# FRANÇOIS CHARBONNET

## «Every word is a mask.»

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

transMagazin (tm): In trans22 we deal with the question of stance in architecture. Like the German word ‹Haltung›, ‹stance› refers to something very physical: the place where you stand. It literally means the way someone stands or a person's posture, but also figuratively means the attitude of a person towards something or a standpoint.

Is it important for your work as a practicing architect to frame a position, to take a stance?

François Charbonnet (fc): I think you definitely have to determine where you stand and that's one of the difficult moments – not only in architecture but also obviously in every field of action.

I recall one of Loos' fantastic intuitions in the Müller house. In the living room, there is not a single chair that is identical to the other. And this is of course done on purpose: everyone entering the room has to find his own seat and by doing so, one defines his position and his territory. That's a wonderful idea that reaches beyond the pure realm of built substance and engages in social issues. Something similar takes place when defining your stance as an architect.

tm: Regarding your practice as a professor first at EPF Lausanne and now at ETH Zurich, how do you interpret your role as a teacher? Do you see yourself as a role model for your students?

fc: I don't see myself as a role model; but one could extend the question to the notion of ‹model› itself: I don't think that we create models at all anymore. No one really knows where we are moving to, because there isn't any framing, not even what one might call a tendency. One can do anything. This really is a problem.

tm: You talk very much about ‹repertoire›, and you do your research within a certain frame of that repertoire. Is there a link between the idea of a repertoire and the idea of ‹common ground›? David Chipperfield brought up this issue of ‹common ground› at the Architecture Biennale in Venice. There are many architects who say there is no ‹common ground› any more.

fc: Well, I can only agree with that. There is hardly a ‹common ground› anymore. We architects simply do not have a project in common... Regrettably. But by saying that we work within a given repertoire, we are merely trying to be critical about the so-called necessity for novelty. And if one were to be completely frank, one must admit that this very rarely happens. It is not being moralistic, but simply lucid. And this does not imply necessarily to put forward preconceived ideas but to accept that needs do not evolve as quickly as architects would like to.

Let me take the analogy with any given language: one can create a new word to express an idea. This can even be in some cases necessary; but most of the time, one does not need to escape the existing vocabulary to formulate a new idea. Poets most evidently know that: it is the way they assemble words together that constitutes the statement, not the oddness of the terms themselves.

Something like this is at stake in architecture and it is very comforting and stimulating at the same time: one never starts from scratch. Jean-Luc Godard said something beautiful about that – I am paraphrasing: «It is not where you take things from – it is where you take them to.» This implies a pre-existing substance, which one is working with. We are all working within the continuum of history and this history should be looked upon as a tool to better understand our contemporary. And in no way should it be considered a limitation, but rather a catalytic moment: it is not because the vocabulary is given that nothing new can be said. Should we accept it, it would allow us to communicate in a much more intensive way.

I sometimes have the feeling that our condition as architects is that of the characters in L'Avventura by Michelangelo Antonioni: each one emitting a sound in a different direction without being able to specifically address anyone.

tm: Perhaps it's possible sometimes to create new words, but without a common language, it's impossible to communicate.

fc: ...and here is another fascinating thing about language: as Nietzsche said, «every word is a mask.» Beyond the accumulation of signs – letters put together to form a word – there is a whole a range of meaning and pertinence. Just like in architecture. A column is not just one column, it's a whole series of columns that address different issues: decorative, structural, secondary, primary... So each element, each part of the repertoire is a mask.

tm: You mentioned before the notion of ‹model›, that we ceased creating models. Would you also say that today's elite doesn't function as a role model anymore?

fc: Today's elite is not working at creating models but at promoting exceptions driven by an economy of attention. It is a very aristocratic principle and one of the agents of the explosion of the vocabulary that we can witness nowadays. And if everything is possible, nothing is possible, too. One has to be very critical about this aspect of our time for it has previously led to catastrophic consequences in history. And what is quite alarming is that even part of our educational system tends to focus on training soloists: and it's the whole orchestra that sounds out of tune.

For our concern, we want to consider architecture as a filter not only to comment on a certain state of the world but also and mainly to better understand it: we think that we can then – and only then – formulate an accurate answer to a given problematic. If you don't use it as a filter, you are reducing architecture to mere disciplinary virtuosity, which can be of course fascinating and sometimes necessary but is in fact very limitative.

tm: And how do you try to explain that to the students?

fc: We try to explain this to the students by reminding them that they are citizens before they are architects and as such they can have an influence on what is taking place by means of their expertise. We also insist on the necessity to become critical and not to accept everything a priori.

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tm: How do you see the role of the architect today? We recognize a deep frustration with many prominent Swiss architects, when you talk about how the situation of the building industry evolved within the last twenty years, with the emergence of investors and general contractors. What many architects fear is a decrease of quality and responsibility...

fc: ...the fading of responsibility seems to be a characteristic of our time or at least it has seldom been so evident – no need to recall what recently took place on the financial markets where no one really was held responsible for anything. One of the reasons for such a decline of the responsibility principle is the outrageous political deficit that we experience nowadays; not to mention that we are constantly facing structures and not decision makers anymore: think of the multiplication of administrative instances and of the amount of levels of authority... It is hard to feel responsible for anything anymore because one doesn't know where one stands within this arborescence. One reaction to the phenomenon is to engage in criticism again: criticism has nothing to do with the peremptory saying ‹this is right› or ‹this is wrong›; criticism is the beginning of articulation and allows, as mentioned before, to lucidly take position regarding an given problematic.

But to go back to this frustration you talk about, it seems that it stems out, partially at least, from the belief that architecture can influence the course of the world. And I really have a hard time to believe that. I don't mean to underestimate architecture, but the tendency is rather to overestimate its relevance.

tm: What about the emergence of labels, certificates and norms...

fc: Architecture – as many other fields - is under the assault of many pretenders and intermediary expertise and the authority of the architect – the one that stands between dialectics and constrain - is systematically questioned. The ability of architecture to specifically address issues not to mention to propose alternatives has considerably shrunk. The semester Airport/Prison [fall semester 2011, ETH Zurich, Ed.] partly stems out of such a consideration and aimed at virtually ‹reconquering› part of that authority. We stated a very simple fact: architecture as a performative act has – to say the least – a minor influence at organizing an airport; it has become a facility determined by a whole array of experts with the architect hardly being part of that process; it really has become an organism almost exclusively defined through schemes of contradictory and opportunistic flows. But these issues aren't really new and in fact were a central question for other kind of facilities in history, one of them being the prison. And in the case of confinement, architecture has been much more inventive than we are being nowadays when questioning the program of the airport. To use the typology of the prison as a filter proved to be very helpful in understanding what was at stake when designing such an infrastructure - although clearly stating that an airport is NOT a prison.

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tm: ...back to the issue of norms. The norms are a reality we have to deal with. But aren't there ways to avoid the norm? If you can trust one another, you don't necessarily need the norm as an intermediary.

fc: Norms are mostly soft laws based on empirical observation and ensure safeguards. But they are also feeding a series of corollary interests – mostly private – that have very little to do with actual needs. One could describe them as ‹mots d'ordre›. To guarantee the implementation of these norms, threats [legal action] and rewards [labeling and subsidies] act as incentives: this is a more general trend than just what we experience in the field of architecture. We live in a society of rewards and mots d'ordre. The value of work per se has become completely relative, as much as the principle of responsibility has. And yes, you are right – although one might think that it sounds slightly naive – one could solve most of the issues with simple trust and agreement. Do you know that Mies didn't want to hear about the railing in the Four Season? He always said to Philip Johnson, ‹I don't want to hear about this...›. They had to do it behind his back. Regrettably, the norm tends to define what you can't do rather than what you could do; as a result, many interventions seem nowadays unthinkable because of this general acceptance. The stairs leading to the Capitol in Rome would most definitely not take place today, not because it is architecturally inappropriate but because no insurance would ever back it up: it contradicts every norm; it is neither a stair nor a ramp and there isn't

any handrail to hold on to... Perhaps it has to have been drawn for horses as in the Scuderie del Quirinale, but everyone nevertheless accepts it as it is: a wonderful path to the Capitol... and I thank the doctrine of law for no legislation can be retroactively enacted!

tm: But still, some people think that the norm is the future.

fc: It has definitely become a fact that is hard to bypass. And I think that we as a profession have to be concerned about it. If most of our tools lie within written norms, do we need really architects anymore? ... I still strongly believe in a humanistic and nuanced approach: life can hardly be normative and is nothing but specificities.

tm: The EPF Lausanne organized a competition for three new pavilions within the campus, which was decided just a few weeks ago. The school asked for a music pavilion for the Montreux Jazz Festival, an exhibition pavilion and a reception pavilion to welcome guests and visitors. In your competition entry you presented an entire A0 sheet to explain your project, but also your general approach to a project. Do clients and other architects confront you with a lot of incomprehension? Is it important for you to explain yourself?

fc: I believe the client has to be educated and this is part of the criticism we mentioned earlier. Let's take the example of the competition on the EPFL campus. It is called ‹Espaces et pavillons sur la place Cosandey›. Reading through

the program, you realize they don't really know what a pavilion is. You can feel it was just convenient to call them that way because of the respective size of each building. But we felt we first had to question the brief by investigating the actual nature(s) of a pavilion in order to be able to provide the client with an appropriate answer. In other words, we were becoming critical. It has nothing to do with stating a superior position, it is about expertise. As an architect, one has to become obsessively skeptical. In this case, the client clearly doesn't know what a pavilion is or at least has a very limited understanding of it.

tm: In your work you often develop projects by questioning and interpreting the program. This implies a kind of research within the existing repertoire of architectural forms but also within the etymology of language. Is there a relationship between the etymology of the word ‹pavilion› and the pavilion as an architectural typology?

fc: As it turns out, a pavilion is more than just a small building. As an architectural artifact it is secondary. This implies that in order to be secondary, there must be a primary building to be identified – no need to insist on what the primary building on the EPFL Campus is. It is very important, because it is stating a hierarchy within the program itself and calls for a specific nature of the architectural answer. The pavilion therefore stands in a dependency to another building: that is its beauty, almost its essence.

We also realized that its domain is actually much larger than the limits of its own body: this helped us to question the limits of the given perimeter: that's for the architectural type itself… but a pavilion is more than just a building as the etymology of the words reveals it; it is a very specific part of a musical instrument, where the sound comes out of it: a pavilion is therefore also a transmitter. This does not sum it up yet: in medical terminology, the pavilion is also the outer part of the ear that acts as a receiver. And finally it is the banner that stands on top of masts stating which company and country a boat belongs to: it is therefore a sign. You see, thanks to etymology, one realizes that there is much more behind the term pavilion than just what is commonly accepted as a typology and it is this multiplicity that we want to engage with.

tm: And you didn't just choose one thing, one aspect for your design?

fc: No that was precisely the point: extend the program to all these notions. And that's what architecture can really do and how accurate it can be. We were merely stating that there is a given potential within the understanding of the word ‹pavilion› and it proved to work perfectly with the program itself: the Montreux Jazz Lab as a transmitter, an array of specific receivers as totemic elements scattered on the entire compound and the Welcome pavilion as a sign. And all of these interventions are of course more than just analogies: if one looks at the section of the Welcome pavilion, one understands that it is also

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an infrastructural facility defining an urban plaza in the back and an esplanade in the front. One does not just stand in it, but also goes through it: it therefore really acts as a gate.

In addition to that, the Art pavilion stands in what one might call the primary pavilion – an oxymoron in regard to what we said earlier – namely the Rolex Learning Centre. It made perfect sense to us to implement it in the largest courtyard of the Learning Center precisely for it really is architecture raised to the level of Art, but also because this part of the building reveals its own weaknesses as a performative entity: it is devoid of any substantial program. It was never thought as an ironic gesture but rather as a meaningful one allowing a broader perception of it. It of course also questions the iconic nature of such buildings: we think that one way to take the full measure of the quality of an architectural intervention is to confront it with a potentially invasive context and that by doing so you would disclose as a counter effect its capacity for resistance. We feel that signature architecture is too often kept in splendid isolation and as a result turned into autistic products.

The travelling of sound in the air finally ensures the link between all these elements: by staging a universal law rather than a derivative of science – technology – we prevented the inevitable future obsolescence of the system itself and addressed in a subversive way the politically correctness of sustainable development.

tm: In the first paragraph of your project presentation you focus on the pro-

ject as a process, not a product. In this sense you also illustrate it with highly composed photomontages, not realistic perspectives, calling for the imagination of the observer.

fc: It seems that we are nowadays experiencing a crisis in our ability not only to read but also to produce images. At the very root of this problem lie the means at our disposal to produce them: shared by an overwhelming majority of actors, they have led to a dramatic leveling: images have now become illustrations more than anything else. But if one looks at the history of representation, one is struck by the variety of means used to express an idea and how open and stimulating their reading can be. Illustrations offer no other possible reading than what they actually are trying to depict. This is so deceptive because it leaves no other course of action than chasing this given representation without allowing the project to fully develop before it turns into a built substance. You see – and this has been said many times before in history – architecture can only be a process and not a product and this is precisely what architects and their fetishism for the object are doing: turning architecture into a product.

Of course this is done with the secret allegiance to the client who can now see what he is paying for before it has even turned into a reality. As opposed to the illustration, the image has to be read and interpreted and consciously leaves certain questions unanswered but only on the level of its representation. The reason for this indetermination is that it does not aim at being loyal to a yet to

come reality; it is merely trying to underline the potential that lies within the orthogonal projection drawings. It is therefore a triggering moment in a project, not a conclusive one and calls for active memory, not for passive acceptance.

tm: What is your interpretation of the existing when you design a project? How do you deal with the existing?

fc: In the case of the competition for the new Beaux-Arts museum [MCBA Lausanne, competition, 2011, Ed.] we questioned not so much the authority of the Denkmalpflege, but the means used to preserve valuable substance: in most cases, the question of landmarks is addressed in a very pragmatic way, namely the preservation of that substance. But we think there are in certain cases other ways to tackle the problem. In Lausanne, the locomotive hall works as a fragment of the city as long as it is kept apart from the public domain; once integrated in the common urban tissue, it can only work as an obstacle. Moreover, its architectural qualities are dubious; not that it is a dramatic building per se, but it is pretty obvious that it does not deserve to be labeled a landmark. Yet, history speaks for it and it would have been irresponsible to erase all traces of such a project: we therefore decided to keep not the substance itself but its programmatic nature, namely the infrastructure. As a result, the entry proposes a ground floor exclusively dedicated to infrastructural functions and allows the preservation of what we considered to be the essential qualities of the existing. Such a process typically implies criticality and this is how we want to act as architects.

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