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A conversation with  
Charlotte Truwant & Dries Rodet  
about inclusivity

After a visit of their shared office space on the Hammerstrasse in Basel, Charlotte and Dries take me to the discreet but well-known Avant-Gouz—«chez Pierre» as they call it. We enter, sit down and each get a tea.

- TM You won the Swiss Art Award in 2017, more or less ten years after finishing your first project, this summer house in Italy—ten years can be considered a period long enough not to be young anymore. Would you say that you are still a young architecture office?
- DR There isn't this «A-ha!» moment in architecture where you can say you found the secret recipe and from that point on you can just work with it. It has more to do with a continuous curiosity that drives the projects forward.
- CT First, we would have to define what it means to be young. You mention this timeframe, but we never considered it in this way before. This house in Italy was a commission we received right after our studies, while we were still working for an office. We wonder if this was when we started our office? It leads to the question: is there a difference between learning and practicing, or do you actually start practicing when you start studying? We believe everything is more organic and less clearly categorised. We worked both for different architecture and landscape offices in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. This gave us a really unique background. We didn't study or work with one «master», but for a range of offices whom we all consider important in our own story. In these offices, we interacted with different fields and scales in architecture, which is still very present in our work today. We embrace the fact that our path has been less linear and you can see this reflected in our work, which is difficult to place in one single category.
- CT There are often people, also theorists, that refer to certain points in time in big offices' histories. It could be that in your practice there is a tilting point where all of a sudden you switch from one side to the other, and this you cannot control. But this hasn't happened to us yet. Maybe you also need people from the outside to point out this shift. But if we talk a bit more pragmatically we have both been working fully for the office, doing research and applying it to our own work in a coherent manner since 2015. This is when we started doing competitions and having projects. So if you look at it like that, we finally started putting things together and taking the time to develop certain themes in 2015. That means that we have been independent and working as an office for only 4 years now.
- DR The continuous discussion we have about architecture leads us to where we are now and has influenced everything we have done: the offices we worked for, the research we did in Japan,... All of this makes us what we are today. And to answer your question, do we consider ourselves a young office—yes! If you want to classify offices in that way, you have to know at what point one stops being young and becomes established. I don't have the impression that there was a clear break in our story. It is a continuous search that keeps on going.
- TM What has changed for you: how was the process of the past ten years and how do you feel now? If you look back, how do you feel?
- CT A big change happened when we moved into our own office space, it was quite important to have a proper working environment and since then the direction in which we want to go has become clearer.
- DR You ask us about how we look back on our own work. We actually spend a lot of time on this when we're asked to present or write about our work. For example, for the project we presented at the Swiss Art Awards, we reinterpreted our earlier work and translated it into a new pavilion.
- CT If you work until 100 years old like Niemeyer, then a 10 year-old office is still super young! But if you look at it from a different angle, it may seem as though we have had the office for quite a while. It's all about perspective.
- CT Preparing a lecture, for example, is the perfect occasion to look back. It comes with a constant questioning. This is important for us. Although we are having a lot of fun now, we want to stay critical: to keep on questioning ourselves, to make sure that we don't fall into some sort of mechanism. This beginning is

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A A House in a Garden, Leest, BE, Truwant + Rodet

- a very rich and intense period for us and we're enjoying it a lot. It's not always easy economically, but it's really productive. Often, the most interesting projects of an office are the first ones—until the office becomes bigger and there is a risk of losing focus.
- TM We see you move between means and scales: architecture, furniture, etc. You seem to be really fluid in your office. Is it easy for you to keep a certain range of action?
- DR We don't really have to think about it too much, it comes quite automatically. We have both a very broad field of interest and it would take us much more energy to narrow it down. If we said we only want to do housing, it would feel very forced. I hope we can keep on exploring all of these scales simultaneously.
- CT It also depends a lot on the people you surround yourself with. You meet people from different fields whom you are interested in and sometimes it just clicks. We have quite an extended network, which is important for us. We have to look for commissions and competitions, they don't always come to us. So you can also control, to a certain extent, which type of project you do. Sometimes you have to refuse a project because it doesn't match your own intentions. It isn't always easy to run an architecture office. You still have to operate in a dynamic market. You are always waiting, not knowing if you will get selected for a competition or a project. We wish we could work on a stable ground with the people we like, but the market is so uncertain that we cannot afford that yet. And that's hard. I guess most of the architects deal with that. Once you find people you really enjoy working with, you don't want that to stop!
- TM It seems like you're describing a relationship with a person, you have to give something away but you're not sure it will work...
- CT Yes, and when everyone understands each other it is great! It takes a lot of time, though, to build that up. We are a small office and only work with 2 to 3 people at the same time. Maybe the dynamic of a bigger office with a constantly changing team is also nice. For the time being we are very lucky, as we have been working with great collaborators and been surrounded by amazing people.
- DR Honestly, we have very interesting lives going on, and we enjoy running our own office. If you don't enjoy it, it's easier to go and work for someone else and spend your evening reading books.
- TM I read in an interview that «...we don't think it is necessary to define a hierarchy between client and society. We consider both being part of the context of a project.» (SAA-RT, 2017). Is this a statement that you followed from the beginning? What values did you keep from your early years?
- CT Let's say we always start the project with a very clear idea, but at the same time we don't conceive our project independently from any context. All these parameters, economics, politics, clients etc. are all part of the project's context. That's why there is no hierarchy between client and society. We do not simply offer a service: we sometimes need to question our clients' wishes. While the client will move on at some point, the house is here to stay a lot longer. There is a responsibility towards the built context, the landscape and the political situation and on that larger scale, a client is but a small part. The building has to stand for itself and should have the capacity to carry on, regardless of its commissioners. That's why it's important to hold onto a strong idea. In the end, the larger context renders this abstract idea more specific.
- DR It doesn't mean that the client is not important, but they are part of the basic brief. The project doesn't just grow out of the wishes of the client or the context, there are overarching themes that come out of our research and the interest of the office. This was probably the reason why we made that statement. On top of that, the different specialists, collaborators or colleagues with whom we work are becoming more important. Their specific knowledge adds another layer of a possible understanding of a project. And this multiplicity starts to interest us more and more.
- TM If I understand correctly, it is a sort of attitude?
- CT Yes. The idea of multiplicity has always been part of our work; from the offices we worked in, to the collaborations we have today. The realization of our ideas in a range of different scales, from the territorial scale to the detail in architecture, is only possible through close collaborations with people from different fields. As architects, we are not the sole authors of our work anymore.
- DR We try to work with people who have their own agenda and who want to come together to discuss architecture, politics, art etc. which enriches a project.
- TM You seem to have a very inclusive way of working.

- CT Inclusive is probably the right word. It comes with a lot of questions, but we're looking forward to investigating them even further. Sometimes it raises the question of authenticity; does the project lose its essence, does the architectural idea need to be reinforced?
- DR Inclusive is more fitting than participatory, which—to me—brings to mind the idea of compromise. Inclusivity is not about watering an idea down until it's digestible for everybody. It has rather to do with adding more content, more quality and diverse ideas, instead of imposing one idea.