

Conversation: 022
With: Rem Koolhaas
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Impetus

RH What was the impetus for starting OMA?

RK As you know, I had many simultaneous interests. At some point, I had an instinct that architecture was a domain that would enable me to continue pursuing multiple interests—and at the same time to make a difference. In film, for instance, the possibilities are more limited. There was also a polemical intention: I was not convinced by any of the interpretations of architecture being promoted at that moment.

RH And why the shift from London to Rotterdam?

RK First, there was an offer of a building commission (Boompjes) from a councillor. This was followed by a second opportunity to do a project in Amsterdam (IJ-Plein Masterplan, School and Gymnasium). So, the incentive was these two very tangible opportunities. You also know all of this, but I started the Rotterdam office with a partner (Jan Voorberg) who had tried to convert our *ex-aequo* win for the Dutch Parliament Extensions—equal with nine overs—into a commission for its realisation. He was an architect who had experience of building, so it was a very strong package. This also connects to the fact that I knew I needed to learn a lot, and, at that point, Holland was the ideal place to learn because it was so indifferent. And it still is.

Collaboration

RH You've always worked with other people. Whether it was the four of you in the beginning and then with Jan Voorberg or Kees Christiaanse in the early Rotterdam days; but also, before OMA, with Oswald Matthias Ungers; the projects you

did with people like Laurinda Spear; or the Constructivist research with Gerrit Oorthuys. Why is that?

RK Simply because I like it. But it has two sides, because I also like writing—and writing is something you do alone. Basically, I really like the idea that with other people you can reach a goal which you may not be able to reach on your own. On the other hand, it's also true that I'm happy to try to do the best I can on my own. Alternating between these two conditions is very crucial.

It was also a very important part of being a journalist. As a journalist I didn't simply write pieces: I also did layouts for the paper. There—even if it's at a very low level—you orchestrate the composition of a very complex entity. Before that, my father ran a cultural institute, when we lived in Indonesia. Part of that institute had a section on music, and I was friends with the guy who ran it. He involved me in an early fetishism with the idea of the orchestra.

There's a very English film, *The Young Persons Guide to the Orchestra*. It's really very corny because you have the conductor, 'Now the triangle...', and he has given a space to every instrument—that really fascinated me. Probably even the role of the director. But also, Gamelan—do you know this very interesting Indonesian form of music? An extensive group, with the whole orchestra sitting on the ground. The music is produced in a very mysterious way—almost like wind blowing through a field—and then, suddenly, energy emerges from certain points, and then shifts.

I think basically all of these experiences made the idea of collaboration and orchestration a very attractive proposition. I'm even wondering if it had something to do with the inherent mood of collaboration in the period following World War II...where basically a whole generation needed to produce something. Maybe I was marinated in this kind of collectivity.

RH I'm wondering about the specific people you've opted to work with at specific moments. Obviously, much can be owed to circumstances, but you've also pursued certain people, like Ungers.

RK It's never been based on similarity. In most cases, differences have been a much greater incentive. I think that's the fundamental possibility of collaboration. The motivation is also probably a compensation for something I don't have.

In the case of Ungers, it was the simple recognition of the incredible speculative force that he was able to give to architecture.

RH What was the relationship with Jan Voorberg?

RK We were friends. In all these cases, friendship is a very important component. There are other important people I miss in your interviews for this reason. I haven't seen Cecil Balmond mentioned. He was an extremely crucial element in the whole process. He's a fantastic example of the virtues of collaboration. In the mid-80s I discovered him as an engineer: we were working on the Morgan Bank, and I simply challenged him to make a generic plan with a single column type in the entire building. This engaged him and we became great friends. Through this friendship, I became much more knowledgeable in engineering, and he developed the ambition to deal with architecture. It was a real exchange—I benefited enormously from that in terms of my own range.

RH You've always pursued long-term relationships with third parties—Hans Werlemann and Claudi Cornaz, Frans Pathesius, Vincent de Rijk and so on—how did this desire to establish 'satellite' partnerships come about?

RK I think it's not exactly loyalty, but it does have something to do with familiarity. Part of it was based on noticing shared interests, but also on sharing certain

insights or certain challenges. It enables them to evolve as well.

Experience

RH You can contrast that with the office itself, which is physically and intellectually fuelled by a super high turnover of young people, while the external contributors are part of a longer conversation.

RK That's a very perceptive point.

RH Why such a strong interest in inexperienced people?

RK Inexperienced means innocent; means unspoiled; means unprogrammed; means free. But it's not entirely true, because I've also been very interested in experienced people like Cecil...

RH When I was working there, the majority of the office were interns. Others who I've talked to, have expressed being thrust into situations for which they felt they weren't ready. This yields certain results, no? Surprises; unexpected solutions. Of course, one could take a responsible stance and wonder if that's the right thing to do, but I think the risk has positive consequences.

RK It makes people grow. Not very long ago, we did a show on *The Evolution of Doha*. It was a really interesting show with an interesting little catalogue. That it was so interesting was almost inevitable because a group of people were selected and thrown into roles for which they had no experience whatsoever. They grew into these roles, and in growing also shaped the process. This is something I really believe in.

Associated Architects

RH Why did you opt to pursue this Associated Architects model, as described in *Delirious New York*?

RK It's interesting that you refer to Associated Architects. I've always been baffled by the fact that I described my own future, and no one seemed to pick up on it. So superficial in a way.

But of course, , the question, 'Why?', implies intentionality! I think I can only partly explain the reason. I had studied it in New York and was impressed. This relates to why *you* want to study an office. In the beginning, when I conceived the office, the name OMA was important. It was not a personal label, but from the beginning something with the potential to be much bigger. So, it was an elastic identity that could shrink and expand.

The Associated Architects model requires more than one participant. I felt that if you acknowledged that, it would probably give more incentive to the participants. It's basically an incentive to participate and to create—which is perhaps the most efficient way of encouraging involvement.

RH How would you describe your role in that process?

RK In the early-80s, I think it was a shared discovery. Once the process became clearer, it generated for me, on the one hand, a constant incentive to change it; and on the other hand, a greater experience with the process, which allowed it to operate on its own terms. Of course, by enabling so many participants in the process to have a voice, it also means all the participants had a particular definition of the process of OMA and would try to define it. Every time I would see a defined description—and this has really been a constant—I was horrified and would say, at least to myself, 'You're missing the point', 'It's totally different'! This has somehow been a constant incentive for me to change.

At certain moments, the whole idea that everyone *knows* that you need many versions, that everyone *knows* there is an editor who is just saying, 'Ok, let's do this' or 'Let's do that', I contradicted many times by simply going for the jugular at the first moment! In that sense, I've never been a believer in the mythology of the OMA process.

RH One thing that seems valuable in it—mythology aside—is its implicit assertion that there is no one fixed answer to a question.

RK No.

RH It therefore has an inherent capacity to produce surprises. I wonder if some of the 'inventions' of OMA would have happened without such a process.

RK For me, a key question is in what context are you producing? Who's facing you? Is it an individual? Is it a committee? Is it somebody with imagination? For instance, the leap from a private house (Y2K House) to Casa da Musica has nothing to do with alternatives. It was simply a flash of insight. On the other hand, the Seattle Public Library was a long, drawn-out process with thousands of voices—both outside and inside—who had time to refine and modify the whole thing. So, it's very uneven. There are many different factors in play at the same time.

In all of those interviews, I'm sometimes stunned by the repetition of some of those mythologies.

Organisation

RH Could you explain why you pursued all of these organisational experiments with the office (pointing at the diagrams)? Inevitably, some of the organisations were not possible at the beginning—they require a certain number of people—but why make a project using the principles of *Cadavre Exquis* with Elia? Why decide to pool the whole office into three projects in parallel? Etc.

RK Could you be more precise? With Elia, we were in different countries.

RH You allowed the distance to inform the design process and outcome—and decided to convey that you had worked in that way. You didn't need to do that. I imagine you could have also sent drawings back-and-forth and eventually

synthesised it all into a coherent project without anyone knowing you were in different countries. Yet, you opted to make the distance a virtue—and for the team organisation to be explicitly manifest in the architecture.

RK I don't know whether there is an overriding argument or justification for doing that. It was also partly that I had a sort of organisational talent. So, I just took the role of 'cement', with everyone deliberately doing their own section. In the end, it turned out to be a productive method. It worked best in the case of the Dutch parliament—which was already a totally broken-up entity—in that it reinforced what was already given in the context.

RH Organisation is a consistent concern in OMA work. Not only in terms of the organisation of processes: one can also argue that OMA projects are principally exercises in organisation.

RK Absolutely.

RH Could you talk a bit about this attitude?

RK That was also one of the reasons I wanted to make the switch to becoming an architect—a builder—actually. As you go on, it becomes interesting to create more complex entities in complex circumstances. For instance, CCTV was such a phenomenal act of organisation that—for that reason alone—it was an unbelievable once in a lifetime opportunity. Organisation is very rewarding.

Repertoire

RH There's an interesting shift in the office's repertoire of media and techniques over time. Yet, within a particular period, some are very consistently employed. Take painting, in the beginning for example...

RK Also because of money.

RH But, I'm more interested in the faster techniques that become involved later: particularly Styrofoam models, diagrams and collages. Could you talk about how that basic set of tools evolved? How did they aggregate as the primary media used by the office?

RK It's not that one follows the other or can replace the other. They can all remain present at the same time. But they are accentuated or prioritised by many different factors. For example, the amount of time we have available to do a project.

If you look at the aesthetic production of my particular projects, you see that it's always a combination of all of the above. But I think you understand my hesitation to answer this question: it's a tricky thing because someone like me is permanently hesitant about formalisation. So, diagrams are very important. Then, the office begins to believe that OMA is about diagrams, and I think, 'Oh my god!', and I would be tempted to avoid diagrams altogether. It's always an insight followed by an irritation! But sometimes that irritation leads to the next possibility.

RH A variation of that question would be about the relationship between the general and the specific. I could ask this regarding media or regarding buildings, in a way. It's easy to say that OMA buildings are specific responses to circumstance, and sometimes that comes with specific tools or invention. But, at the same time, certain things recur. One imagines that might simply be because one has to start somewhere—and, in the beginning, you can only use what you know. You cannot invent all the time. So, I think there's always this tension between general and specific.

RK Absolutely. But also, the intention to combine them. To think of a creative process that is, in a way, general, but which affords an ability to be precise about unique conditions. In the writing that is also important. In the explanation of many projects, that combination clearly plays a role.

Value

RH Clearly, I'm looking at a particular timeframe in this study, so I'm asking questions in the past tense. In retrospect, what do you think was the value of that early period of OMA?

RK I think that is incredibly complex to answer. Obviously, in any career there's a beginning and middle, then the beginning of the end, to the end. You have to apply a consistent ingenuity and ambition—but the ambition obviously changes in all these phases.

There's a lot to be sentimental about in the early period; it was pure...blah, blah, blah. But it was—in its own way—an incredible success story of going from nothing to buildings like Congrexpo in seven years. In that sense, there is an almost unbelievable expansion. It's impossible to imagine that same expansion could continue in the next ten years, or the next ten years, or the next ten years...because you would be on Mars!

So, it was incredibly exciting but, for me, so was the decade after. It was spectacular in terms of dedication, I would say. It was spectacular to be able to mobilise the support of so many people as co-authors.

Rem Koolhaas (Rotterdam, 1944) founded OMA in 1975 together with Elia and Zoe Zenghelis and Madelon Vriesendorp. He graduated from the Architectural Association in London and in 1978 published *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. He co-heads the work of both OMA and AMO—the research branch of OMA, operating in areas beyond the realm of architecture—and has led numerous projects over the last five decades. Koolhaas directed the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, is a professor at Harvard University, has published numerous influential books and curated *Countryside: The Future* (2020), at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.