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ARCHITECTURE, NOT ARCHITECTS

A CONVERSATION WITH...

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Laura Baird

Trans Magazine (tm): In 2012, you and Reinier de Graaf both curated OMA's exhibition at Venice Architecture Biennale about Civil Servant Architects of Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. Your aim was to point out a period within the history of architectural practice when, in contrary to the 1990s and 2000s, architects did not perceive themselves as genius «star-architects» but as servants to the society. What was the main motivation for you to focus on the 60s and 70s?

Laura Baird (lb): The project actually started with a particular building that we were interested in. When we did some research about who the architect of the building was, it turned out that it was not credited to a single person, but it was credited to the GLC which is the Greater London Council. So essentially, there was not an architect's name on this building, but a municipal body's. Especially compared to how architects work today where there is a huge influence of PR and big names, you would imagine that working for and burying your name within a municipality wouldn't be so desirable. But these often young and inexperienced architects that worked for the GLC had quite a lot of freedom. Within two or three years they had the possibility to execute a huge public project with a large budget. This is very contrary to how things are today. Part of this is because of the demise of the public sector in general and the demise of the funding that was associated with public sector work and public sector buildings, but part of it is also because of this shift in no longer focusing on architecture but focusing on architects.

The other thing that was particularly interesting for me personally was the phenomenon of the «architect as civil servant», since my background is also interdisciplinary. I have a bachelor's degree in public policy and a master's in architecture. So, for me, the architect as civil servant is the ultimate marriage of the two – and this, as a discipline, doesn't exist anymore. Today, you either work for the municipality or you are an architect, it's never both.

The appearance of the «civil servant architect» also wasn't limited just to London but, although slightly different, existed throughout Western Europe and a frequently practiced position. For example, we took particular interest in a man named Werner Düttmann who was the Senatsbaudirektor of Berlin in the 1960s. He was the one who single-handedly convinced Mies van der Rohe to build in Berlin. Because Düttmann was both architect and civil servant, he was able to alleviate certain building codes on a particular plot, and eventually Mies built the New National Gallery.

It's fascinating when you see what was made possible through the integration of design and policy into one single function. I



fig. a
'Public Works', Venice Architecture Biennale, 2012.
 © OMA and Frans Parthesius

think the 60s and 70s were also a time of relative experimentation and almost naivety.

tm: However, the reputation of the architecture of the 60s and 70s, especially the experiments with megastructures, also seems to be tarnished today – not so much because of the ideas and motivations behind it, but because of the built architecture itself and its impact on the city.

lb: I think, if you can get past that prejudice and look into the projects themselves, not only the architects but the architecture, in some cases it's fantastic – often more ambitious, more adventurous than anything that many architects are trying to propose today. So, to use not only this expired job title as an inspiration but also to use the architecture itself as an inspiration became a really important finding.

One building we looked at was the architecture school in Nanterre. It had these little studio spaces, almost pods where five or six students would sit in and work together and have kind of a community of sharing within their little studio space. Now, that seems commonplace, but at the time an architecture school like that didn't exist.

tm: So, the focus of these projects was not in the first place on the object, but on the development and function of space and how space is being used and occupied?

lb: There was a lot of experimentation not just with space and form but also with material, much more than people give that time period credit for. For example, we had a building in the exhibition called the Wibauthuis which was the office of the Municipality in Amsterdam. It was built entirely

out of precast panels. The innovation and the purity with which it was realized are in a lot of ways quite ahead of its time.

tm: You said that these civil servant architects of the 60s and 70s were often completely unknown. In contrast to this period, it is quite clear that an office like OMA today is the exact opposite of unknown. How do you handle this situation?

lb: Of course you are right that we are a well-known office; that is undeniable. But within the office itself we don't really notice this. We are a content driven office, above all. It's again about «architecture, not architects» – this kind of philosophy that resides within our office, that we are interested in content, in programming, in experimentation and in design. We like to participate in the dialogue that is happening about architecture maybe on a larger level, but we are not interested in PR for PR's sake.

tm: On the other hand, it can sometimes be an advantage to have a name, to use your popularity to help raise public awareness for a specific topic.

lb: With AMO – which is the mirror image of OMA – we have a vehicle through which our thinking about a certain aspect can also enter discourse and dialogue. We are a very researched-based office to begin with. Our projects and our thinking are backed up with a huge amount of research. But very few of the projects that come into our office are realized. So there are huge amounts of work and research done about these projects that may never see the light of day. AMO became a vehicle for us to try and use this research for something else, either an exhibition or a publication. The second thing

tm: You have also been working for OMA on a development concept for the growing agglomeration of Moscow. Very similar to the Roadmap, you are dealing there with problems in a 'retroactive' approach, which means that you are dealing with processes – in this case the expanding city of Moscow – that have already occurred. So, it seems that, if it comes to 'planning' in general, governments and administrations fail again and again. Do you think that it's because policies of governments are generally too shortsighted, or because processes are too fast and too complex to follow?

lb: The interesting thing especially about megacities is their diversity: there is such a variety of conditions that solving the problems of the megacity is actually no longer the domain of a single discipline. If it's left only to policy makers, it will always go wrong, if it's left only to architects or urban planners, it will always go wrong, if it's left only to economists, it will always go wrong... You need a kind of hybrid of these disciplines because the size and the scale of the problems are enormous. So, yes, perhaps policy makers weren't ambitious enough. But it also might be that they weren't informed enough, or architects and planners weren't informed enough. The really interesting thing about Moscow was that unofficially it had grown more than twice its size, and then all of a sudden officially it grew to two and a half times its size. The borders of the city actually increased. The competition called for a concept for this development and how this development should proceed. The problem was, the border that the government put into place was not the same the city had grown. It addressed very, very few of the problems the city was dealing with because of this growth. What we ended up proposing was actually a development plan that took the entire periphery instead of one section and dealt with how the urban development would develop further on the basis of what was already happening there. We had the input of economists, traffic engineers and even policy makers. So part of our proposal was not formal or architectural at all, part of our proposal was about the policy of land use and land ownership. Moscow has a real challenge ahead of it – the problems there are severe and drastic. But again, if you don't act on a large scale, it's going to be very difficult to overcome these problems. I think small-scale interventions are not sufficient. A coordinated policy is often necessary to solve a huge spatial or demographic problem. And an integrated approach between many disciplines all of which complement each other is actually what cities need to be taking into consideration.

tm: So it's not only about making a proposal for different strategies but also about the ability to implement that policy?

lb: Right. It goes back to the civil servant architect as a profession that doesn't exist anymore. So, as consultants we felt that the best thing we could do for policy makers or for a government is to be as informative as possible and to allow policy makers to be as informed as possible.

tm: We already discussed OMA's exhibition at Venice Architecture Biennale. We have the feeling that the general concern about the social responsibility and necessity of architecture is growing more and more. This tendency can be observed with many recent exhibitions and publications and will likely continue with 'Fundamentals', the topic for the next Biennale in 2014 which will be curated by Rem Koolhaas. What is your opinion? Which issues will concern us, especially the younger generation of architects, in the future?

lb: It goes back to the question or the mantra of 'architecture and not architects'. That's actually where the responsibility really resides, that our generation of architects continues to focus on architecture rather than on architects. The Biennale in Venice has become a kind of fair of the vanities. To refocus it back to the elements and to refocus it back to the fundamentals and to focus on architecture instead of architects, this is something that we can apply. That's a really important and fundamental concern and a great challenge for our generation. In a time of PR-mania it's sometimes a very difficult one...

tm: Because it's not only something that we as architects can influence?

lb: It's really exciting when we encounter clients that are interested in good problem

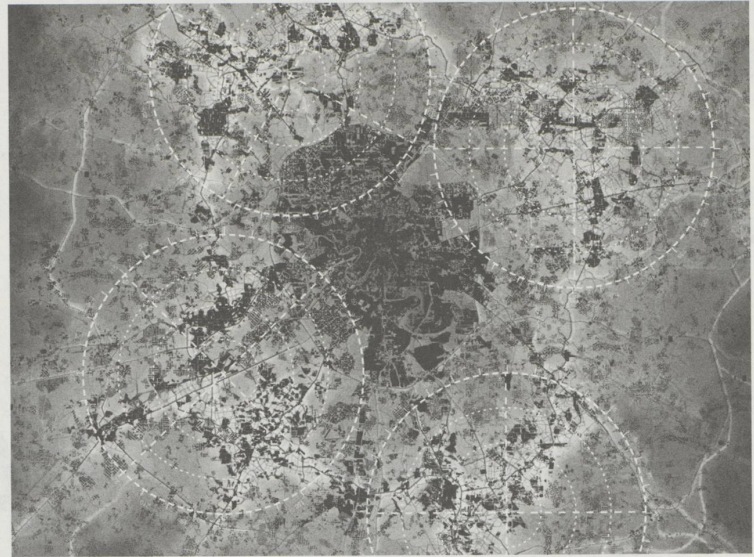


fig. c
Moscow Agglomeration Development Concept, 2012.
© OMA

solving, in good design and in good socially responsible practices. So that's also important when we decide which projects we will be part of or even what we publish or where we exhibit or what we participate in – that we can actually be true to our original motivations in what comes out of our office and in what we produce. Some of the cities that are on an uncontrollable scale are also very raw and still have a huge amount of potential for innovation. If young architects can keep this focus, architecture as such can still very much be influential.

Laura Baird, born 1982

completed a BA in Public Policy Studies from Duke University, and a Masters Degree in Architecture from Rice University in Houston, Texas. Since joining OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) in 2007, Laura has worked on a number of different projects and led AMO's growing involvement in the fields of energy policy and renewable energy planning, having been involved in Zeekracht Masterplan, North Sea, Roadmap 2050 and 'The Energy Report' for the WWF. In 2012 she was also responsible for the Draft Concept for the Moscow Agglomeration: an urban plan for Greater Moscow's expansion to 2.4 times its size. In August of 2012, Laura was the co-curator of 'Public Works', OMA's contribution to the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale. Since 2002, Laura has lectured in both academic and professional settings in The United States, Europe, Russia and China.

The interview was conducted and recorded by Julia Hemmerling and Christopher Metz in Schiphol, NL, on July 15th, 2013.