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BUREAU

A conversation with
Daniel Zamarbide

trans Redaktion

It is a busy Wednesday on the construction site. My call with Daniel is scheduled at 9:30. Still some time to find a socket to charge my phone. An improvised seat made out of some packages of cement and a more or less clean wooden board to put my laptop on serve me today as my temporary office.

TM «BUREAU» is the name of your current office. It was founded in 2017 after you and your office partner at that time decided to split up. Was that a considerable rupture in your life?

DZ You call it office, I rather want to call it «project». It is simply a new project that allows me to continue my work in a slightly different format. But let's jump back in time: The real change for me was when I decided to leave the first office I worked in, «group8». That was a crucial moment in my professional life because I took my first steps as an architect with «group8». It was a group of friends and colleagues and when I left the office there were about fifty people engaged—so it become quite large in the meantime. The time in «group8» was really intense and interesting but at that point when it started to boom really fast, I felt the urge to leave. I guess I experienced a small personal crisis where I felt my philosophy differ from my partners in «group8» and I acknowledged this feeling that maybe it was the time for me to come back to a more personal way of dealing with architecture, to more personal issues. That's why I left and that was a big jump, a really big jump. When you have grown within such a strong environment and office it is hard to think of a professional life outside of its structure.

After this I started, with a new partner, the route that I am still developing today, on my own.

TM How do you see architecture then?

DZ In «group8» I learned the practice of building and complex project making. We were developing a lot of important projects, of course all in a contemporary way, but after a while I began to feel a certain personal discomfort on how to tackle the profession of an architect. It was about doing competitions, building houses, responding to briefs—you know the usual stuff—with an incredible amount of energy and effort. But this is just one way of looking at architecture. In my case, I really had the feeling that I need to come back to other occupations which I found closer to the field of art. In my studies I had taken a number of courses in these directions and already had a foot in the

door. After leaving «group8» I started spending more time on other activities than running from meeting to meeting. I went back to what I consider a more research-oriented approach. I got interested again in architectural history and realized that this whole fascination of mine was not about solely doing art after all, it was just about expanding the idea of what architecture is and has been for a long time, since ever, actually. Architecture cannot only be about designing and constructing buildings but must be about so many things. That's why I tend to support all my projects with a wider context of architectural history. That is what we today call references. I try to link whatever I do with other sources of architecture and art since this field is very, very wide.

The collaboration with my previous partner was the first step into the direction I am taking now. I went from having a lot of partners to having just one and now to work with a very reduced team, but with full trust. This feels kind of a natural progression.

TM I was just about to say that the decrease in size is recognizable in your case: a lot of partners, then one and now solo. If we stick to «Bruch» in a materialistic, physical way, getting from large to small through grinding and continuously breaking is indeed a very natural way.

DZ The whole thing with dimensioning has something in it. Me going from a big office with a lot of people and doing a fair amount of large buildings to a very intimate and—some might say—radical practice. Our profession offers a lot of possibilities of practicing it in different ways. But one thing that seems to be quite constant is that very quickly we architects become «creative managers», spending very little time ourselves on ideas and a considerable amount of time trying to implement them. I try, in my practice, to find a better balance. That is why, most probably, my work has been considered close to an art practise at times. But I would not agree with this idea. I am an architect and practise as one. I actually love constructing «architectural things», they tend to be just smaller ones than usually expected.

Now I can spend much more time on research and developing ideas, and on the other hand these can get built very quickly because of the rather small size of the projects.

- TM When I scroll through your website I come across built projects—like «Mr. Barrett’s House» or the «Dodged House» and so on. Usually a small, intimate house. All of the projects seem to be very object-like in their representation, as expected, for instance, in an art exhibition.
- DZ Yes, it’s true. I show my projects mainly through photography, this enhances creativity I guess. For many years already, I have worked together with Dylan Perrenoud and what interests both of us is the specific intention of photography. It does not necessarily point out how the architecture is inhabited but it can say something about one clear moment of the building. At the end this image is not architecture, it is first of all an image, but it has this creative potential. Of course, images are very important. Once you finish a project you don’t master it anymore, you are not its owner any longer and that is a good thing, probably. But at this point you also start to lose the grip on it. People move in and live in it how they imagine it according to their ideas and imagination. They bring their furniture, their friends and family, their lives take over. This is why I think of photographing the moment where the built architecture is about to slip from me is very important, and logically, we spend a bit of time on this moment.
- TM Why do you consider that moment to be important and how does photography come into play?
- DZ First of all I grew up during the time when 3D renderings first got established and soon came to absolutely hate them. I have no trust in 3D renderings as a creative tool. I took a decision at one point to only show projects that have been built and not to show proposals for competitions, model pictures or sneak-peeks in currently running projects. Especially now I try to distance myself from architecture as the one and only monoculture. The «architecture for architects» trend I question strongly and linked with this the abstractness of it—which produces great and beautiful images—but is in its core very romantic. This has to do with the current cultural moment we live in. When a crisis occurs there are two ways out. One is a conservative and protective one—this is the way of the architectural monoculture—and the other is a more bursting-out, spontaneous one, which I personally find more interesting. I tend to distance myself from a purely architectural environment, that’s why generally I do not show many drawings linked

to my projects, even though I actually love the act of drawing. But that was the decision I took and I rather work with photography and spend a good amount of time thinking about how to show a project in its essence. Especially in a time where one gets flooded with images and so much potential is lost through the sheer amount of them, it is important to think how to say as much as possible with only a few frames. When I generally think about it I believe that I benefit from my activity as a teacher and my fascination of writing a lot. These different environments, this panorama view, enables me to gather a distance, since it offers a possibility of re-thinking and re-positioning myself, my practice and my responsibilities all the time.

- TM You moved to Lisbon with your office. How did that journey take place?
- DZ I was not born in Switzerland, I grew up in the north of Spain, so the question of displacement was intrinsic for me. I love Switzerland, it is now the closest to what I would consider a national identity and I have spent 20 years practicing in the country. I was still driven to look for something else. Practising in Switzerland has the difficulty of somehow getting comfortable because of the economic stability—it’s not that being a good architect in Switzerland is easy but in terms of ideas you can get very comfortable. You design and build and things just kind of roll. So when I started my new practice the idea was to move away, at first only temporary within the year, and see what we get from that, testing the ground of a more substantial move. So it was more to be on the move, which meant somehow to be alert on how society evolves and how we can find architectural tools to accompany this movement or question it at times.

These yearly «excursions» out of the office, for one or two months every year, was a very successful exercise because I am now living and working between Lisbon and the Geneva-Lausanne region since I co-direct ALICE, Dieter Dietz’s lab at the EPFL. This suits me perfectly. One foot here, one there as I know it from my youth. The practice takes an enormous advantage of the fact that the office now is present both in Switzerland and in Portugal and other places where we have projects as well. I mean, you probably are young and want to see something new. That’s exactly the same reason why I moved away: to see something new, to be confronted with a different environment. This opens your eyes. Actually, and this is something that I can only say now, looking back on it: I have the feeling that now I am very close to the moment when one finishes one’s studies again and starts to wander around, eyes wide open.

Of course I am not at this moment any longer, after all, we are all getting older, but I try to nourish and celebrate this very moment I feel so connected with and consider so powerful. Somehow it is always the same development: If you are new to something, you are eager to learn, sharp and motivated. You see that by looking at some of the most honoured pieces of someone's creation, architecture, art or whatever, and by checking when in the timeline these works have been produced by the authors. Often they are early works. And this is maybe the moment which I want to embrace by confronting myself with a different context and with different places.

TM I guess that can also be brought back to a physical aspect of Bruch. Before there is a fracture, some kind of tension is building up, until it becomes unbearable and eventually the fracture occurs. You questioning your way of your research, your work, your nationality and origin seem to embrace this state of tension—which is very productive I guess. Can you explain the project «Lampedusa»?

DZ This image you mention of the tension of the things before they crack is, for instance, is very useful in experimental structural engineering. You know, when one pushes things until structural failure and then just go back one millimetre and then it works. I think in this analogy there is a potential to describe my state and my work. Like the first works of Land Art—thinking particularly of Michael Heizer—this tension nourishes the relation we have with our environments, a relation that is—as we know now—inevitably tense as well.

In case of «Lampedusa» I had the chance to work on a stage design, something that I have been doing for a while. The topic was very intriguing to me. It dealt with the examination of the complexity of a place. Lampedusa has become known because of a very critical migrant situation but in the theatre play the whole history of Lampedusa was examined, which offers and reveals the much wider context. Through this layering of historical events the play unveiled many complex, even absurd situations one would not connect to Lampedusa anymore. Realizing the work together with the directors (Philippo Filigger and Dorothee Thébert) was very stimulating and creative. The flow of ideas and research fields materialized with rare ease. I was really happy to have this installation

recognized as part of the Swiss Design Award that we won this year since it was coupled with a lot of positive feelings for me.

Concerning this I must add that I try to get more and more rid of the idea of a precise and inflexible brief. The idea that you get a brief and that you then mechanically respond to it. I believe in the establishment of dialogues, creative collaborations which work out. I do not think that the simple way of responding to a strict and inflexible brief is fruitful or holding great potential for the future of our profession.

Among the different projects in the «BUREAU», I am currently also working on a small restaurant in Lisbon with quite humble needs, size and financial means. It is an absolutely interesting project to pursue, since the dialogue between us and them is open and creative. In all our current projects we look for a space that promotes and favours respect, dialogue, and curiosity on both sides. I guess one can put it as simple as that.

TM Would you define yourself rather as an initiator or as someone who is reacting towards things?

DZ I would consider myself as the initiator because I like to take quite a lot of risks and take the initiative as often as I can, regarding my own projects. Although I do not know whether my practice is radical or not I know that I stubbornly pursue ideas that I find interesting, coherent, important and challenging. If I were to use this word I would say that with time my practice is becoming «radically soft».

With this in mind, I would not say that my first push or step is closely linked to breaking things, since I do not think that is the idea. Frankly, I am not afraid to follow my own intuitive ideas—cultivating intuition is very important to me—to places that haven't yet been explored. In that sense I think that I do not react, but rather initiate. Before I interact I clearly arrange the things that are important to me, I lay them out and manage to communicate them well, that's why I do not want to be the radical guy who breaks things. Maybe this view also came with time and experience. If someone needs to shout out their ideas and be super radical with their conditions it's fine as well but somehow I grew calmer and do not want to approach projects with a sledgehammer any longer.

Daniel Zamarbide, born 1972, is an architect (IAUG, FAS-BSA) and an educator based between the Lake Lemman region (CH) and Lisbon (PT). His practice, the BUREAU, moves around places and disciplines, working on the many formats that architectural practice can offer. As an educator, he currently co-directs Dieter Dietz's ALICE lab at the EPFL and intervenes regularly at the HEAD (Geneva University of Art and Design) where he has been a professor for several years.