

# A conversation with François Charbonnet (Made in)

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am  
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich**

Band (Jahr): - **(2018)**

Heft 33

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919083>

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A CONVERSATION  
WITH  
FRANÇOIS CHARBONNET  
(MADE IN)

In 2018, François Charbonnet and Patrick Heiz were appointed as new professors at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich. Together, they run the architecture office «Made in», based in Geneva. We were attracted by their manner of producing images, as they seem to collage different realities into one. To better understand, and to familiarize ourselves with their position towards architecture, we sat down with François for an interview.

TM How do you see the reality of the architectural profession today?

FC I think there are different aspects. First of all, regarding education and the relationship to the real, it is very difficult for me to understand any architecture outside of reality. Intentions, wishes, will, expectations are all part of a reality. E. L. Boullée is not doing anything other than dealing with a certain reality, but he raises the dimension of architecture to cosmic features. utopia is nothing other than a reality which is not presently accomplishable for x or y reasons; yet this does not mean that the conditions won't ever be there or haven't been available before. But I do not see why this issue is of such relevance today, as you might seem to suggest: virtuality is real. It is nothing more than processors, that accommodate a certain condition which a reality emerges under. It is neither surreal, nor unreal; it simply is.

TM In which relation does teaching architecture stand to reality and do you think that there is a change to be made in the years to come?

FC I see very specific responsibilities in the field of education towards what the world outside currently is. One could consider several poles of expertise and consider, for instance, the «Berufsschulen» as the main agent to adapt to the demands of the market. On the other hand, a higher level of education should focus on research and use scepticism as a productive asset in the design process.

In the series *Portraits I-VI*, led successively at ETH Zurich and at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, we proposed to address issues larger than architecture itself. For example in the semester on the «Society of Control», theorized by several thinkers and authors of the 20th century, where typo-morphological sets are brought together as an enlightening procedure toward a better understanding of the general condition of our world today, and not only that of a built environment.

In other words, I think it would be very profitable for young aspiring architects to become

aware of the milieu into which they will be evolving as «experts». I don't see any contradiction with a more pragmatic approach toward construction or design, but I wish education would become more critical of a certain «state of affairs». It is nothing more than an invitation to look beyond and strive at defining the architect as a generalist and not as an obscure specialist, who knows everything about almost nothing. Another point to be made is the nature of issues that we, as architects, tend to consider as problematic. Regarding this, I tend to be less optimistic for the very reason that we are currently experiencing a fetishist time. Now everything lies in the morphological essence of the object rather than in its ability to raise questions—which are to be considered as potentials—and engage in a dynamic consideration of the architectural project. What I mean is that there is no such thing as a problematic feature in architecture, unless the architect literally builds it up by themselves. After all, a budget, a legislation and even the clients' expectations do not form a problem. The object-product can never be an exclusive aim and should not be stifled once and for all, especially not in an early stage. What is really at stake is the process, not the product. And I might add that even the client should not set the aim without considering the actual problem artificially defined by the architecture. That form follows function—whether such a peremptory statement still makes sense today—isn't sufficient a call for architecture to embrace all dimensions of life. Such sentences and states of mind have indeed led to a sort of proletarianization of the built environment. What I mean is that life should remain the core of our expectations... and life cannot be simplified: as a silent margin, architecture is merely the indifferent surrounding into which it can deploy itself. I believe there is the need today for a certain de-sacralization of the object, especially in Switzerland.

TM Do you think that the tools, that are currently widening our horizons will also change the reality of architecture?

FC Again, if I may insist, there seem to be a lot of professionals who believe that what stands in

the centre of architecture is architecture itself, but what really should remain our preoccupation is life in all its complex features. At «Made in», we tend to consider the architectural project as a promise, which necessarily exceeds expectations and demands. The cultivation of potentials—its proliferation—is what really defines a project. And there is nothing unreal about it. It is more a matter of perception than anything else: how do you question through the architectural project what is defined as a problem today, or how much are you ready—if necessary—to reformulate it and become sceptical toward the fervour of your time?

which tend to blur the intentions. Yet I believe that this is precisely the instance where actors reveal themselves in their full complexities. That is when they have to critically address an equivocal statement, not when they face an illustration which is either to be accepted as such or simply condemned as an inappropriate answer. I am personally less interested in answers than in questions, as they are dynamic and are never an end, but rather the beginning of an articulation: their resonance capacity is much larger than that of a peremptory statement. As such, I tend to think that they keep the project alive.

TM In the text «*contradictory*» you spoke about the program, as it doesn't create problems, but is rather a framework. Could you elaborate on this?

TM So would you say that you are creating images rather than illustrations?

FC As I previously mentioned, we tend to always exceed the issues set by a program and it is indeed hard for a client to accept, that their expectations are simply not enough to trigger a project or, to put it differently, formulate a problem. A problem is not to be understood as an obstacle to something, but as the precondition for complexity to take place and to allow multiplicities. And this is what I mean by saying that a project should always be excessive because the problem itself literally exceeds architectural issues: one is a citizen before one is an architect. Any architectural proposal is an act of policy. As Hannah Arendt suggests, the Greek «polis» is not the actual built substance, but really any space between at least two people where an exchange can take place and one can appear to one's peers. The potential of the exchange is what defines the Greek polis, not the Parthenon.

FC We are only interested in images, hardly in illustrations. Of course we are sometimes constrained to produce illustrations, yet what we often try to achieve is to suggest echoing features by mobilizing collective memory, in order to bypass the issue of taste or inclination and to place the project in a larger problematic context.

TM And in which relation would this stand to the built object?

TM How do you use images in your work and what kind of importance does it have for you?

FC It's a phase where you can actually raise questions and look for resonances. I think that one should always try to measure the echoing intensity of what one proposes: what has been done before, what could be done in the future, even in fields outside your own expertise. It is about the ability to read one entity in several ways and to search for multiplicities in history, not for legitimacy. One way to do it, is to promote a sort of meta-image that would express something other than what the plan and the section do, and put the design into perspective. It is therefore always about cultivating scepticism regarding the acceptance of certain phenomena or conditions; images should not aim at acquiring certainties, but at cultivating doubts.

FC As paradoxical as it may seem—considering the overwhelming amount of images that we face in our daily lives—I don't think anybody is really interested in images today. The presence of the text as a caption systematically presupposes a way of reading which becomes univocal; any equivocacy is banned. Clients simply want to see what the product will become and are hardly interested in defining what it could be. By embracing such a stifled stance without any resistance, architects simply accept to bypass the necessary process. They merely tend to produce illustrations to ensure a smooth procedure and flatter their own fetishism for the object. Any image—that is, any illustration freed from the sententious contour of the univocal—is suspicious, because it actively triggers the associations of entangled ideas,

TM So for you, the potential of the project cannot be voted down regardless of whether the built project lives up to the expectations or not?

FC No, because the idea is charged with intentions and still remains valid as an idea. The French philosopher, Paul Ricœur, tried to describe eternity, not eternity as a paradise, but as each moment in history having its own eternity. To do so, he proposed to consider time as a fully deployed cone. If one is to embrace it in such a way, no matter how far back, one can free oneself from the sententious and linear consideration of history. In other words, if an event

has taken place, it is still there in time. I would like to think of an idea in architecture in a similar way: it can be constantly reactivated with its own speed and trajectory and is embedded, by essence, in its own eternity.

- TM And would you understand a project as an open work?
- FC Perhaps, but it can never become an end-product, even when it is completed. I therefore think of the project as a dynamic trajectory and not as an end. But there is such a fetishism for a sort of self-realization through the object, that I realize how problematic this can be today in the acceptance of a design. And yes, architecture remains highly fetishistic in certain aspects of its practice. But it is always a constant negotiation between a fetishism and an alienation. I tend to believe that architecture is more an alienating process than an appropriative one. The more you cultivate multiplicities and equivocalities, the more potential you activate.
- TM Would you see this kind of blurriness as a quality then?
- FC Not a blurriness in the way that it is not sharp, but as a blurriness that is yet to be defined. The design could be read as a sort of Riemann space, where geometries are not yet predefined. A project is essentially in a constant transitional state and we architects are the markers of the singularities of a passing time. There is an interesting series by Thomas Ruff, which is called *Jpegs*, where the photographer collected images from daily events. By reducing their resolution—among other features—Thomas Ruff managed to express a very accurate metaphor of what information today is: a conglomerate of blocks of information which are never able to fully embrace reality as such. Thus leaving

the reader with his or her own partial and bias representation of a given situation, trying actively to reconstruct what the full frame of the real is. Fragmental is the ultimate condition of information today.

- TM So then this also gives you a reason for wanting the projects to be open?
- FC Absolutely, but it is also about struggling for time which, today, is an absolute luxury. The foreplay act according to the SIA is around ten percent of the whole process, which means that the most crucial and exhilarating time in developing architecture is economically constrained to a ridiculous and therefore negligible instant. Yet, if you want to become a serious architect, the intensity of the energy set in motion will take place in this early phase. Building is essential—that goes without saying—but the act of building is almost exclusively about solving pragmatic and well-identified issues, not about mobilizing potentials and raising questions. This is the time for experts, really. Naturally, architecture needs both, but I wonder if there shouldn't be more emphasis on multiplicities rather than granting a unique legitimacy to the built substance. And after all, many unbuilt—yet real—projects remain more influential than their actual solid pendant.
- TM Would you then say, you can only be free, if you have these constraints?
- FC I don't believe any freedom is ever granted but only conquered. Constraints are part of the equation and constitute to a large extent the a priori for a design to take place, but if architecture, on the one hand, is not autonomous—and rightly so—the project, on the other hand, is free, not as a decree, but as a necessary dynamic condition.

François Charbonnet is co-founder along with Patrick Heiz of the architecture studio «Made in», based in Geneva, Switzerland. After graduating from ETH Zurich he collaborated with Herzog & de Meuron and OMA before setting up his own office in 2003. In addition to his practice, he is a frequent lecturer and has been a visiting professor at the EPF Lausanne (2010–2011), the ETH Zurich (2011–2013), the Accademia di Architettura, Mendrisio (2014–2015) and the Kyoto Design Lab (2017–2018). In 2018 he was appointed as professor of Architecture and Design at ETH Zurich, together with Patrick Heiz.

