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Taking Positions

A Conversation With Elia Zenghelis

Claudia Dische
Hendrik Tieben

trans: *In a conversation in your design studio at ETH-Zurich you stated, that the events of September 11 changed our world. What do you think has or will change?*

EZ: In essence our consciousness and our perception of reality, our view of the world. September 11 was an eye-opener to the discrepancy between reality and our view of reality, an explosively widening gap, especially in the last twelve years: the crucial period between the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the assault on the world trade centre, which was twelve years of delusion. Twelve years of complacence over America's increasing world dominance and twelve years of euphoria over the "so-called" new economy, the global free market.

trans: *In the same conversation you mentioned the need of a new regionalism. From Sigfried Giedion to Kenneth Frampton there were different concepts of regionalism drawn from a modern perspective. Nevertheless from one of the founding members of OMA the interest in regionalism sounds surprising. What did you mean with the term regionalism?*

EZ: I was not talking about "fabricating" a new regionalism but about the need for us to understand that (contrary to current mythology) a very strong regionalism still exists, which we must acknowledge and respond to. Globalisation is as sure a fact with us, as is its ability to sustain and absorb cultural differences. Our society's perverse view of the world is oblivious of this articulation: a world out there has been ignored as if it doesn't exist and this world reminded us of its existence. A maniac with enough money to make the impossible possible was able to jolt us out of our complacent view of the world. Our awareness of their reality was painted with tragically blazing colours: for they decided that they had to inflict pain for us to understand their pain. Their very existence is a disclaimer of globalisation and for us a warning that if our economic system is to survive, it has to do adjustments to its constitution as was the case after the Second World War. In the inter-war period in Europe's democracies, capitalism rested on the principles of liberal economy where market forces were allowed to regulate social structure. During the German occupation it became obvious that if the European countries were to be liberated again, they would turn to communism. And it was clear that the Soviet Union would very easily possess the entire civilisation of Western Europe. The new democracies that emerged understood that they had to be cleverer; they adopted policies and programs borrowed from communism and integrated them into their own agenda. Such things as social welfare, medical care, free education, etc., would have been inconceivable in the liberal democracies of the twenties and thirties when they would have been seen as outright bolshevism. And yet in the fifties and sixties in most of Western Europe they became normal. Capitalists made fewer profits, but they still made

profits, and contrary to expectations, capitalism blossomed. In a similar process of self-preservation, the colonies were let go, at least territorially. But the present cultural policy and economic system that the collapse of communism induced and that we call globalisation and the global free market, are a form of economic imperialism. This too will inevitably have to change, even if on the 11th hour. Once more it will mean less profits for the sake of survival. Otherwise September 11 has made it sufficiently clear that we are in for apocalyptic revelations that will come from the invisible enemy we cannot reach and from people borne out of the quintessence of regionalism, like the ones we are trying to catch in vain, people that are illusive, that disappear and are everywhere.



Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture
Entry for Casabella's 1972 competition "The city as Significant Environment" by Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis

Prologue [the Exodus project]

Once, a city was divided in two parts. One part became the Good Half, the other part the Bad Half. The inhabitants of the Bad Half began to flock to the good part of the divided city, rapidly swelling into an urban exodus. If this situation had been allowed to continue forever, the population of the Good Half would have doubled, while the Bad Half would have turned into a ghost town. After all attempts to interrupt this undesirable migration had failed, the authorities of the bad part made desperate and savage use of architecture: they built a wall around the good part of the city, making it completely inaccessible to their subjects. The wall was a masterpiece. Originally no more than some pathetic strings of barbed wire abruptly dropped on the imaginary line of the border, its psychological and symbolic effects were infinitely more powerful than its physical appearance. The Good Half, now glimpsed only over the forbidding obstacle from an agonizing distance, became even irresistible. Those trapped, left behind in the gloomy Bad Half, became obsessed with vain plans for escape. Hopelessness reigned supreme on the wrong side of the Wall. As so often before in this history of mankind, architecture was the guilty instrument of despair.

trans: *Last week Winy Maas gave a lecture in Zurich, where he declared that in the time of globalisation different regions must extremely specialise. Doesn't this idea of specialisation cause similar problems to the zoning of modernist planning, only on an even bigger scale?*

EZ: If that's what he said, what he is claiming is not globalisation but an acceptance of regionalism. Naturally together with the global, the regional has to be cultivated and invested. I don't see the kind of separation of functions in a similar way, but I see it as a natural way of maintaining some kind of ecological balance. And at a most pedestrian and basic level, if we have a universal global market, there is no need for Holland to produce bananas as we get them anyway. So Winy Maas is right.

trans: *Many of the early projects by Rem Koolhaas and you were meant to show the world like it was. Some of them did that in a prophetic and polemic way like the Exodus-project from 1972. Now you say that this is not enough. Where do you see the role of architecture today?*

EZ: OMA has always insisted on the importance of reality and the need to transform it through idealisation; it was similarly insisting on the critical content of any act of architecture as a necessary tool to achieve this end. At the same time we were waging a war against two streams prevailing when we founded OMA: first those movements that had lost their pertinence to the reality of the day and consequently their critical origin, movements like Team X, that were fighting a redundant war and secondly those movements that accepted reality uncritically and whose work did not contain this element of reform and redemption, at that time a prevailing consumerist euphoria. After the aimless drifting that had settled over the West following 1968, groups like Archizoom and Superstudio, people like Leon Krier, Vittorio Gregotti, the early members of Tendenza, ourselves, we were all doing the same thing: trying to re-decipher and re-invent the singularity of architecture, as a critical instrument to reform reality

with, by re-invoking the autonomy of its make-up and instrumentality of its presence. And we were doing very similar architecture. It was later that we started to bifurcate. By putting emphasis on reality, we were trying on one hand to combat the senseless and value-free euphoria of fashion: Pretty women in sports cars disappeared from our drawings. On the other hand we were combating the redundant moaning and groaning of the dissatisfied intellectual of the left wing, who was afraid of pleasure and saw us and the hedonism we promoted as corrupting influences. That was when we drew attention to the sensuous materiality and beauties of reality. This gave rise to the Retroactive Manifesto which basically was Rem's theory of Manhattanism. Put very crudely it was this: reality is a model of inspiration and a theory, if we draw it from examples like Manhattan. It's alive, we don't need to make the kind of ideological conjectures that had

become hysterical once their historical pertinence had faded, as for instance the Team X rhetoric had become after 68. Manhattan was itself an ideology but only as „idealised“ in Delirious New York; through this idealisation, provided by a provocative distortion and re-interpretation of the truth, reality procured – for the closing decades of the last century – the New Paradigm for urbanism and architecture: the Retroactive Manifesto.

trans: *Rem Koolhaas wrote in SMLXL that OMA started to be a global office in 1987. That was more or less the moment when you left the office. Is there a connection?*

EZ: Rem opened the Rotterdam office and I opened the Athens office, and certain differences started to become clear. One of the most exciting things in working with Rem was the constant surprise of discovering that one was subconsciously adapting oneself to unexpected and ever changing internal mental and physical conditions, often of immense inspirational scope; but by then these were winding down and the most exciting ones were being replaced by others that felt increasingly alien and programmatic, in an agenda that was more personal to Rem and which required reciprocally personal recourse: for instance, one of the things that I could not adjust to, was the idea of the office as a kind of Hollywood studio that would be able to produce (with lots of directors scriptwriters and producers within) lots and lots of B-movies, and occasionally the A-movie. For me it was confusing and I feared that in this set-up I would personally lose a sort of obstinate focus that I wanted to retain on rhetoric specific to architecture and that it would be impossible to produce A-movies. This, to a large extend did happen to OMA with the exception of those projects which Rem himself spent time on. Those exceptions are sublime but the rest is „junk“, which by now has lost its shock and ideological value and is, I think, too cruelly allowed to be delivered and mislead. In the end the problem is that after a while, a lot of this appears as diversionary tactics that became counter productive; and in a sense they both misfired - in terms of the senseless cloning they provoked – and backfired in terms of the cloning epidemic that seems to have infected OMA itself.

Globalization starts 35 miles away from a Dutch office. Sometime in 1987, in our office, international projects and collaborators began to form a majority. Suddenly OMA was global, not in the form of multiple offices turning out a single “product,” but of one involved more and more deeply in other cultures. We became experts on difference: different possibilities, contexts, sensitivities, currencies, sensualities, rigors, integrities, powers. - From then on, we navigated between the potentials for credit and discredit that globalization implied. - Some day CNN seems like an oracle, a private bulletin board, each story hitting nerve endings directly related to work.

Rem Koolhaas: S,M,L,XL

trans: *Recently working with statistical data and their extrapolation became very popular in architecture. Even though statistics have often been used in urban design, this particular way of using analyses as a starting point for design seems to go back to the practice of OMA. When and why did OMA start to work in this way?*

EZ: The main reason was on the one hand the excitement through the discovery of Manhattanism and on the other hand the excitement of the unexplored, when for the first time in the eighties we had to deal with landscape. One year before we did La Villette I was given a commission on a big piece of land on the island of Antiparos. All of a sudden from Manhattan, I was on a sparsely populated, tiny Greek island in the Aegean sea when I was asked to design twenty-one villas on virgin territory. I discovered then that the same processes of Manhattanism were applicable to this landscape, through this idea of a latent intelligence, that we called the intelligence of the site. A way of analysing and exploring what's there, now called “mapping“. The idea was to make use of that latent intelligence. A sort of contextualism in which architecture reformed and redeemed the context, i.e. made its own context. Once you understood reality as found, you understood that you could make it contain the latent potential. Not a ready-made that you only had to “map“. You had to act on it by some sort of capitalising on the accident of “having found“ in it “that“ latent intelligence which, by re-forming, you idealised; mutations which in the park of La Villette further developed into

hybrid zones of indeterminacy and reversibility and new types of service points; a conscious development to which we retroactively gave a “mathematical” formula that spoke of “method design” in a very transparent way. In “Exodus” we were already talking about mutant behaviours. The degree to which behaviour interacts with and is provoked by architecture interested us, as was the effect of programme, particularly for Rem who saw a parallel between architecture and script writing. “A” mutated when “B” fell on it and produced a hybrid. After twenty years, this has degenerated into a dumb fetishism of the accident and of the analytical process, of which Datandscape is the apotheosis. It is also the apotheosis of the Retroactive Manifesto, which by now breeds a lot of bad cloning.

trans: *Isn't there a need for this kind of analyses by OMA, the studio Basel or MVRDV, to get a broader idea of the problems we face today?*

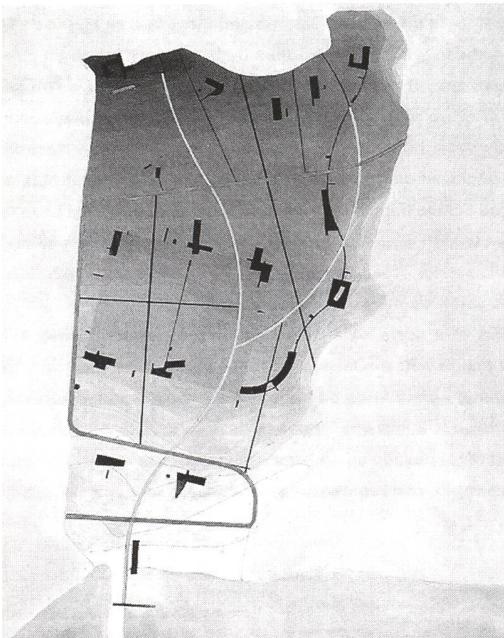
EZ: It is sad to watch intelligent and sensitive people like Herzog and de Meuron doing incredibly gratuitous things when they have the rare gift to make beautiful architecture. They are capable of making intensely beautiful objects, which very few people can. Such valuable grey matter spent on “maps” is monumental wastage, especially when it could be spent on developing objects that are less self-referential and more of an architecture that contributes to our zone of civilisation, the cities.

trans: *It seems that in your studio at ETH-Zurich these approaches, also like other former OMA topics like program are no more the initial generators for urban design. In the same direction leads your recent statement in your text: „Architecture is propaganda“ where you wrote: „In the end [...] one must be reminded from time to time that architecture is about buildings, even though, as we know very well from history, they do not have to be built, or even be strictly buildable. Architecture is propaganda.“ From where do these changes come from, and how would you describe your approach today?*

EZ: We were talking about how activity could generate architecture, and the programme therefore was like a scenario and that was very much influenced from Rem's previous experience as a scriptwriter and journalist: Scriptwriting and making a movies similar to scriptwriting for architecture. There was a vacuum in the period before. The ideology of the Smithsons could no longer hold any relationship with reality; the ideology of Archigram was misfiring. Like with mutant behaviour, programme offered then a provocation for architecture as new platform. But the autonomous singularity and rhetoric of architecture was not denied then as it seems to be today, when it is important to be reminded that architecture is a container and does not change with changing programmes. Therefore, programme can spark off architecture and become redundant afterwards.

trans: *Eleni Gigantes, your partner, said in an interview 1994 that our world by now has been completely urbanised by infrastructure. Also the Studio Basel speaks about the city Switzerland and OMA about the world as city. Instead you differentiate in your text „Architecture is propaganda“ between urban condition and city. Would you explain the difference?*

EZ: Urban condition is the condition of urbanisation outside the city. Oerlikon for instance feels in parts very urban and yet it's categorically not the city. We know it psychologically. We know the difference between it and the city. Andrea Branzi gives the most explicit illustration of the point when he said “the city is like a toilet: you can build a bathroom as big as you want – it can grow to 1000 square meters or more – but there is only one hot spot.“ You go to that one spot again and again. It's a recurring biological, psychological and cultural need: it is called civilisation in this case.



The project for Antiparos in 1981 is called “Inverted Arcadia” as a metaphor for the subordination of nature to a “civilizing” transformation. Here Zenghelis' understanding of urbanity went from a geometry of lines to a confetti of points of occupancy: a catalyst for the strategy for La Villette.

trans: Your project in your design studio at ETH-Zurich is located on a site in the city of Marseille. So like this issue of trans you are asking how the new and the old come together in the city. Can you tell us why you have chosen this theme?

EZ: The answer is intensity and exaggeration; the juxtaposition of the sea against the city. The Belgian coast inspired us: The desire of all Belgians to have a place by the sea has generated an incredible urban curtain facing the Atlantic. This is a reason why I give programs like this and for the things I talk about in juries. The exaggerated condition where the city comes to the sea has also to do with consciousness. Doing projects like this in order to recharge one's consciousness and one's understanding of the importance of psychological factors in architecture. Like the pull of the wild: the fact that we want the security of the city and at the same time the temptation of the shark that we can't see in the sea; we are drawn by the mystery of this juxtaposition. In fact we don't realise that the intensity in the beauty of the Barcelona Pavilion (for instance) lies in the mystery of the allegory of the tame and the wild. You almost have the feeling to be lucky to be there because in the trees that you see behind the courtyard you can almost sense the roaming tigers. The line that architecture demarcates between the civilised and the wild has also to do with psychology. Psychology is a parameter of considerable instrumentality when one is doing architecture, as is the necessity of knowing why one is doing whatever one is doing.

And (to return to your second question concerning the local and the regional in which I dealt with the question of multiple coexistances) Marseille contains within it this unresolved issue of multiplicity: all the projects we are doing in the studio are projects in the city that articulate and elucidate the juxtaposition of differences.

trans: A new perspective to this question could bring the discussion on what should be done with ground level zero Manhattan, because it's the first time that the buildings which are missed are crucial works from late modernism, so they stood exactly for that attitude to architecture that was criticised by postmodernists like Charles Jencks for their arrogance to the existing city. How do you see this recent discussion?

EZ: The enormity of the question presents itself as an answer to itself, if we look at the totality of this phantasmagoric urban phenomenology in historical time. The twin towers, ugly and magnificent, were initially a quantum jump in terms of the New York that was. So first of all the erection, then the destruction, and now the absence. It is such a big question that we can only see it as a complete and dramatically emblematic urban act that represents the reality of its history (i.e. truth) in the most exaggeratedly sublime way, always remembering that you can only do architecture when you exaggerate.

Thank you for this conversation.

This conversation took place on February 8, 2002 at ETH Zurich.

Elia Zenghelis is currently visiting professor at ETH Zurich and partner at Gigantes Zenghelis Architects, Brussels, Düsseldorf, Athens. He is one of the founding members of OMA.

Claudia Dische, editor of *trans*, is a student of architecture in the studio of Elia Zenghelis at ETH Zurich and worked with OMA during the last year.

Hendrik Tieben, editor of *trans*, is an architect and currently writes his doctoral thesis at the institute of history of urbanism at ETH Zurich.



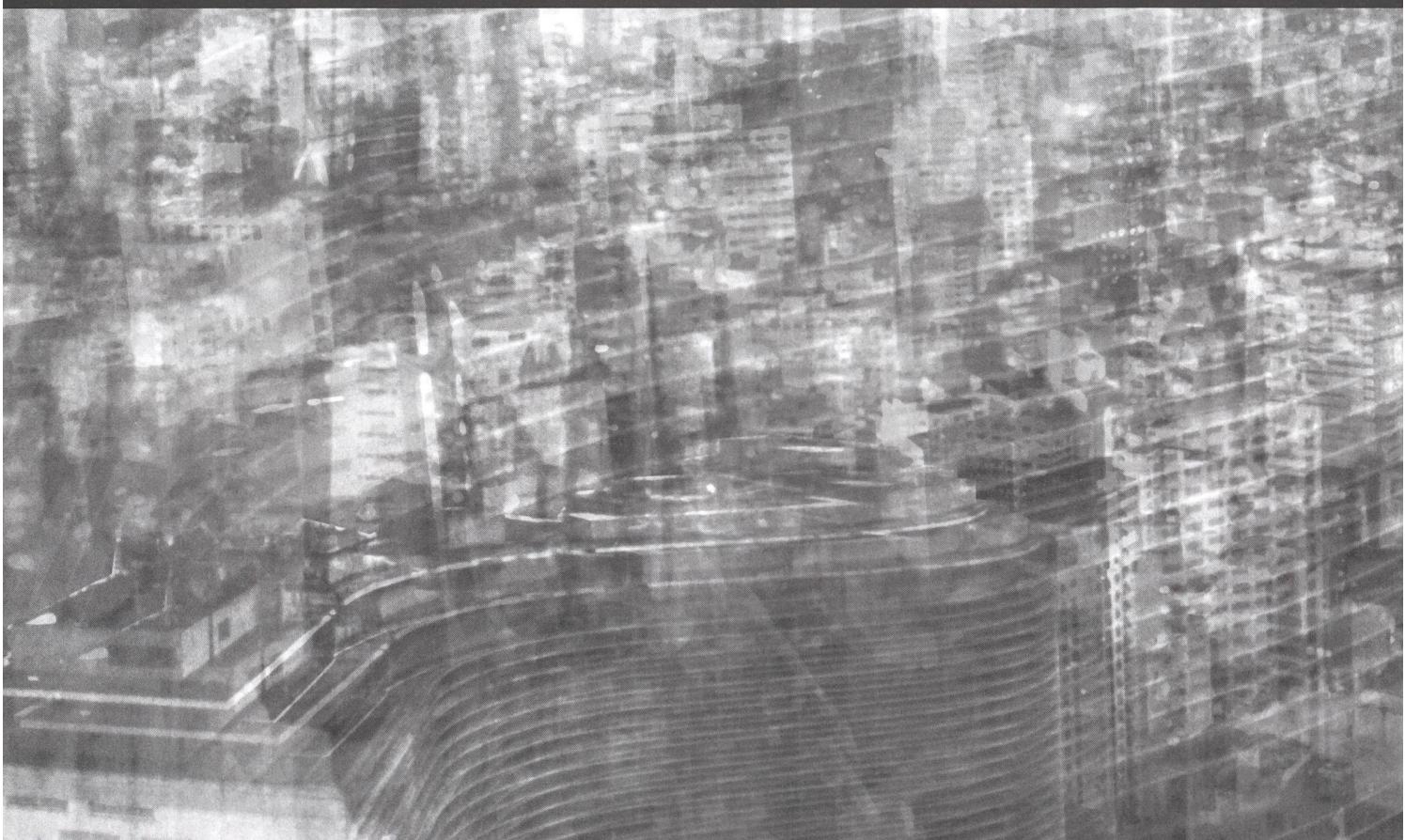




Bild: Phil Steffen, 2000



Fig. 1 Brush Park, aerial photograph courtesy Alex MacLean / Landslides.