suggestion. For Frankfurt—which was also one of these four projects—I began to cast these resin bars and then engrave the facade on. It was quick—and strong too. Actually, that was the problem that I saw with the models made by Ron Steiner. He was making these super nice, precise models. But they were very traditional architectural models: physically weak and easily broken. Also, for some projects, like Zeebrugge, you cannot make it out of planes: it can only be a volume. I cannot make this skin from card. How would you do it? So, I had to do it from plaster and then vacuum form the skin. So yeah, maybe I'm always thinking more in volumes—but that also makes it easier.

RH No matter whether it comes from you or OMA, there seems to be a reciprocity between your techniques and OMA's ideas. Traditional models, as you say, are slow but also have a different level of detail to yours—and because they're made by architects, tend to attempt to convey certain things that make them… fidgety, by comparison. My hypothesis would be that there's a back-and-forth between your model making process and OMA's design process.

Improvisation

VdR It's also a consequence of time limits. Which were sometimes ridiculous. But at every level in the office. Rem

does it on purpose almost! He never gives a decision a week before the deadline so that there's time to calmly work it out. He's always like, 'Ok, what other options are there?'. When everything is put on the table, he asks what else is possible. He wants a process where there's always room for unexpected things.

Once you know that, it's easier navigate. I don't need to worry about whether I have done the right thing, it's just something I put on the table. I don't need to care if it gets thrown away, it's just there for the discussion. I don't try to think what Rem thinks. It doesn't work. Other people try to do that, in the office, 'What will Rem think of that?'…but that's not a good strategy! He's always trying to go further, to do something unprecedented. In that way, I only try to make interpretations from what other people bring in: their concepts and ideas. I like it when those concepts are understandable, but it doesn't have to be super-defined. If the idea is understandable, we can work together.

It's really important to do it different to the traditional way. With the traditional way, you cannot get it done in the time and you cannot improvise so easily with the lack of information. Other model makers in the city will ask for really detailed drawings, four weeks before the deadline, just to produce all the parts. But then, anyone can do it. It's not so engaging.

RH I like that there is this totally pragmatic aspect to it. You don't have enough time, so you're forced to be inventive. Adversity is the mother invention!

VdR And it helps us stay sharp. But for Rem, it's a chosen strategy. He regularly demonstrates this trait of being unpredictable and completely random in his choices!

For example, he asked me to make the model for CCTV. It was clear it was a super important project: everyone was working on it. Rem was very eager to win but he really delayed making choices. He was involved, but no one seemed to know what to do. Probably on purpose. They were producing all these foam models—there were at least 300, all laid out on the table—of all kinds of shapes.

I was booked for the model making and I said to Rem, 'We have to somehow start one day. Can you make a choice?'—we only had one week left!—'I know it's a really important competition, but with only one week it's going to tricky!', 'Yeah, maybe you're right.' Then he, literally randomly, picked a foam model from behind him without looking: 'Ok, this one'—and that is the shape that's built! He didn't even look at it.

I copied it exactly. Then the guys in the office thought, 'Well, if that's the shape we better ask Arup if it's buildable.' The evening before the deadline, two people from Arup—who had developed a programme that could calculate the stress in the structure—sent a diagram with the required diagonals. So, we had the shape, and I called Rem, 'Do you have something for the facade?', 'No, but we've just got this thing from Arup and it's actually not bad. Let's engrave that on so we have something.' It just stayed like that—and now Arup claim the design of the facade!

RH A joint accident.

VdR Yeah. I would normally get nervous about these short deadlines, but I see that Rem does it on purpose. There was enough time, but he knows that if he doesn't make a decision, everyone will try harder because they don't know what to do: they will produce stuff. I think that's probably what he looks for. So, if there's no input and no time, you have to do what you can—and there will be something you can improvise from. That's better than nothing. It's basically a way to get these unexpected projects. It's not that it's a particularly beautiful design or something. Not at all. But that improvisation was really part of the process from then until it was built. I had to go along with it, otherwise I was only waiting, because nobody knows anything for sure.

I don't know if it's still like that. I think it might have been a certain period: eventually the office became so big. I don't know how to make a model for OMA anymore. There are so many people involved; so much discussion; so much produced…it's impossible to get involved. So, after some time when the office became bigger, I lost the

connection a bit. The short, quick improvisation was easier than the later more professional process. It wasn't so much fun anymore.

RH It sounds like the pressure also stimulated you?

VdR Absolutely. For me, the situation is: 'Ok, they need something, and someone has to do it.' If I can do it for them, I will. I could always find a few clues by talking to people—get a hint and then do something—it doesn't have to be worked out. A description; a quick sketch; or a foam model is also enough.

The new professional modelmakers don't have this same appetite for chaos. They need instructions, CAD drawings and time…and budget! Another advantage of limited time: quick things are cheap!

Collaborators

RH Are there other external collaborators from that time who made an important contribution in terms of process, ideas and representation?

VdR Hans Werlermann and Frans Parthesius. Frans now does all the photography, and we used to do all the models together. We had a workshop together in the beginning. He was a very good craftsman but went on to do lots of photographic work.

From the really early days, there was Herman Helle. He made this amazing, huge model for Melun Senart. I learnt a lot from him: he is really a super-improviser. He was using all the crap he could find, but in a very interesting way. I remember he was making a model which needed to show containers in the harbour. He always had this way of buying things super cheaper from the Far East: like 500 pencil sharpeners. So, they were the containers in the harbour. If you don't look too closely it's super convincing. He always had these improvised solutions. He was asked to continue making models for OMA afterwards, but he was not interested in being a modelmaker. He also didn't like precision so much.

It was a nice time!

Vincent de Rijk *(Gouda, 1962) is an industrial designer, furniture maker, and model builder. After graduating from the Design Academy in Eindhoven, he started his own workshop in 1987. He made his name with a series of bowls in ceramic with polyester resin and the many architectural models he has realized, primarily for OMA. De Rijk is a leading specialist in the field of transparent resins, with which he has produced many pieces of furniture.*