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CONVERSATION
WITH
KERSTEN GEERS
(OFFICE KGDVS)

Photograph: Bas Princen ©

We meet Kersten at a restaurant on the EPFL Campus on a blisteringly hot July day. He's there to see his students present their Master theses. As we discuss, the interview is routinely interrupted by the sound of clinking glasses and the waiter asking us for coffee. Kersten takes an espresso.

TM I want to talk a little about architectural representation, because at the ETH there's been a lot of discussion recently, regarding this. I was interested in the link between the collages that you make and the reality of your built projects. For example, Superstudio or Archizoom were making collages clearly based on theoretical projects that would never be built, whereas you often made collages linked to actual built projects. What part do the collages play in your creative process?

KG It's true that some projects we presented in these collages had the intention to be built, but I think some other projects kind of knew themselves that they would never be built. We knew from these projects that they would be merely suggestions of an idea. Part of this paper tradition that you just mentioned, whether it's Superstudio or Archizoom, are projects which know from day one when they are made that they somehow challenge reality. For us it was always important that there was very little difference between a project which we would present to be built, and a project which is only part of the virtual reality of a theory. I think collages have always been thought in the same way. There's no distinction between a hypothesis on paper and a hypothesis with the hope to arrive somewhere else.

These collages, we tend not to call them collages, but rather perspectives, because they are a bit collage-like, but they're made with a computer, so we do not claim any artisanal process. That process was never there, not even in our earliest collages. Made in the beginning by ourselves in a very controlled way, I think it's important to know that they are composed. In that sense, they are indeed different from what you can consider a representation of reality after pressing the button of a computer.

What is certain, though, is that we always make these perspectives because we wanted to reduce the amount of views of a project to an absolute minimum. We also wanted to reduce the space or the place where you make your decisions to the absolute minimum. By making only two views, you do not make the

entire three-dimensional model. If you think about computer renders, the typical thing you see in every office or practice is that, at a certain point, a complete 3D model is made. For us, these perspectives often come a little bit earlier in the process because they are where you describe and sketch the intentions. I think they somehow try to be part of the realm of the painting. It's a complete composed image, comparable in its ambition to a Renaissance painting. These were often iconic scenes, where a certain scene would be depicted with utmost precision, where the placement of figures in space all contribute to a narrative. I think it's exactly this which was, and still is, important for us today. These perspectives are a *mise-en-scène* of a wanted reality.

TM Would you say that the collage is a way of creating an abstraction of reality in which you can design freely, by reducing the complexity of actual reality? Almost like the creation of a temporary virtual space?

KG We draw a project in reality and somehow that reality changes. I mean, even the most perfectionist project changes according to the reality or the context. These perspectives are places where exactly this in all its abstraction is tested. However, they do not replace the model and they do not replace a plan, section or axonometric view. They are merely an aspect of that building or that project. What is important for us is that they are mostly eye height, and there is a desire to show things as they present themselves in a hypothetical reality.

TM If we were to discuss your floorplans, in some of your recent projects for the media—such as RTBF, VRT, Campus RTS Lausanne—you work a lot with these almost endless floor plans. It harkens back to this utopian vision of the megastructure. Do you think that the megastructure is still a relevant reality today?

KG I'm not sure if I would categorise it as a megastructure, because for me a megastructure has a lot of other connotations. I would not completely deny that this is partly present in these projects, but it was not the central interest.

I think there has always been this interest in the very big building, the building so big that you cannot ignore its presence. We thought that was an interesting problem, hence we invested a lot of semesters with the students exploring the Big Box, Architecture without Content, and the endless interior. The moment where you enter a building and there seems to be no end to that building. Likewise, I think it is also a consequence of our current reality where there's always less experienceable architecture. In a way, concepts like the No Stop City which looked extremely radical in the 60s, you could say as a slight provocation, are now realised concepts. This kind of overall modernity, where you have the same chairs and tables everywhere, just like where we are sitting now, every place looks exactly the same. It's a realised modernist project which perhaps doesn't look like an extreme rigid multiplication of the same thought, as imagined by say, Archizoom, but it is ultimately that; this kind of endless interior. If you look at current headquarters for Google or Facebook, these places are dystopian to the point that you are scared.

So in that sense, in these projects built for the media, we thought the endless interior was very interesting, with a building that at its core, deals with this ambiguous idea of reality. The media has also become something strange and virtual, which we barely understand. Its mode of production—filming, recording, broadcasting—changes constantly, which also changes the requirements to the building and rooms they use for this purpose. Basically the interior will be reshuffled every few years. So the question which was interesting for us, is that of a building which has no clue of how it will be used. So we asked ourselves: is it possible to make an amazingly big floor, that in any configuration of its contents maintains a minimum amount of quality? Can you organise a floorplan with all these boxes containing who-knows-what?

TM Something that interests me is the materiality of quite a few earlier projects—the Garden Pavilion at the Biennale, the Summer House or Weekend House—and the prevalence of steel. What is this fascination with steel as a material?

KG This fascination is still there, it didn't change. We don't have a theory in materials, but we both studied with Ábalos and Herreros, so the steel fascination comes from our masters. I would say they both are obsessed with American steel architecture. It's very much something from the architects of that generation, where it represented a desire to be modern. Perhaps it was more a desire from the 50s and the 60s than a contemporary desire,

but in these very successful works of Lacaton & Vassal you see that there is an attempt to connect back to that. I think part of what we connect with is this sort of extreme elegance. Of course, David [Van Severen] who is not here today, is an important factor in this. With David's father being a designer who was interested in materials and so forth, this probably played a role. It was part of our discourse in the beginning, gradually followed by this interest in Italian or Roman classicism, so it became confusing and mixed up. I dare say we would like to build Bramante but in steel, which is of course not possible, but it's exactly the fact that you have two opposite poles that makes the work come alive.

Perhaps through our collages that resemble Hockney or Ruscha, there's always been a big obsession with Los Angeles, a hedonistic light modernism. It's not very coherent, but it's part of it. So our work is this kind of narrative about what modernism would have liked to be, but how with our current obsessive ecology standards, it's no longer allowed to be. It's a dance between the hypothesis of modernist architecture and the acceptance that it's forever in conflict with reality.

TM It's almost like a forbidden fruit, somehow.

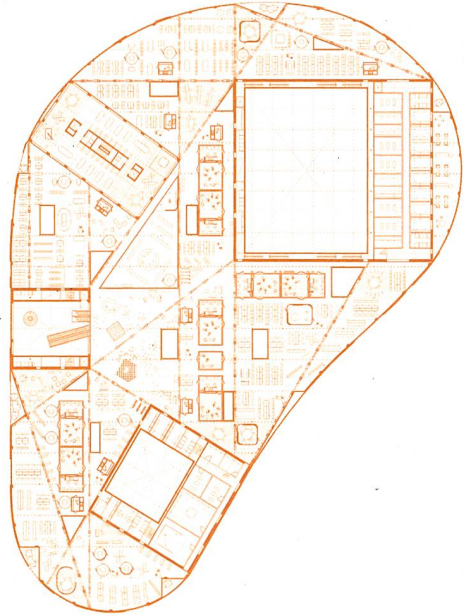
KG Yes, exactly. That's why I'm quite fascinated by the work of Lacaton & Vassal. They seem to make buildings which on the one hand present themselves as the most pragmatic answer, the most economical, within a given envelope of what's possible, but at the same time they use that argument to make an architecture which is extremely specific, very personal and very much a celebration of a kind of modernism that's almost impossible to build anymore. They play all these games, but also keep a certain economy of means to end up with a kind of poetry, which I think is very powerful. It's very odd, but for me it takes me back to these misgivings, in a sense, about the actual built architecture of Alison and Peter Smithson. It is architecture of which most of it did not age well and has turned out, at least when I look at them now, very dated. But they were very important, especially for us, in a possible idea of a 'dirty modernism'. A modernism which embraces reality, this reality 'as found' which is one of these statements that they played around with. It's not this desperate attempt to create the sublime. Maybe it's weird to hear this from my mouth, because our plans are maybe so reduced, that people tend to see it as a desire for the sublime. But it's a combination of putting everything under pressure and what results are extremely simple plans.

- TM The context of when you guys started the office is also interesting, because it was still in the context of the SuperDutch and now we also have the rise of what people call the Flemish movement.
- KG This is what people tend to say, but I have my doubts.
- TM In Switzerland there's a certain fascination with the Flemish movement at the moment, I'm just wondering why there is a sudden interest for this movement, whether Swiss architecture might have become too comfortable and craves this provocation from the Flemish?
- KG I find it difficult to judge the Swiss architecture in this debate, and to know why exactly the Swiss have a sudden interest in us. However, if I open it up and ask myself why in general there is an interest in this architecture, then I think it is architecture that was, and is, made with very little money. But with a lot of freedom of expression and I think that's quite rare. I think it has always been the attraction of Peter Märkli's work. Somehow I don't know if his buildings are expensive or cheap, you cannot say that as a foreigner, but they look a little basic. They play this game with leaving certain building methods visible or using a certain way of building to make the tectonic of the building.
- The way I read it is, when the clients are roughly the same age as the architects, the architecture produced represents a certain generation, because both the client and the architect are of that generation. My experience is that the movement, or something that looks like a movement from the outside, always happens exactly when these conditions are fulfilled. I think Swiss architecture was very powerful when the clients and the architects were roughly the same age. That's of course still the case, but this generation of clients and architects is now a little older. I think that also happened in Holland in the 90s, just as it has happened in the last 10 years in Flanders. Now we get somewhat bigger commissions because we are a little older, and the clients got a little older. Of course you also need writers who write about it. It's not just the clients and the architects, it's also the writers who are also roughly of the same generation, so the people who bring this to the world's attention often studied together with the architects. And then something is created which perhaps doesn't always really exist.
- TM In relation to the SuperDutch or the Flemish movement, do you feel a certain affinity with either movement? Do you think that either of them proposes a more relevant version of reality?
- KG My fascination was always with architects who managed to escape any movement. Maybe they were part of it, maybe they were even the ones who instigated a certain movement. If you look at Koolhaas, he was never part of the SuperDutch, although he was probably the one who created it by accident. In some sense, he never felt addressed when people talked to him about this and he also survived that because he had nothing to do with it. He was not so Dutch. He's a Dutch architect in Holland who has a very un-Dutch behaviour. Especially when compared to these offices that came in his wake, that are very Dutch, that embraced a certain means of production which Koolhaas never did. They had lots and lots of work in Rotterdam, and Koolhaas barely built anything in Holland in the 90s. He felt very left on the side. Venturi, for example, I've always been fascinated by Venturi and there's never really been any Venturi movement. This whole American movement say, the New York 5, it was happening in parallel to Venturi. And even Rossi, with his enormous influence, it did not make Rossi an Italian architect, in the sense that he built very few things in Italy, and perhaps some people confused his archaic figures with Italian figures, but that's a bit silly. Still, people are often superficial. For me, these figures are intriguing figures. I think if you as an architect or cultural producer need to depend on a wave that you're supposed to be part of, then I think you're already half dead. So I'm not part of it in any case, we're not part of it.
- TM Fair enough.
- I wanted to bring up the topic of Bahrain and the projects being developed there, this relationship to an unknown context, culture and construction industry.
- KG Yes, the construction industry there is very weird.
- TM Bahrain seems to be a location where other European architects such as Olgiati, Kerez and Holtrop are flocking to. I'm interested in whether these projects in Bahrain are an attempt to escape the heavy regulations of the construction industry in Europe; does it permit a certain kind of freedom?
- KG It was never an escape. At most, it is, and was, a fatamorgana, but in a positive sense. It all started, in our case, in 2010 when we won the Silver Lion and we got to know the people

A



B



C



A Pearl Route, Al Muharraq, BH
C Radio & Television Building (RTS), Lausanne, CH

B Radio & Television Building (RTS), Lausanne, CH

involved with the Bahrain Pavilion, namely Noura Al-Sayeh. She is a remarkable person, a very impressive person. I would say a talented enabler of architecture in such a very specific context. At that time, we did not really know about Bahrain, nothing about pearl fishermen, so it was all a discovery. When we were there, we were fascinated to learn that indeed the original houses had kind of a typical plan that we love to design; rooms around an empty core. Many of the projects in the Middle East at that time were very big, fancy, glamorous projects and this was very much the opposite. It was a small project, a heritage project. It was a moment to reflect upon heritage in a very different context, and it opened our eyes. It was amazing to think about what you would keep about a Bahraini traditional house. The points of reference are very different from here, where often it's about materials and tectonics, whereas there it's sort of an endlessly replastered kind of abstract construction. So what you keep is the type, and that was an amazing discovery. Instead of adding layers on top of the existing type, as we have accepted to do in Europe since say, Scarpa's interventions, you have to keep the existing type unscathed, so you build an addition next to it. Work-wise, in terms of the practical aspect, it's always been quite complicated. I think it's different for other architects who are living there, so there's another relationship with context and methods of production and construction. With us, it was a long-distance relationship with an Indian contractor who we were assigned through the ministry, but that worked quite well. I think that our architecture, being a Belgian economy of means, is very simple and I think survived the move very well. I do not think it was an escape, it was really asking yourself: if you were to apply the same thinking in Bahrain, what would happen? It was very fruitful.

TM How do you see the reality of the architectural profession today?

KG I'm a positive person, so I think that it is nonsense to pretend that today the situation is bad and that 30 years ago it was good and 50 years ago it was even better. If you look back at all these avant-gardes that we tend to teach ourselves about in history class, these avant-gardes were often run by five people who were totally unknown to anybody around them, until today. It's only the history courses that made them relevant and saved some buildings so that we visit them. Sadly it is so. I mean Le Corbusier made a few big slab buildings—his Unités [d'Habitation]—and the world makes probably 1 million other slab buildings, which are deemed irrelevant. I think the reality in

which we operate as architects today is very comparable to any other reality in the past and that the cultural profession of architecture—because it's not just building buildings—will always be marginal. It will only influence the actual world to a certain degree.

TM Which aspects of today's reality do you expect to change in the future?

KG There's the strange fact of technology, and by strange, I mean that we think that technology has technological results. But my feeling about it has always been, that the more technology we have, the more architecture becomes basic and similar to what it was before technology arrived. What used to be connected to big computers and mainframes and cabling, now it's just an iPhone. I don't need a laptop, at home I don't have a computer room, I don't even have a study room. I probably won't have a library anymore soon. So in a way, a house is still a house like it was. Much more than it was 30 years ago, so that's amazing.

Perhaps as an architect we have an amazing role to play in this totally distracted world where the now, the «forever now», has no past and no present. I think we are guardians of the past and we're definers of the future because these are the two concepts which are really disappearing. People endlessly check their phones, so there's no future and no past. The weather app on the iPhone is a good example: you can see the weather tomorrow afternoon for Lausanne. Then when you arrive in Lausanne, they've changed the weather for this afternoon. It's nonsense—there's no expertise anymore. And there's no accumulation of knowledge. I think that's what we, as architects, have to do. That sounds almost conservative, but I don't think it is.

TM Would you say that you actively deal with the theme of reality in your work?

KG Of course, you have to. You're a citizen of the world, you're here today. Everything is about reality. But I think for your generation, I would like to ask the same question in the other direction. How do you deal with reality? It's crazy. It's so stressful. Nothing is certain. I'd like to think that architecture is a place where you can produce calm. And if we manage that, I think we are already extremely successful.

OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen was established in 2002 by Kersten Geers and David Van Severen, and has been based in Brussels since 2006.

Kersten Geers, born 1975, has been a tutor and lecturer at the University of Ghent, The Berlage, Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Columbia University, Yale School of Architecture and Harvard Graduate School of Design. He is currently Associate Professor at the EPFL, Lausanne. The results of his academic activity are bundled under the moniker «Architecture without Content». He is a founding member of the architecture magazine, San Rocco.

David Van Severen, born 1978, has been a tutor and lecturer at the University of Ghent, The Berlage and Harvard Graduate School of Design, and a guest critic at TU Delft, the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, Yale School of Architecture and ENSAV (École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles). As OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, they have completed a multitude of projects ranging from furniture to urban design.