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IT'S TOO EMOTIONAL!

A CONVERSATION WITH...

Winy Maas

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Trans Magazine (tm): Dear Winy Maas, in our current issue we discuss the notion of *limits*, not only in architecture but also beyond that scope. Throughout your career as an architect, researcher and professor you have tried to integrate different disciplines into the field of architecture and thus sought to go beyond the traditional borders of architecture. Where do you otherwise see limits within the discipline of architecture?

Winy Maas (wm): Maybe the word *taboo* could indicate that. Because that's the main issue of limits, isn't it? How many and what taboos can you already imagine? Are there still taboos? Are there limits therefore? I am curious.

tm: What do you mean by taboos? Taboos in thinking?

wm: Sure. What is *'not done'*, for instance? Or, why are things *'not done'*?

tm: We actually talked very recently about the utopias of Modernism and the visionary concepts by the Metabolists in the 1960s. Today, there seems to be a lot of doubt about big, utopian ideas.

wm: You pointed out one taboo already, I think: Big buildings definitively are a taboo here and there. In the Netherlands, for instance, it's also a taboo if you make an expensive building. You cannot do that, it's *'not done'*, in these times of crises. You have to be modest in your budgets and in your fees. It's intriguing how taboos appear. Probably, we want to keep a kind of safety or control basically for our economies, and not so much in social issues in the first place. That's the reason, that architects somehow work in a field of *'stability'* and safety. That's why most of the architectural work is *'safe'*.

tm: Maybe it's also because there is a big feeling of disorientation.

wm: What kind of disorientation? And by whom?

tm: The possibilities seem to be so unlimited...

wm: You mean for architects? Is that really true? Architecture is more limited than you think. You can, for instance, use a small repertoire of materials: stones, glass and... that's it, basically. And there is only a limited amount of spatial elements: a window, a door, a stair... We, as architects, always have to deal with a limited amount of materials and enormous financial constraints.

tm: But still, today, you have to deal with huge amounts of inputs and impressions, and you have the possibility to build almost everything anywhere?

wm: Yes, that's true, but there is also a global tendency, that buildings look more and more the same.

But I still find other taboos or limitations. For instance, when I show how our software, called the *'Spacefighter'*, automatically incorporates architecture, as it can partly erase the notion of *'style'*, a lot of architects were offended. As if they are not needed anymore! As if they can be replaced by computers!

Well they can. That was a taboo. It indicates that if architects don't want to be overwhelmed by software designers then they have to team up with them to address the spatial possibilities!

Another strong taboo at the moment is the obsession with craftsmanship. In many debates it is suggested as the main task for the architect. That it prevails over other elements. How idiot. Craftsmanship is something completely natural for the profession of architecture. I expect every architect to be a craftsman or a craftswoman.

tm: But that trend towards craftsmanship can also be seen as a reaction to the conceptual epoch in the 1990s and 2000s, to refocus on the building itself.

wm: By the way, the word *'concept'* is a taboo as well, these days. Like conceptual art, conceptual architecture is for me still a beautiful way to span the gap between the limitations of architecture and a wider scope. And it's also another way to make choices on the level of what you should do when you can do everything. So for me, the whole discussion on going back to craftsmanship is super stupid. It's like despair, like if you are at the end of what you can do. By doing that, you lose the whole field of possibilities of enlarging the messages of a building, of giving it a typical meaning, or of experimenting.

tm: Much of this experimentation has led to a huge amount of exceptional, iconic buildings all over the world.

wm: I think it's a big mistake that some people hate iconic architecture – though it's partly understandable because in some cases it also became a bit redundant, too expensive, too unnecessary somehow. And when you see the twentieth bridge of Calatrava somewhere on the planet, it's not iconic anymore. It loses its originality. But some of these buildings that were built mainly by the generation before me were sometimes exciting and beautiful because they explored new geometries, new messages or new scales. And I still believe that we should make buildings that are outstanding, that can attract attention, that can create a message, that show leadership. If we avoid that, we even lose the ability to create wonders anymore. To deny a world of curiosity would

ultimately kill any culture and it would deny the issue of progress. Of course, we therefore have to define what a good icon is.

tm: What is a good icon, in your opinion?

wm: When the outstanding makes sense. But why do we only limit the iconic to the cultural world? Why should we only spend money on bridges and museums to make icons? I therefore do think that housing could be iconic. I think there is still a world for icons. The tendency to dismantle the term *'icon'* is too emotional.

One component that I would like to add to the criteria is *'humor'*. Humor is sometimes necessary to span the gap between cynicism and optimism, to alleviate serious circumstances.

For instance, we were making a barn for Alain de Botton in the landscapes north of London. And we let the barn hover above the terrain in order to give sufficient space for rabbits passing by, for nature in this national park. Thus, it turned into a *'balancing barn'*. This puts into perspective the seriousness and obsessiveness of some British leaders with the role of architecture in the monumental landscapes. «Is it a joke?» some of them asked. And I said: «Yes, yes. Is it a good one? We should discuss whether it's a good joke, that's the issue.»

tm: So your projects are often comments on or criticism of a specific situation?

wm: Yes, hopefully. In that way we are referring to the issue of context. But there are many contexts. The building that you have to make is one kind of context. But it's also the *'Zeitgeist'* that you reflect. The context of a building is bigger than only the site itself. I do think that a new interpretation of contextualism is therefore needed. The question of critical regionalism could also be reapplied, or further applied, or deepened. I do think, for instance, that cities should and could be more different. I believe in and love biodiversity. My hope is that in our world there will still be as many differences as possible.

tm: Where do you see the potential for diversity in architecture today and for the future?

wm: Already the question of climate defines that issue. What is the effect of Zurich's *'2000-Watt-Gesellschaft'* on architecture, for instance, when you have to spend so much money on insulation? How can the same concept for building work in different climates, could be useful research to discuss this issue better.

That is one kind of research you could do. And you actually have a place where you can do that, at your school. The good thing about Switzerland is its seriousness and that it wants to take things seriously.

tm: How did you experience the research you have done in Switzerland, in particular *Stadt Land Schweiz* in 2003?

wm: I love it. Don't take the book wrong, it is meant to study the possibilities of a country and to illustrate them by exaggerating in order to activate a discussion. Well, it worked. The reaction towards *Stadt Land Schweiz* and ideas like *Super Zurich* has been extremely strong. A complete studio has been dedicated to that answer, which they didn't put in Zurich, but in Basel, I believe.

tm: You mean the ETH Studio Basel, founded by Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Marcel Meili and Roger Diener in 1999. Only one year after *Stadt Land Schweiz* they published *Switzerland: An Urban Portrait*. Could you explain *Super Zurich* a bit?

wm: *Super Zurich* poses the question: Do you want to *villagize* Switzerland completely, everywhere, or could you imagine a certain degree of density in and around Zurich? It therefore asks for other kinds of cosmopolitanism within the city and the awareness of the advantages of a possible reduction of urbanization in the Berner Oberland and other similar areas for creating natural domains. That is what *Super Zurich* intends to discuss. And now, fifteen years later, we can see that part of this operation has already come alive; you see that there are enormous densification activities going on in and around Zurich. It's not bad. It makes the city much stronger. I think that's an interesting tendency, that limits are moving, that densities are more accepted. That was impossible fifteen years ago. There is an interesting change happening with the discussion on *limits*; also when you look at the acceptance of Glatttal as a kind of city.

Next year we are going to do a conference on *Super Zurich*, not at the ETH, but at the Volkshochschule in Zurich.

tm: Why is it important for you to develop *Super Zurich* at the Volkshochschule and not at the ETH?

wm: Why the Volkshochschule? We would like to have more normal people involved. I already know the opinion of some of the ETH-community on *Super Zurich*, so I don't have to explore it there any further, it doesn't result in anything new. It's also an experiment to be and discuss more within the society. Not that the ETH is not connected with society, but we would like to have a discussion with people that are not architects, say *other* people that would like to contribute to this discussion from another angle. This is really interesting to find out. What are the thoughts and opinions within this environment of the Volk-

shochschule: What is the role of urban planning? What should the state do, where should it invest? What should be new, what should be respected?

tm: That's actually very close to the situation in Switzerland, that every larger public building has to pass a public vote, and therefore a public debate is initiated.

wm: Indeed. It fits in a tradition. Possible disadvantage: It takes maybe seven years before you can make a building. So there are also thoughts of *limitation* within this legislation. It takes longer, not everything is accepted and you are part of a public verdict. It's somehow a way of life that you have to deal with. But I'm also a victim of that. For instance, when you take our proposal for the SRG, the Schweizer Fernsehen. I think it was an ambitious piece of architecture, but the fact that the client wanted to concentrate many television studios of Switzerland in one building and to reduce, say, all the branches in Uri and Geneva – that of course became a red rag for the Swiss society. Though the operation would be considerably economic. And efficient. Maybe we were a bit (ab)used. Maybe they couldn't find a Swiss architect to do the proposal...

tm: You were talking about the limits in scale, local limits – for example the scale of Zurich – on the one hand and the global scale on the other hand.

wm: I think it is so important to discuss the repertoire of possibilities and solutions before choosing one. I still like the *Stuttgart 21* case, for instance, where Christoph Ingenhoven proposed this insanely expensive tunnel. We suggested not to make the tunnel, but to make a bridge over the whole city and valley and to make a station in the sky. And from there you have only escalators that bring you down, like an octopus, to any place in the city. Retrospectively, this approach could have been pursued in the course of the riots.

And in Zurich? I wouldn't mind a bridge over the Zurich Lake. (laughing) Or what could also be interesting or hilarious, if you made a skyscraper in Glatttal or Leutschenbach that overlooks the Zürichberg. That would be so beautiful, so funny.

tm: So the iconic potential is again very important for you, to make infrastructures like the train station in the sky or other parts of the city visible and meaningful?

wm: Yes, as I explained before. It has literally a much bigger impact, both functionally and aesthetically. In the Stuttgart case with the octopus above the city, at that moment the whole world would know it. The next movie from Hollywood could go there. Unfortunately, the octopus has been buried

and turned into the underground. Now it will be somewhere in *Middle-German-Endlessness*. During the *Stadt Land Schweiz* project we were inspired by this operation and made some new suggestions for the future tunnels in Switzerland – not to build them like that, underground, but to make sky-roads over the Alps... There could be super nice, thin bridges, let's say 1.600 meters up in the sky, that jump from mountain to mountain. I would love to have such a mountain crossing from Italy to Germany... That's my dream.

tm: But it probably doesn't fit the Swiss mentality. The mountain panorama would be destroyed...

wm: Maybe not true. You want to keep the *Heidi-illusion* and that's okay. But these kinds of proposals help to define the needed questions. When you want to make your connection through the Alps, I can only ask: «Do you hide it or do you want to show it?»

And then, I am sure that you can make the thinnest bridges on the planet and, of course, there won't be any columns. You have the best engineers in the world. So you can do that. (drawing) This is also nice. You can do it like that. If you hang it from mountain to mountain, the bridges will 'echo' the mountains and the valleys...

tm: Most of the research that you have done in your office and within MVRDV's think-tank The Why Factory, is likewise provocative and pragmatic – for example *Pig City* from 2000 that comes with strong images on the one hand and very precise, empirical statistics on the other hand. How do you also see this link between your practical and theoretical work as an architect?

wm: On the one hand we should be concrete and pragmatic. That is one of the arts and the beauties of our profession. A work of architecture is only significant when you have built things. So you have to prove what you say. To make even idiotic ideas thinkable, you have to span the gap between theory and practice.

On the other hand we need to visualize fantasies – the other possibility of architecture. It helps to think on a higher scale. It can pose questions to our realisms. With such a bridge over the Alps – you think it's about urbanization but actually it's about the opposite, as these thin bridges in-between allow the forest to continue. Many of your valleys are horrible in Switzerland because they are completely filled up. You feel extremely claustrophobic in them. In the end it's also not good because of climatic and ventilation reasons. So, thinking on a higher level liberates that. And that's what some of the projects try to do. They work on the collective scale.

I do believe strongly in the world of democ-

racy. Also, on a larger scale, a kind of collectiveness is necessary. And what does collectiveness mean? You have to ask everybody what he or she wants to contribute to the collective. The project *‘Freeland’* is about that...

tm: It's a project that you exhibited at Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012. It explored the possibilities of a self-organized city with fewer rules and less bureaucracy...

wm: You can do what you want, as long as you don't harm your neighbor, and you have to contribute to collective needs as urban farming, infrastructure and urban energy – that's all. In this project we want to create a direct link between the individual and the city. It is not only a tool to design your own house, but also your own city.

And I must say, this ping-pong game between architecture and urbanism doesn't exist a lot in our world of architecture. There are just few architects that are really doing that. That could be much more explored and that's what I also try to defend so strongly at the moment, whereas many architects withdraw from these possibilities and only make *‘nice objects’*...

This reductionism, to only concentrate on small buildings because that's enough, because you cannot do more... But with what perspective?

On the other hand there are architects that do urbanism, but with a very naïve approach. They just enlarge their methods, but they miss the point: time, for instance, or next generations that behave differently, those kinds of aspects. But urbanism is

much more complex than that. For me, this is one of the most intriguing worlds. For instance, to consider an object also as a vehicle for urbanism. And that kind of vehicle can be versatile and gentle, or it can be exemplary, therefore it becomes iconic, it can also be prototypical and thus can be further applied.

tm: In *‘City Shock’* from 2012, you formulate ten different catastrophic scenarios concerning our future. In the preface, you also describe that many of the so-called experts completely failed to predict most of the revolutionary events of the last years, like the 2008 financial crisis, or the Arab Spring in 2010. You point out that it seems to be more and more difficult to make reliable predictions based on facts and empirical evidence. Do you think that now is the time for architects to draw perspectives for the future?

wm: Yes, we have to put up an agenda or agendas for that. To understand directions. To test them. And one of the methods to test values is to envision possible disasters. Are we too fragile for that? Or can we adapt easily? So one of the examples that some students came up with was the threat within the milk industry that actually happened afterwards in China. We looked at what kind of effect that would have. This also meant that another way of dealing with agriculture would be necessary. Did it make sense? Yes. This specific article within the book already gave an agenda to the current industry of agriculture in the Netherlands. So?

Winy Maas, born 1959

Winy Maas is one of the founding directors of MVRDV. The office was founded in Rotterdam, in 1993 along with Jacob van Rijs and Nathalie de Vries. Winy Maas is also the director of The Why Factory, a research institute he founded at TU Delft in 2008, where he also works as a Professor. Since 2012 he has been a Visiting Professor at ETH Zurich. Winy Maas graduated in Landscape Architecture from RHSTL Boskoop in 1983. In 1990, he completed two masters simultaneously, in Architecture and in Urban Design and Planning, at the Technical University of Delft.

The interview was conducted and recorded by Julia Hemmerling, Vanessa Schmitz, Annik Nemeth and Christopher Metz in Rotterdam, NL, on June 13th, 2013.