THE PRODUCTION OF ARCHITECTURAL SPACE—A CONVERSATION

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I know your way of working from several occasions and find it interesting how two very different personalities approach a project. Is it possible to say that the greater the differences are between the two, the greater the possible span and depth of the project definition?

The differences between us are interesting and productive only with regard to our common ground. Our work techniques, which we have developed from a personal friendship, are very discursive and rest on a constant dialogue about the overall questions and goals we want to develop.

I believe that architecture, per se, is a dialogue-based discipline, always, for everyone, in contrast to art. Cooperation in our case means that appreciable parts of this dialogue also appear within our collaboration and at an eye-level. That is not a "better" or conclusive model, but a personal one that at some time or another generates processes that become indispensable: you notice that you split yourself up in a certain way.

One could see your basic attitude and your way of working things out together as a dialectic crossing—that is, seeing projects from the one side as well as the other. The other is at a particular equidistance to you and the initial position. Doesn't this antagonism amount to an aestheticizing of the procedural element?

I believe that every creative achievement, at its core, gives form to the resistance that opposes it. Over the course of time, however, I've become increasingly mistrustful of an architecture that displays this antagonism, aestheticizes it. I think that architecture that really moves me has shaken off the traces of this process to find itself in its form and structure. The history of its genesis is, indeed, written in this "elegant solution," but the design loses its character as a brash commentary on its own formation. Or to put it differently, working on the design also reveals a conspiratorial streak in the end.

To what extent does your work with students affect your own work in the office? Do the large-scale analyses done in the Studio Basel or the results of the constructive design at the ETH lead to a broader range of knowledge?

I quite intentionally keep the work of the Studio Basel at a calculated distance and thereby in constant friction with the work of the office. The Studio Basel is a type of intellectual topography, an artificial space of reflection, which, in the view of the office, is visible only as a contour. Only one single project (p.484, N° 097) was occupied directly with this interface, as a type of short circuit. That was very informative, but not generally applicable. After all, a novel isn't written to verify the hermeneutics.

I agree with Marcel about the calculated distance, yet what does this distance create? The work at the ETH forces a focus on a theoretical practice, in which the ability to generalize and to maintain analytical distance are decisive—in contrast to the groping movements in the design and building process—but it hardly make us better designers.

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One of your strengths and liabilities is the reinterpretation of the task, that is, the (re)definition of the project. Regardless of whether it is for a competition or a direct commission, you twist and turn the thing long enough until it obviously comes to rest "beautifully" for you, so that you can get down to work.

Actually, for us, the key moment in design isn't really the "idea" and it's certainly not the sketch, but the "invention of the task" behind the commission. It is the moment in which a functional, technical, or urban planning question begins to take on architectural qualities, not as form, but more so as provocation toward form. It is a precise moment in which the working field is abruptly charged and changes its aggregate state. Even before the sketch of the plan, the question itself takes on architectonic or architectural characteristics. When we pulled out the old projects again for this book, they proved (or didn't prove) their vitality more through this potential behind the initial question than through their form.

As a rule, you subject yourselves to an obsessive work process that pushes the envelope. How normal or crazy is your work situation?

For me, making architecture is always tied to the experience of being exposed, perhaps in contrast to certain intellectuals or other professional activities in which a distance between the self and the task must be kept from the start. The difficulty, however, comprises the constant change between a relaxed concentration and the increasingly necessary defense of one's own sphere of action. In our common work, Hermann Czech often pursued functional concerns with an obsession that didn't stop even at formal quirkiness, and which could hardly be influenced from outside. Yet precisely in this obsession, I see quality, because it also contains persistence. This is becoming ever more of a prerequisite for our work, as current processes for realization require, in addition to artifice, mobility, and assertiveness, also a high degree of certainty with regard to the solutions one has worked out.

One could also say that this excessive immersion in work is really desirable because it is there that the work on architecture first takes on features of autonomy.

To what extent do collective values play a role for you? Did something go wrong in the boundless addiction to that which is subjective and simultaneously popular?

When one grows up with *L'architettura della città,* then this idea of "city" as a metaphor of the collective has practically dissolved in thirty years. But in reverse, I also do not want to return to a romantic Rationalism; society's understanding of architecture would be entirely different today. First of all, one has to ask what and who actually went wrong, or what it would mean today for it to be "not wrong." I believe that the visual ecstasy of brand name architecture can be understood against the backdrop of the "non-place" of the global production of cities. This has, for its part, achieved a new quality: the method with which investors realize their colossal

programs are becoming increasingly similar and interchangeable throughout the world. This redundancy is countered in certain markets by the competition between firms or cities for recognizability of branded sponsor architecture. I believe that under these conditions, conjuring up the "collective" as an option has become a very diffuse hope. What is the collective? ipods? Mass dropout to Bali? The antagonist of globalization is probably not the collective, but rather, the specific. Through this opposition, the suitability of conceptual models for globalization behind medial architecture is criticized rather than the subjective irresponsibility of the architecture itself. Global networking, too, will constantly bring forth new forms of differences.

Does the securing of one's existence precede a cultural essence, as Sartre claimed, or does existence equal essence in the sense of Camus?

Architecture arguably involves—different from art and different from other non-artistic professions—a feature that lends a context to this titanic question: the architectural commission. This externally given task, whose character is little discussed in architecture, is not some unavoidable evil or another, but rather, an essential, dialectical element of our discipline, which touches on the innermost core of our work. To that extent, even where it is entirely self-contained, architecture contains the cultural as well as existential components in a form that can't be disentangled—long before we let ourselves be appointed heroes of cultural heritage or discredited as prostitutes of the market.

What roles do categories such as ethics, aesthetics, and coincidence play in your work? What relation could these roles have to one another?

That seems to me to be a question that would be better for you to ask of yourself since we do not cultivate a productive way of dealing with chance to the same extent as you do. It probably also wouldn't suit us. I assume that you presume such an ethic of chance, don't you?

One arrives at chance, which requires the freedom of the possible, by moving from ethics—which poses the questions of the greatest good, right behavior, and ultimately the freedom of will—through aesthetics (as the theory of sensorial knowledge, which demands freedom of appearance). All three concepts represent not only the boundless freedom of human action; they also show its mutually effective relativity. Interesting here, along with chance as a mathematical calculation, is, foremost, chance as a possibility for design. The experiences gained by chance in the process of design and realization present an additional potential for the work of architectural realization. The actual design act is the decision of whether, how, and when such results of experience are implemented. Moreover, there is the possibility to make something appear random, in order to depict a creative difference to the surrounding framework. The "ethic of chance," to get back to your concept, leads us to the indubitable intention of integrating that which already exists or was originally not intended, as required, into the

aims of the design. Other than a few exceptions, which are accumulating lately, your main area of work in the past several years has been Switzerland. To what extent is Switzerland, with its traditions, a chance or a burden?

One could now say that the concreteness, the objectivity, or the way of speaking about things or not speaking about them, even the peculiar temporal rhythm of the land precipitates in our projects. It is likely that heritage is something that ensconces itself in a person rather than something that one has sovereign access to. It is not the country as a circumstance of the work, but rather "the Switzerland in us" that shapes the work. And a conversation about that would quickly take on autoanalytical traits.

What effects do these other project locations at culturally quite diverse places in Styria (p. 144), Munich (p. 404), Bremen (p. 420), Vienna (p. 296), Paris (p. 388), and Milan (p. 374) have on your works?

The different relationships between the design and the realization have had more of an impact than a general "foreignness" with regard to other cultures. Moreover, investor architecture is often much more aggressive and it follows, in part, quite trivial branding strategies. After all, budgets are significantly smaller everywhere else other than Switzerland. All of that changes the speed, the compulsion for risky architectural positions, and the focus on main questions.

Nonetheless, what was truly amazing to me was how foreign the work field is in Munich already. We use the same instruments, watch the same TV programs, and are informed on the peculiarities of Bavarian politics. Yet as soon as I look at the architecture with people there, what we have in common proves to be quite superficial. This uncertainty is actually exciting and distinguishes these works fundamentally from local production. I believe that our future will look precisely the same: cocooning under a global blanket of bad English, international share prices, high-strung travel, and worldwide information in flash formats are ruptures and differences that evolve into new differences, even in the smallest spaces. These differences play a role in our designs.

Your buildings and projects often appear quite enigmatic to many who view them.

There are actually no enigmatic strategies: instead, perhaps, an instinctive movement to avoid the temptation of fast perception. Probably also contributing to the confusion is that so little repeats in our works, which I sometimes consider a weakness. The buildings thereby don't help in mutually decoding one another. The projects are like individual equations whose superior parameters are not immediately visible.

Even with all of the differences in your works, your interest in the unspectacular, everyday, banal, and unpretentious seems consistent. Might that be a subversive technique?

Right at the start, there was something amounting to a theoretical interest in normality. We sought the reliability of a language that defended the collective dimension of culture against a late modernity that had become exquisite and private. This aim was lost in the transformation of a 1980s culture that had begun to radically rethink normality.

The interest in the unspectacular probably survived in shades: for us, the category of commonness is less of a theoretical framework today, and instead, an almost subjective architectural category with which we deliberately simplify our fields of design, protect them to a certain extent from the noise of form. I also believe that your work and our work touch on this issue, whereby your desire for provocation in "lower spheres" is much more pronounced.

Although you sometimes have renderings produced, one gets the feeling that you don't take them seriously, or they don't take themselves seriously.

I can only hope that you mean those drawings that we actually didn't take seriously … Computer drawings are often a problem for us, sometimes a nuisance. Renderings shift the debate about the project to where the new type of client wants the architect, as "manager of the visual brand." Visualizations as a whole have extended the peculiar medial cynicism into design work, because these images hide below them everything hypothetical in a design: a purely rhetorical setting in terms of external communication.

For us, models and model photographs have remained the decisive media until today: initially because the degree of abstraction in the model much more clearly reflects the respective state of contemplation; then, naturally, because of the material three-dimensionality, and because the model always retains its provisional character as a sketch. And photographs of models are capable of capturing light in a way that until now cannot be reproduced on a computer. Sometimes we slightly manipulate these photos, which we enjoy, but the pictures always have the status of being artificial. To put it bluntly, only in the exceptional case are we able to express or expand our architectural ideas through the medium of rendering.

The dictate of "lifestyle" attempts to make people what they aren't, wants them to transform in accordance with a contemporary lifestyle image. How close to the spirit of the era, the zeitgeist, does architecture have to be?

It is probably not possible to imagine an architecture that is not "in the spirit of the era." We do, after all, claim to produce our architecture from this era. But a privilege of the current intellectual disorganization is that the question of how architecture works out "the present" is left entirely open and is even a topic in the design: Zeitgeist is everything, somehow … .

The media in which architectural lifestyle is synchronized are clearly one of these realities nowadays. The fact that we retreat from this synchronization through our interest in the specific, the concrete

site, the state of a culture, the use of architecture, and its material concreteness, does not have solely theoretical or even ethical reasons. It is practically an unconscious disposition in which provocation, burdening, helplessness, and pleasure fold together before the backdrop of a single premonition: The conceptual category of difference is most likely essentially more instructive than that of "generic."

So-called author architecture attends to certain qualities, such as egocentrism, anti-contextualization, and an overstrained emphasis on the subjective "signature." On the one hand, as architects you are beyond this spectacle; yet, on the other, you also do not explicitly comment on it.

Actually, I found this author architecture unmoving right from the start; neither the special nature, the difference, nor the hidden element is at the forefront, but instead, repetition is the recognizable gesture. The actual process, which noticeably revolves constantly around discovered architectural questions, has a great tradition in architecture. But that is not what is at issue with these signatures.

Yet one has to concede something in this: several of the stars have an exceptional talent for using the inclination to personify culture in an exciting way. That, too, is the present. Not everyone who refuses it could "actually" do it. And none of the stars that I know are without an impressive, substantial background. But without a doubt, the theatrics of this métier tends to defuse its substance, always.

In several projects you thoroughly enjoyed working together with other artists and architects. This trait, which is rare in architects and that I likewise share, must be obvious to you, as well as appealing.

I would have to contradict you there. We work rather rarely with artists and at a few sites the collaboration arose simply from the rather difficult process of Art and Architecture competitions. Naturally, that does not mean that we do not highly value such contacts. But perhaps we aren't always capable of such heights, such as the Centre for Global Dialogue with Günther Förg (p. 234). The amazing thing about it was his forays into the unimaginable, far from what was repeatable or an appropriation by the architecture industry. In contrast, it becomes ritualistic and boring when it's no longer possible to develop a color concept in architecture without artists.

In the projects Rüegg House (p. 160), Centre for Global Dialogue Rüschlikon (p. 234), and Villa on Lake Zurich (p. 270) you made great efforts to show the physical qualities of certain materials. Did that have to do with—since this was heavily emphasized—heroizing a material's use value? Is the aim to install the hegemony of a sculptural, space forming construction in its most elemental form?

This intention of using the material in its "pure" form and working on the load-bearing structure long enough until it physically grasps the spatial body definitely arose from this interest

of gaining back the sublime in architecture. The fascination with the mightiness of huge stone ashlars joined with an examination of regaining this alienated material for parts of the load-bearing structure in a contemporary way.

For the Hotel Park Hyatt, the solid, space-forming construction was seemingly inserted to counter the ephemeral, space-breaking, illusory form of hotel architecture. Was this subversive act the attempt to "permanently" condition certain building parts in order to avoid the primacy of the apparently unavoidable equipment-aesthetic of common contemporary hotel furnishings?

No, one cannot escape the pretentiousness of this surface; the "last centimeter" used by American interior designers to set this mood is naturally also applied to concrete walls. The space-forming, load-bearing structure determines merely the spatial structure, important dimensions, and the light. Through these traits we wanted to inscribe a "perceptual skeleton," a spatial rhythm which could not possibly be clouded by the material sample collection from Atlanta. Today I'm no longer so sure. A space such as the restaurant, which could have been one of the most beautiful restaurant spaces in Zurich, has been conquered by the décor. Most likely, in the perception of spaces there is no real hierarchy of primary and secondary parts; the various forms of perception sink, as it were, in one another.

Today, more so than ever, building takes place in a huge tension-field of diverging interests, probably because it is involved with a lot of money and influence. In addition to the clients, there are the banks, the authorities, the general contractors and executing firms, controllers, etc., who all cut off a piece of the commission cake. To what extent has building now become more crisis management than a reference to pure theory?

Building was always commission, and the "pure theory" of architecture always included this in its concept. What actually puts the relationship to the client in a type of permanent institutional crisis can be identified rather easily. First of all, it is the intention of development and interim investors, which completely separates the design from use and subjects it to diffuse speculation about polyvalence: a building with uncertain usage has to comply with everything and nothing; and second, it is the division of the creative and the technical-constructive side of planning among different responsible bodies. In a work process separated into countless partial competences, controls, and delegated responsibilities, this is extremely likely to lead to conflict. Regardless of which meeting we're at, basically, we no longer meet anyone who is personally truly responsible.

Space is a historically and culturally conditioned concept and therefore not an absolute measure. Nonetheless, for us as architects, isn't it the only possible primary medium of reflection?

I think that space is, at least, the only level of reflection in architecture that it can claim for itself exclusively. In this respect, space actually represents our central medium of reflection, although not the only

possible one. Architecture shares all other levels of expression with other disciplines. For light, material, even sculptural composition, the architectural sources commonly lie outside of the discipline. Contaminations take place in both directions: and the blurry borders of architecture are also intellectually quite stimulating. That isn't the case with space. The fact that the arrangement of space is specific to a time and a culture does not contradict its theory-constituting character. The language within which intellectual activity is realized is just as chained to time. Yet what challenges this medium of reflection in a paradoxical way is that space cannot even be simulated because its perception is always bound to the physical presence of the observer. That fosters not only the theoretical, but also the practical exclusivity of space as an architectural means of reflection: architects are ultimately those who can actually imagine this non-representable space.

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