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# «EVERYWHERE, I AM A STRANGER.»

For a long time, the Dutch architect Wiel Arets has been an active yet scarcely noticed protagonist in the city of Zurich.

Philippe Jorisch met with him at his Zurich office for a talk about his profession, working in Switzerland, being self-taught, and the future.

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Wiel Arets and  
Philippe Jorisch

Philippe Jorisch (pj): Wiel Arets, you are an internationally known architect with an impressive list of realized projects. But you still have an enormous curiosity that fuels your imagination and produces many publications, and you even design espresso cups. You believe in the architect as a proactive public intellectual. How in all this do you see the relationship between thinking and making?

Wiel Arets (wa): First of all let me say that you have to invest a lot of time and energy before you know anything about architecture. When I was about fourteen years old, I physically worked at my uncle's firm making pavement stones. It was while cutting boulders, curbstones and gutters that I realized that you have to understand the profession you are involved in very well. And before you talk about creating you have to know what you want to achieve, what the concept is. When I write a text, it is also creating something. The moment you use words you have to understand what the particular meaning of each word is. You mentioned different products. When I develop a concept, be it for a spoon or urban design, I make a small sketch. The moment I make this sketch I think, and I think in words. I write, look at the sketch again, back and forth, like a kind of ping pong game. It is like exercising. Like a soccer player kicking a ball a thousand times against a wall, so that days later he can appreciate the precise effect of his movements. Bathroom furniture, an apartment building and urban design may be different disciplines. But in all of them a strong overall concept helps you develop the product.

pj: What's the agenda in all this creating of yours?

wa: That is quite a general question you're asking. What I like to do is produce good products, whether it is a book, a text, industrial design or a building. I think it is important to develop consistent rather than spectacular products. Usually it starts with a question from a client. I then have to rephrase that question. And when I start working on it, I discover so many things that ideally the product could keep me busy for the next hundred years.

pj: That sounds like quite a challenge.

wa: People only see the finished product that works but they don't see the effort behind it. At the moment my office is building the headquarters for 'Allianz' insurance. There we are developing a completely new kind of ceiling. No one has ever used that particular production procedure before. In our team we talk about every small step. It's a long process. At the end, it works and everyone thinks it was easy. But it actually

wasn't. I guess what fuels me is that at the end people start using the building or the product the way I imagined it. Or even differently, in a way I had not foreseen. That's something I like very much.

pj: So you combine the intellectual with the craftsman.

wa: I think that's essential not only for architecture, but to make anything. As an intellectual, not knowing what I do or what I produce is not what I'm after.

pj: How competitive are you?

wa: I am a sportsman. I am very competitive. Competition should challenge us to produce better things. But competition is not only me against someone else, it's also me at different moments in time.

pj: For you, is there a difference between chaos and order?

wa: I am not after one or the other. Look at the city of Tokyo, for example. Tokyo looks completely chaotic, but it's not. There are many organizational principles within that city. It is chaos which is not random. When I develop a product I need a governing concept to create order. Maybe that order has a layer in it that looks chaotic. But it is controlled chaos. I'm not interested in order for its own sake. And I'm not interested in chaos as something where you do not find what the underlying organization is.

pj: Is simplicity an aesthetic and emotional pleasure?

wa: Only very few painters and very few film directors make films and pieces of art which last. There are too many fashionable things that please emotions quickly, but at second glance you find out they are very superficial. This has to do with an artist's oeuvre. You realize then that over a long period of time a particular artist was precise in his thinking and creating, had a concept in mind and had the necessary skills. I very much like the work of the fashion designer Yamamoto. I have shirts of his I bought more than twenty years ago and when I wear them now, people think I bought them yesterday. You have to ask how time will make a product or building better. I also believe that everybody works in a particular autobiographical condition. Pieces of art always have historical reference. I am not alone on this planet, but I cannot perceive or produce what I do without all the knowledge that is somewhere inside me.

pj: Do you feel European?

wa: I was sitting on an airplane yesterday, and for the first time I marked where I have been on one of those world maps.

I was really amazed that although I lead a nomadic life, there are actually a lot of areas in the world I haven't been to. I think today the world is one big city. In previous times we thought in terms of continents or countries. Nowadays everybody is traveling very fast physically, and by e-technology in a split second. And we all talk about the world. When we talk about sustainability, we don't talk about Europe, we talk about the world. Everyone in a way is already preparing to be part of this world city, a world city with different neighborhoods.

pj: Where do you feel at home?

wa: In whatever country I am in. Last week I was in the States, and I felt at home. In Japan I feel at home immediately. Although I very much realize that everywhere I am, I'm a stranger. And that's the best condition to be in! Because when you are a stranger, you appreciate everything you see. Everything is somehow new. The worst condition is to know. When people say «We always did it like that» or «We should do it like that». For me, being a stranger is exciting and I'm always curious.

pj: What draws you to Switzerland?

wa: When I was three years old my parents and I drove all the way from Holland to Switzerland in a small car and I was very fascinated by the incredible scenery. But also how clean everything was and how people seemed concerned about what they are doing. A lot later, about twenty-five years ago, I came here again and was confronted with architectural products that are notoriously precise in execution. I was impressed, but I didn't understand it at first. Later, fifteen years ago, I was asked by the city of Zurich to be on some committees. Then I started to understand the democratic system here. Besides an interesting way of dealing with issues like taxes, there is open debate about how to operate in urban matters, for example. No matter what political opinion you may have, there is always a lot of mutual respect. That's something that isn't happening in a lot of countries I know. My office was later asked to take part in a competition, and we did quite well. So more and more I had the feeling that if I had the chance to build in Switzerland, I should do it. And if given a commission, I should set up a proper office in Switzerland. I am now here quite often, doing exactly what I've learned to do over the past few years and appreciating Switzerland.

pj: Did you study any Swiss architects in particular?

wa: Not directly. Of course I appreciate a lot of Swiss architects. Let me say that when I was a student I studied an architect from my hometown, Frits Peutz. I asked myself

why I should study architects from all over the world when there was someone around the corner who could tell me a lot about what I should learn. I spent a year in his archive, in the old office, which he hadn't been in for fourteen years. And I found out that he was an architect who knew how to conceptually work out things until the last detail. But he was also very curious.

Through studying him I became interested in Italian architects such as Rossi and Grassi and the *Tendenza* debate that was going on at that time. I later was asked to teach at the AA in London and then at Columbia University in New York. At the same time, I wrote articles about Japanese architects and traveled to Leningrad [Saint Petersburg] and Moscow. My interest in Peutz lead me in four completely different directions. It made me understand that you should not follow a trend, but rather learn from a lot of other architects and not only from their buildings.

pj: You believe in the architect as an autodidact and you talk of yourself as a permanent student. Why do we need architecture schools then?

wa: That's a good question. When I was teaching at the AA it was a kind of members' club. There was an exhibition space, a bar, a library and a few rooms. You went there, talked to a few people, then went home and worked. That may be very challenging. Anyway the word school is wrong. That's why when I was dean of the Berlage I immediately changed the name from *School of Architecture* to *Laboratory for Architecture*. It is not the five years in this or that school, where someone tries to teach you something, that makes you an architect. In my opinion a school is maybe a place where you meet people who can make you curious. But architecture is one of those disciplines that you really have to work through yourself. Take Corbu, Mies, Kahn... sometimes I have the feeling that good people should stay away from school because they could also be corrupted.

pj: How do you teach?

wa: I don't teach the students, the students teach me. When I have a studio with say fifteen people, they all produce completely different things. I am interested in where these people come from and who they are. I want dialogue. And they do not need to all become architects. One may become a renowned photographer, another an excellent fashion designer or a famous graphic designer, or even a mayor, you name it. So why should I teach these people to only work according to my method?

pj: During your deanship at the Berlage, you proposed Dutch landscape as a possible starting point for investigations. What do

you think about the relationship between nature and artificiality in Switzerland compared to the Netherlands?

wa: I think everything we do in Holland is artificial. Eighty-five percent of the country is reclaimed land that was previously under water. This technical condition is important to understand the surface of the earth in Holland. There is a sensibility and an impetus to make everything very light, thin and fragile. Personally, I'm from the south of Holland, so outside of that eighty-five percent. And curiously the area I am from is called 'Little Switzerland', and I really feel quite Swiss. What I really like about Switzerland is that nature is extremely strong as a given condition and I believe this somehow determines the architectural strength and directness here. On the other hand, there seems to be a tradition and awareness for artificial nature in Switzerland. The many fountains all over this country are an example of nature brought into the city.

pj: Do you think Swiss architecture may be too picturesque? For example, compare the reality of the Swiss concrete jungle of transit corridors to images in competition proposals.

wa: I would like you to look at the proposal my office did for the ETH campus in 2004. There we really tried to understand Swiss nature and culture. We understood that the limits of the ETH campus were carefully defined. I see this when I go outside the city, to the countryside. The asphalt stops and nature takes over. Secondly, Swiss asphalt has a particular quality, it is perforated, almost like a carpet. Thirdly, all outdoor public ground surfaces in Switzerland are very smooth. Few cornerstones, curbs or ground sills, no walls. All edges are precisely defined, but everything is still smooth. So we defined the boundary very precisely and proposed not adding buildings by foreign architects to the existing buildings. Instead, we took proposals from Swiss artists and scaled them into the scheme as placeholders. I understood that bringing only ideas from Swiss protagonists to the ETH campus was the real challenge.

pj: You are in contact with many fresh and creative minds. How do you see the youngest generation of architects? And if you were 26 years old again and finishing your diploma thesis today, what country would you explore?

wa: I am 26 today, because I think it is a misunderstanding that someone is younger or older because of an abstract mathematical measurement. I feel twenty-six, and I would do exactly what I am doing now. I am working on 'Tokyo Utopia', or 'TOUT' for short, a research project I started half a year ago with students in Madrid. We are living in a moment in time where a multiplicity of

utopias exists. What I like about the youngest generation is their powerful will to come up with a new order. Look at Facebook's Zuckerberg, nobody gave him a commission! That's the exciting state of our time, that everyone is responsible for their own career and image. At this very moment someone in the favelas in Rio might be doing the most incredible things, given their access to technology. And I want to give young people opportunities by throwing them into the water. This young generation, who belongs to many, many clubs and will come up with brilliant ideas for the future, is giving me so much pleasure. I want to see how the world will become very different with a bunch of young, intelligent, clever and radical students, who feel like strangers in the condition they are in.

*Wiel Arets, born 1955*

is a Dutch architect. He founded Wiel Arets Architects (WAA) in 1983. Today his office has studios in Amsterdam, Berlin, Maastricht, and Zurich. From 1997-2002 he was the Dean of the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, and he is currently Professor of Building Planning and Design at the UdK in Berlin. WAA's latest publication, *'Wiel Arets: Autobiographical References'*, Birkhäuser, 2012, provides insight into his life and work.

*Philippe Jorisch, born 1985*

is a former editor of trans. He graduated from ETH Zurich in 2011 and started his own practice in 2012.