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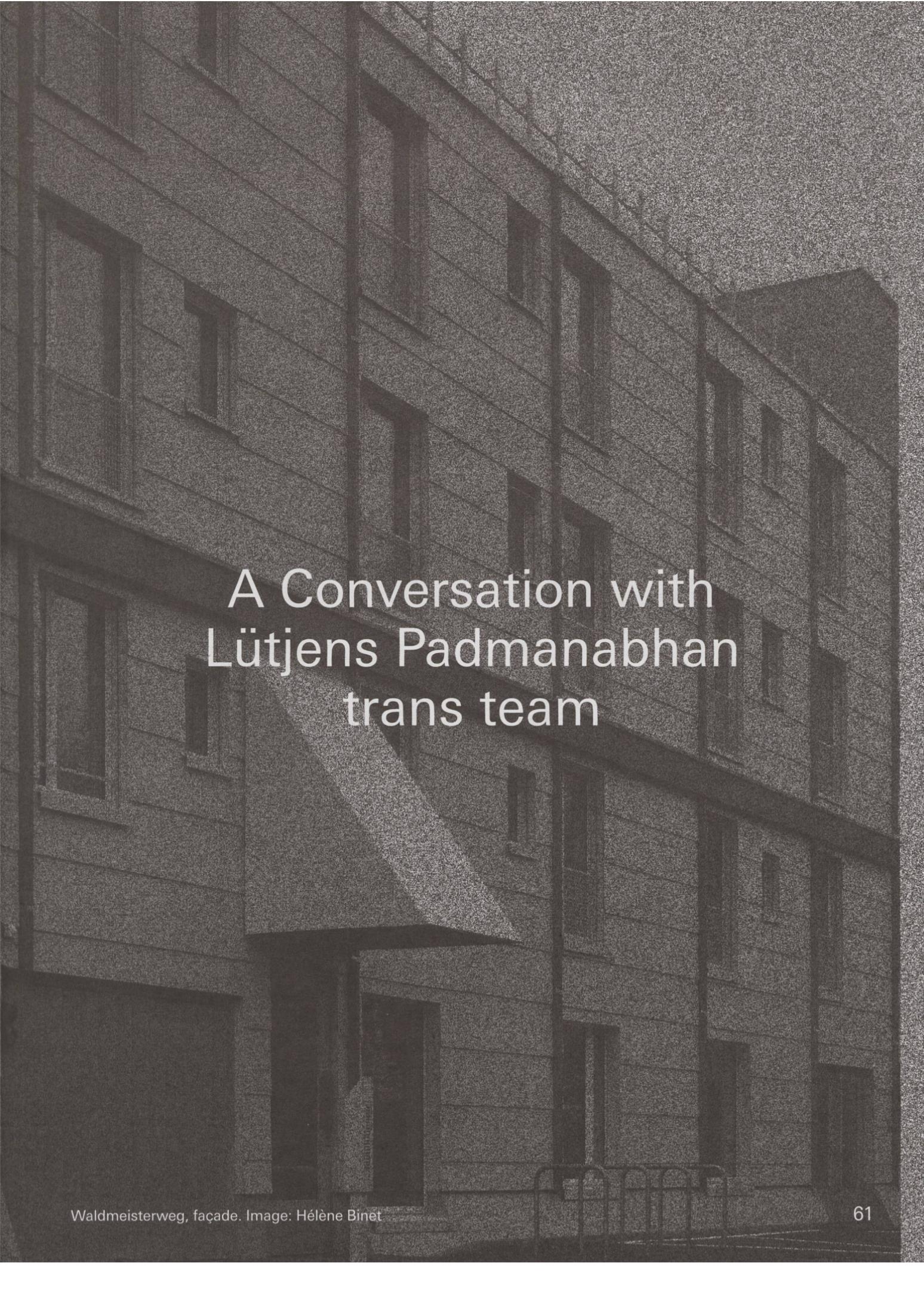
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A black and white photograph of a modern building facade. The building features a grid of windows and a prominent overhang. The text 'A Conversation with Lütjens Padmanabhan trans team' is overlaid in the center. At the bottom left, there is a caption: 'Waldmeisterweg, façade. Image: Hélène Binet'. At the bottom right, the page number '61' is visible.

A Conversation with
Lütjens Padmanabhan
trans team

Waldmeisterweg, façade. Image: Hélène Binet

61

It is a hot summer afternoon in Zurich. We find ourselves in a bustling office in the Binz, crowded with models, where we meet Oliver Lütjens and Thomas Padmanabhan. Over the next couple of hours, a soft breeze wafts across and accompanies the animated conversation about silent gestures, loud statements and going with the flow.

TT You established your office back in 2007. Where did you first meet and decide to work together?

OL We met in Basel working for Diener & Diener Architekten. I was leaving and Thomas was arriving to the office. After some time, there was a competition in Langstrasse for a small apartment building, and I really wanted to do it. So I called my friends at Diener & Diener and the only person picking up the phone was Thomas.

TP It was noon and everybody had already gone for lunch!

OL So, Thomas said: «Let's do it!» He suggested that only the two of us should go for it because we would already be complicated enough. We worked on this competition in the evenings and at weekends. In the end we were proud and happy with the result, although we didn't win.

TP We liked to work together and we enjoyed every minute of the process, especially the conversations. Shortly afterwards, we met in Basel and we formalised this collaboration. That's the story of the office!

TT Architecture can be loud, as an object, as a gesture or in teaching. Because architecture deals with politics, community, social space and form, architecture can allow others to be visible or silenced. Where do you position your practice between being silent and being loud in its gestures?

OL When I was a student, John Pawson gave a lecture at ETH. At that time, he created a book called «Minimum» that was about the essence of things. In the lecture he talked about an apartment he had for himself – white walls, no details, very abstract. When it was Christmas, they brought in the Christmas tree and it just didn't look good, it didn't work. The tree could not be in that space. You could say that his architecture is monastic and silent. In that sense, I would say the architecture of our practice is, on the contrary, quite articulate and loud.

TP Maybe our architecture is not loud but has a normal tone of conversation of everyday traffic. It is not a church, a temple or a house of worship. When we carry out a housing project, we have the «flat screen and plastic toys test». If you can put a gigantic flat screen and throw lots of plastic toys on the floor and the apartment still looks great, then it's good. It means that the apartment can integrate the normal world and everyday life.

OL For us it's about an architecture that is inclusive. That allows connections with almost everything and is not exclusive, in contrast to John Pawson's architecture, which even excluded a Christmas tree from a family home.

We have a lot of discussions about neutrality with clients, especially when talking about apartment buildings, because you don't know who the inhabitants will be. Usually, you would think we should make it neutral so it can be rented to anyone. Our architecture is the opposite of neutrality – it is very specific. We think about every detail, every colour, and we try to always maximise rather than minimise. And maybe that's why I think it's loud. However, as humans, we can handle a lot and we don't think we have to hold back.

TP We think that every human being is very competent. When you walk across the street, you digest so many impressions and things in such a confusing array of ideas and images. Why shouldn't architecture be like that? If you read a novel, you're not interested in the monolithic idea of the novel but get carried away by the richness of the texture that is being unfolded in front of you.

OL The interesting thing is that we discovered that the more articulate and less neutral the architecture is, the more it can connect to the most different kinds of things; whereas neutral architecture has difficulties in connecting to anything because it remains empty and dull.

TT Picking up what you said about relationships between architects and clients, for us this has to do with a balance of silence in decision-

making. In parallel, there is also the relation between a building and its surroundings. What is your position regarding this silent balance of relationships?

TP We don't think about the building in terms of being too loud or silent enough. In most cases we think that the context we are building could use some enrichment and a generous building. I am not talking about using marble in a project, but the care and the beauty of things when they are touched by a caring hand. For example, when you put a really nice flower in front of your door that anybody could smash with their feet you are telling the passers-by that you value them because we care. This is how we imagine that buildings could be generous to their surroundings.

OL We think more about the tone of the voice than silence. For us architecture is still a language – a language of form. When you speak, it is often the tone of the voice that is decisive on how something gets across or is heard. As Thomas said, we are not thinking about the marble because usually a project is located in a very mundane context, where the marble would be completely out of place. Or, we cannot construct a heavy building where all buildings are light. So we look for a lightness of construction instead of heaviness. These are the parts or realms where you can speak of high ambition and generosity instead of screaming over everybody else. To do this it demands a lot of attention to detail, because this is where you express most distinctly how a building is made or how it feels.

TP I think silence is actually really important because when you finish a building and it is out there it gains its own life. The reading of that building does not belong to us architects, but to the users, the everyday public and everybody who sees and uses it. At that point, the building falls back into silence. It is like when you don't want to look at architecture, you just pass by but don't notice it. Maybe you see it out of the corner of your eye and it has a texture. This is to say that there are many layers of perception of architecture. I think it is gratifying and makes us happy if our buildings can also play a quiet role out there. Of course, we also want to make buildings that will hold up to somebody who really scrutinises its architecture, on a par with or on the same level as great buildings. But the building can do several jobs at the same time. We both like architecture that is not exceptional at first sight but rather develops later through layers of perception.

TT What about silence and form from a societal point of view, regarding the question of what a building should do in the social and political context of a city?

TP We don't think of silence and articulation when we work on the buildings as something that you can regulate. We find it is a miracle when opposing elements can become a whole in a complex articulation. The human ability of combining seemingly contradictory forces into a unity is just fantastic. But we think that this is not necessarily leading to something that is loud. It can also whisper. The question is whether in the end it becomes a murmur or a cacophony of shouting people. We think in terms of enrichment, accumulation of things and ideas like a coral reef. Whether the result is silent or noisier, it really depends.

TT How are you speaking up with your architecture? For example, you mentioned that inclusivity is important to you and we think that is a very strong position that could be considered loud.

OL There is a loudness to it because it is a counter movement to what we experienced when we were students or young architects. It is a generational conflict as well, between former generations that we admire but we need and want to do something else.

TP What I find interesting about this conversation is that the history is returning. There is a slightly moralistic undertone and it seems that form making is pitched against a social or political issue. This is the old formalism claim – after constructivism they were called formalist, which meant that they were only dealing with form. I understand your question about form and richness and loudness in this context. I see a lot of student projects where there is a complete abandonment of actual form making and an increasing reliance on flexible structures, infrastructures like an ever changing organism that claims to be non-committal in form.

TT You are starting as lecturers at ETH this fall semester but have already a great experience in teaching. Going back first to your education, how was it for you as a student to feel heard or unheard during your architecture studies?

OL My best semester was with Hans Kollhoff at ETH. I rarely felt as well heard as in this semester. This was due to his capacity to observe and engage, and a very clear language with which we would work – it was like working with Hans' gloves. As a student, this freed me from thinking, how shall I do it? The interesting thing

is that we got incredibly far with the projects. I learned a lot about form and language, but mostly about ideas.

TP My experience as a student was very different. I was taught in Aachen in the 1990s, and there was a huge dominance of commercial, high tech, German architecture, which I abhorred from the first year. At that time, I could only connect to architectural history. There was this great scholar Jan Pieper who was a historian of architecture anthropology from the 70s who was implying these methodologies on architecture history. I had a complete retreat as a student into history. After Aachen I went to the U.S. and I had a great time because the intellectual life of the university was more ambitious. My education, my training was largely self-taught as a monastic wing of learning. I had to find my own sources and value system. History was for me a real idea of a counterculture to commercial superficiality at that time.

OL In comparison, our teaching is a very collaborative form of teaching the students. We are not neutral spectators who let the students develop the projects, who stand back and give little guidance. We rather try to engage with the work of the students and bring the project as far as possible together. As teachers we learn as much from the students as they learn from us. It is a dialogue.

TT Do you think there are topics that are silenced in architecture that should be brought into academia? How will your design studio reflect such topics?

OL We have been asked to teach housing – this was apparently something the students addressed as missing in ETH. In our practice we designed and launched many competitions on housing, but not because we thought this is our specialty, but only because it was what was available in competitions and projects. Nonetheless we realised that we not only value the floorplan but are interested in the urban context, in the expression of the building and every detail in the house. The more housing you do, the more you learn about the economics of housing: social and economic questions and problems like pushing people out of the city because you redevelop buildings and people cannot afford rents anymore. Housing projects also involve themes such as sustainability, reuse, technical innovation or low tech. All these topics interconnect in housing.

TP We architects can all agree on the goals of what we should be doing – building more

sustainably and for a society where people can afford housing at all ages and all situations of life. There is something about social justice and sustainability that have to be somehow combined. When you work on projects, you can arrive at a point where it really hurts to make choices which are very difficult. We don't know whether we will be able to simulate that struggle but we hope that we can reach this in our design studio at ETH. We want the students to be committal and make choices where somehow this struggle is simulated, opposed to having a project where you can add up all the things you wish for and it becomes a beautiful wish list. Designing is about killing your darlings. It is about making choices and overcoming fears of losing some things.

OL We think that architecture is providing a form of glue to bring all these things together. Only architecture can provide this glue between strangely not compatible things like sustainability, social constraints, costs, capitalism, urbanism and so on. This synthetic ability of the profession is what we are interested in. We want to teach not in a linear or analytical way but rather in an intuitive way, where the student's intuition is addressed, right at the beginning. Only after that, we step back and analyse, rationalise and dissect together what we have done. It is a lot about centering around the notions of immersion and intuition.

TP There is no fight for sustainability without science – we believe in science, but we are not the scientists. If you bring together social scientists and hard science, you are in a grey field where you don't know what you are doing. You have to commit to form – and that is the architect's field. Therefore architecture is an affirmative profession. Of course, you need analysis to do synthesis and you need criticality to be affirmative, but in the end, we construct buildings and they represent a status of power – money interests, politics and ideas – this is something we have to accept.

OL We try to teach with a complexity of ideas. But what is beautiful in teaching is that you have several projects next to each other and how they are all part of a big question. The studio should pose a big question and there are multiple-voiced answers. It is within this multiplicity that you will discover the communal themes.

TP When the first ideas arrive, we do not give the students a critical assessment of them in the sense of what is good and bad, but rather give them the best possible interpretation of what they have done. To be affirmative about what they have done and to underline that, in the

first three steps of the project, everything is good! From here the students get the confidence and joy of understanding the core idea of the project and what they have done intuitively. It is about a psychological process of unearthing the ideas that lie within.

This is very similar on how we work. In the beginning of a project we are very rational and we start with the most straightforward solution. We pursue the most generalised and not personal idea – kind of generic and almost too boring. When you then work on that really diligently, you begin to see problems and resistances and a character is slowly emerging from that neutral mass. From there, ideas suddenly emerge, they almost come out of the clay, it's really fascinating. You find the idea from inside that mass and you do not fight the form, you basically go with the flow.

- OL Sometimes there are incapacitations or discussions and all of a sudden you discover the real ideas within the project. We had cases where it happened on site, that the real character of the building or its soul – that instance of thought on which you can then base all subsequent decisions – came when we were discussing the colour of the staircase. It is never too late to discover the idea of a project.

Oliver Lütjens, born 1972 in Zurich, and Thomas Padmanabhan, born 1970 in Stuttgart, established Lütjens Padmanabhan Architects in 2007 in Zurich. The practice's recent work focuses on housing in the residential districts surrounding Zurich, Basel and Zug including the award-winning low rent Waldmeisterweg apartment building in Zurich and the Zwatt Sufficiency lighthouse project in Regensdorf. Further afield, they are currently working on the new residence of the Swiss ambassador in Algiers, the Unterfeld Energy Center in Zug, and the new residential development Göbli in Baar. Oliver and Thomas have taught as assistants at ETH Zurich, and as guest professors at TU München, EPF Lausanne and Harvard GSD. They are currently lecturers at ETH Zurich.