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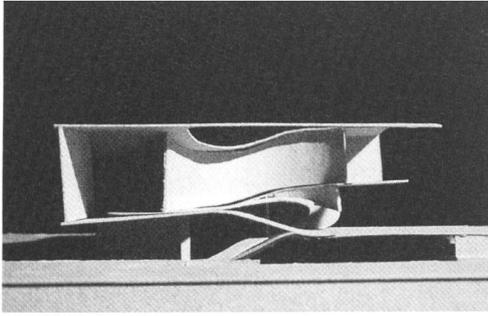
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Ben van Berkel

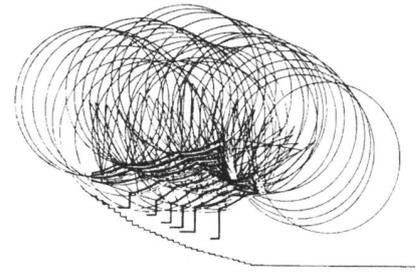
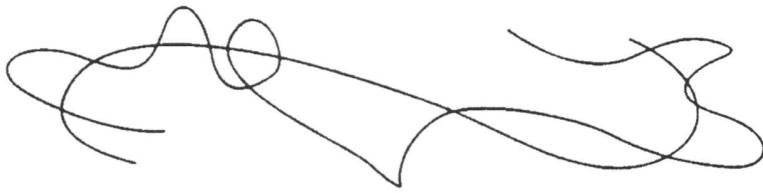
Interviewed by Stephan Schoeller and Philipp Wälchli

If you compare Swiss architecture and Dutch architecture these days, it is obvious that there are main tendencies, certain similarities. On the other hand Swiss and Dutch architecture have both generated a very unique and typical way to deal with the question of contemporary architecture. Where is the link between these two “styles”?

I think this is not so very clear, especially if we talk about contemporary links. We live in a very mediated culture where everyone is following exactly what is going on in architecture. When I lived in Zurich for a short time just up to my studies, I got totally fascinated by architects like Moser and Steiger, whom I never knew. Or the whole influence by someone like Alfred Roth who was really important for the fifties and sixties, a promoter of European architecture. He was someone I never knew about before in Holland we learn everything about the big heroes of architecture. We never learned about, let's say, the 'hidden' heroes. And I think that this is a main interest you also find in Holland now. I studied also the work of Candela, Utzon, Coderch, Morandi, Nervi and Moretti. These people had a strong influence on my own work. The difficulty with contemporary Dutch architecture is that I think we are too much attached to modernism. That is difficult because we are situated in a contemporary world with new demands.

But where is the influence on the very autonomous and innovative Dutch architecture? Are there certain sources or filter, is there a special technique?

My main influence was the Architectural Association in London. I studied for six years in England, where international architects like Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi or Peter Wilson were teaching. Later I got interested in the architects I mentioned because I studied them through my thesis. But there is a tradition in Holland of course of housing, of architecture also coming from the fifties like Bakema. My idea is that we are still too much linked to modernism. The wonderful thing about the new possibilities of techniques is that you can start to read things, the deepest value of architecture. The Netherlands architects have been conceptualizing quite a lot but never really changed the real condition of architecture and its values itself.

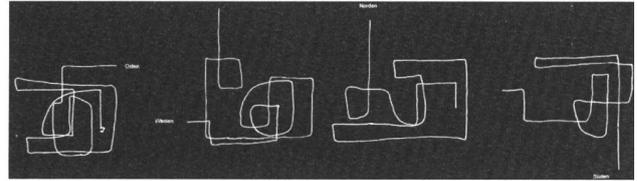
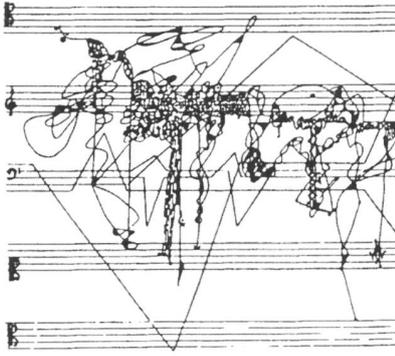


There is a certain movement in Switzerland today, what Martin Steinmann called 'going behind the image'. The attempt to find a non-formal way of building, but it usually ends in dramatising materials. It seems that in your work it is this formless way to work with images and given materials that led you in a complete different direction.

Yes, but this happened only for the last three years. My early works like the carbouw-project or the electricity station, are still influenced by architects like Zaha Hadid. Later on we discovered possibilities to open up more. I believe you should try to argue for yourself what architecture really means and what it simply can do. Is architecture something to confuse? Is it the visual or the aesthetic aspect alone? Or is it the formal typological object, which is having strong relationships with representational ideas. Or could it be that architecture is what I call a kind of public science. In that sense I am interested in this idea of public science. But how could architecture be related to other kinds of public ideas. So as you find in fashion and media offices. Or maybe in medical science and the new techniques they use there, or in space science. I think these last three are very interesting topics. But how could we instrumentalize all our contemporary aspects of daily life in other ways than the typological ones?

The Yokohama Port Terminal is an approach very different from the others. My feeling is that it is very influenced by the use of computeres to generate forms. It goes from an edged, rough kind of architecture towards very smooth, floating spaces. Do you think this is your way now to deal also with these kinds of contemporary influences?

I think more of how to proportion information. For me the most important is knowledge technology. How could you exchange knowledge from one field to another? Like in medical science where they do this kind of rotational section of the body. They discover a certain kind of problem with the body and then they can get knowledge out of the technique. So my argument is not so much that the computer is a wonderful tool to generate aesthetic effects. Important for me is to learn how to proportion information. And with the knowledge of that information you listen if it sounds all right, and if you know how to deal with that, you work with these techniques. I discover that it even does not matter anymore if it is a kind of box, a cracked box or a blob. I do not think in these terms anymore. I do



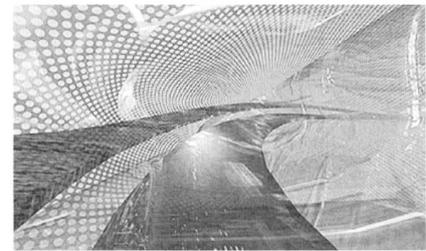
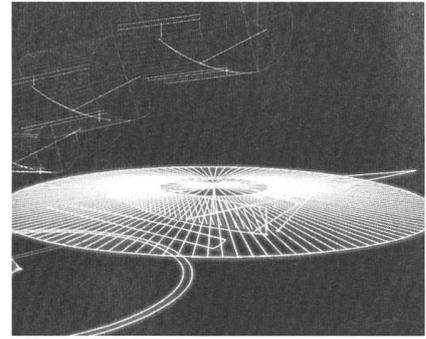
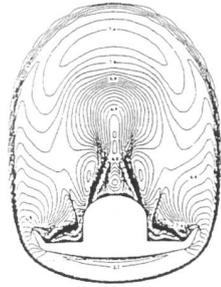
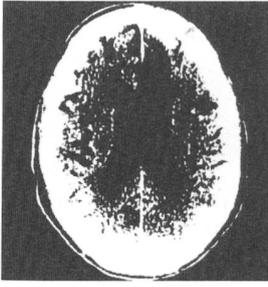
not really think in these kind of articulations anymore, because I believe it is more the way how you guide information.

Because there is often too much information, you have to guide it, you have to filter it?

You have to filter, you have to instrumentalize it, you have to turn it into an organization. So how could you instrumentalize contemporary techniques into a contemporary organization or a structure? What is a contemporary organization, a structure for today? A long time we thought that a box was a really utile form, very efficient, very functional, highly flexible. But my argument is that it is not really endless. It is not multi-directional because it is having these corners and these corners are really important. For me they are the nihilist-approach towards the idea of evolution. Thinking about Nietzsche for example. They go somewhere without having a clue where they go to. And this is the principle, if you tilt this up and you bend it you could actually start to make another kind of utile system as efficient and kind of coherent like the box: the Möbius-Band, where you could incorporate outside and inside in one system. It is endless, it is incorporating all qualities of time. The freedom we created with this kind of abstraction is really important, and to see how you could bring in more qualities and differences. If you bend this really well then this whole system can hold itself up. I am not so much interested in organisation of a form but in how it starts to trigger and move incorporative in one system.

How is this organisation working in an office for example? A strong hierarchy, where everyone is doing one job, his job? Or does everybody has to be involved in the whole process?

Not only the environment, also the concept of architecture has changed. The whole concept of the way how an architect needs to work in the future is more based on a united kind of system where you have to be a director. John Cage would never stand in front of his orchestra. He would walk through the orchestra and he would know the composition of the music. And all the musicians would face many different directions and he will know all the details but he will also give the freedom to all the musicians



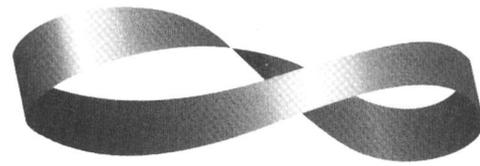
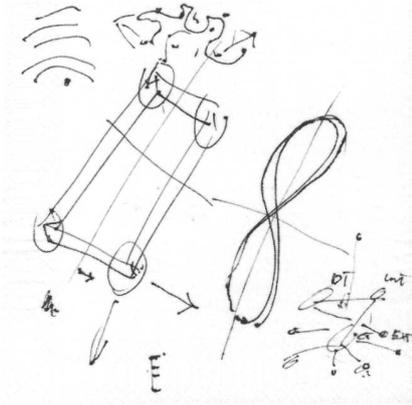
to come along with the experiment of the composition. Standing in front of the orchestra is the most classical way of architecture and it is kind of impossible today. We need other methods of working.

How do you control these methods? Are there certain rules or a system that you develop? So you can use these rules for every following project and control the project?

The organisation in my office is totally not hierachical, it is really a network system. Not only because my work is changing, but because my working methods are changing. And for that reason also totally changed the office last year.

Do you think that there is still a possibility of having visions in architecture or is there also a shift towards more pragmatism? Where is the imagination, the creativity in architecture today?

I think that this is the main problem today. This is what I mean when I talk about technique. We group it now in three layers. We have the techniques, we have certain effects but I also believe very much in the imagination. So if you go from technique towards effects, most important is how technique can intrigue the imagination. Not so much in terms of a 'free-floating' way but more or less how the imagination starts to develop a certain vision or maybe a certain kind of organisation or effect. So the technique is only a kind of tool. For example the Station area in Arnheim, a project we are working on now. There are two bus-stations and a car park underneath the whole site. We studied the flows of movement of the people going on on the site, the different movements of time, slow movements, quick movements. And you could also indicate the different kind of density areas. By that we could channel these systems into volumes in computers where you can really show the volumes changing. We did not literally transform it into a form but we stimulated the imagination of the politicians. Because they saw that more people are moving between the two bus stations than between the station area and the city. That gave them the idea that the site was their site and that it was not the site of the train people alone. So this is a very pragmatic model of how new techniques stimulate not only me but also the whole group of people you work with. This is what I mean by imagination. It gives you a possible inside, a statement



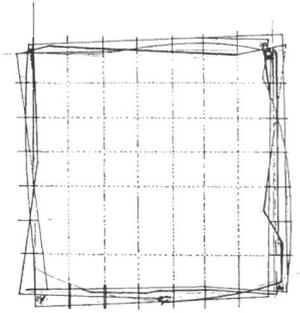
how you could develop a project. In that sense, although my whole work is quite theoretically based, I say over the last three years that I don't have a theory anymore. By that I mean that all my work is more related to how to work with statements. Statements resulting from almost physical diagrams. For example the Möbius-band; it is not theoretical but just a diagram that can unfold ideas. It is all about abstract machines and how they can trigger new ideas.

Talking about diagrams ...

There are three levels of the diagram. I call them the suggested diagram, the instrumental diagram and the rational diagram, and all of them are not related to the modernist diagram. They generate new informations, it is the idea of the unfolding diagram. For instance an instrumental diagram. It is the way how you could start to turn it again into an organisation or a rational diagram. So you start to animate a particular kind of information, that can start to generate a new statement again.

Organisation, statements, diagrams, knowledge techniques etc. It seems that theory is still a very important approach towards your work. But how important really is theory for the today's generation of architects?

Theory is important. But in any theory there needs to be a little amount of speculation in it that could give you at least the feeling that theory at the end gives you a certain amount of proofs. For that reason I think it is not necessary to have a theory because there is so much of theory. Many architects come along with theory and they say, yes I have this wonderful theory, but they just think afterwards theory. And that is fine, I mean, artists do the same. But I think in architecture it is a little bit more difficult because we have to deal with everyday life. The illusion of change in how architecture needs to be framed or guided with these kind of aspects of existence. I am really critical, I am worried about process thinking. I am not so much interested in post-structuralism of Derrida or Deleuze for example. Maybe because of my building experience I really want to see results. I want to see how theory could work. In fact the whole linguistic aspect of theory is not important for me.



What is the aspect of style in your work, the question of image?

I believe very much in all kinds of organisational principles. Like cars that have their windows in the surface. Talking about coherence and organisation this is maybe a kind of collage like, montage like technique. You never learn from visual effects alone. If you look at only the aspect of style then you kill your own kind of possibilities in your profession. It is the same with fashion design, for which the visual effects are never the only thing. A good designer is also looking to a particular kind of as I call it instrumental qualities of organisation of a structure. There are different organisations of ingredients or materials to get it differently. But there is more if you think of production and organisation behind it. This is what interest me most. If I say that architects become the fashion designers of the future, then I mean that they have to think about the future. Architecture is going to change it all. We are now working on projects like the station project. But it will be completed in 2010. You can not think of taste and style alone. The most important is to think of what organizes style. And then the reading and the effects need to be given to others to judge.

Illustration page 54:

Dream House, Berlin

Illustrations page 55:

left: C. Deleuze, „The fold of the Soul“

right: J. Utzon, acoustic study of ceiling of Opera House Sydney

Illustrations page 56:

left: S. Bussotti, music notation

right: Dream House Berlin, motion diagrams

Illustrations page 57:

left: CT-scan of brain

center: flow around Space Shuttle

right: Geometrical study models for hyperparabolic facades

right: Yokohama Port Terminal, renderings

Illustrations page 58:

left: sketch by Ben van Berkel, November 1998

right: Moebius-band

Illustrations page 59:

left: electricity station, REMU, Amersfoort, study

right: electricity station, REMU, Amersfoort



„Sic transit gloria mundi...“

Stil und Mode sind Gegensätze, zumindest in den Augen ‚seriöser‘ Architekten. Dass sich aber möglicherweise Stil und Mode gegenseitig bedingen oder zumindest auf viel komplexere Weise ineinander verwoben sind, ist wohl eine realistischere Sicht der Dinge.

So sehr das Neue von Künstlern und Architekten gesucht und interessant gehalten wird, so unverständlich ist es zunächst für das breite Publikum. Erst in der Vereinnahmung durch Zeitströmungen findet es weitere Beachtung. Ob die Gründe, die zum Neuen, Avantgardistischen führten, dabei noch eine Rolle spielen, ist fraglich. In den Grenzgebieten zwischen Massengeschmack und Avantgarde findet ein Spiel von Uminterpretation, Erinnerung und Vergessen statt, in dem der Zeitpfeil nicht immer in eine eindeutige Richtung weist.