

ARCHITECTURE

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Architecture As Method Off-Architecture

When the magazine *archplus* - in its two issues on off-architecture in October 2003, *archplus 166 Scenes* and *archplus 167 Networks* - made an attempt to launch a debate on the new self-conception of a young generation of architects, the focus was deliberately placed on the situation in Germany. For the state of development of this generation can best be described against the background of the specific structural problems in Germany after more than a decade of slow business in building and with a surplus of graduate architects like nowhere else in the world.

The proposed notion of 'off-architecture' expressly suggests an expanded architectural practice that sees in the deplorable economic situation, which can neither be denied nor played down, the kind of freedom which, in the well-known words of Spinoza, is an 'insight into necessity'.



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Architecture as Method

Ever since the beginnings of modernism, architects have strived over and again to break free from the limits of architecture, which they felt were oppressively narrow. Rhetorically at least, recurrent attempts were made to expand the notion of architecture - in terms of color, form, function etc. However, what strikes us as most radical about this today are not formal expressionist gestures like those by Poelzig or Höger et al., but rather the sober and programmatic concepts for rationalizing architecture. And most radical in this respect was Hannes Meyer

in his manifesto 'bauen' of 1928: 'building is just organization: social, technical, economic, psychological organization.' The dictum was generally criticized as an objectivist reduction of architecture although, quite on the contrary, this program for the "organization of life processes" is the most comprehensive definition of architecture conceivable - even if this fact may be somewhat obscured by the use of the adverb 'just'. And although this turn is still associated with the verb 'build', it clearly points in the direction that architectural practice seems to be taking today after so many isms and salvation promises in the 20th century. 'Social, technical, economic, psychological organization' has an enormously political implication and does not necessarily have to result in a built object. Rather, the issue today would be to expand, and apply, 'architectural thinking' (Rem Koolhaas) itself, or 'architecture as method', to new and different fields of activity. To be sure, the point here is not the sub-cultural posture of being on the off side of things as the result of an economic plight, but rather the active expansion of the architect's field of activity, which, though, may well have been prompted by that plight.

The emergence of a more communicative notion of architecture could be exemplified by the development of OMA/AMO. No other contemporary architectural office has ever practiced this with more consistency or success, with the second half of the palindrome, AMO offering precisely this 'architectural thinking', the architectural

method, as a service: from management to political consulting, to fashion shows and so forth. The point is to conceive the office as a research institution which, using a specifically architectural approach, works in the forefront of contemporary culture. Nevertheless, OMA is now building more than ever. It is significant here that AMO is a genuine 'expansion' and not just a makeshift solution, as described by Bill Millard in his article in the upcoming *archplus* 173 OMAMO. Equally significant is the fact that this expansion coincided with the cancellation of the Universal Headquarters project, which was of considerable importance for the office in the late 1990s. It might not be pure coincidence that Spinoza and Koolhaas are both Dutch. As mentioned before, true freedom can, according to Spinoza, only derive from an 'insight into necessity' - and such insight can indeed be a painful experience.

Off-Architecture

The two *archplus* issues mentioned above made the case that the young generation has in fact already taken to this practice - consciously or unconsciously - without, however, having specified it as regards content and methodology. Far too often, this practice is defined *ex negativo*, as an unfortunate consequence of the economic situation: 'We want to be on, not off!' was a recurrent response. Off-architecture tries to reverse that argument so as to indicate a perspective. Understandably, there is much anxiety about the whole situation, and there are only few who consistently face

up to the necessary changes. One thing, however, is clear: the nonchalance of simply going on discussing about styles andisms, about 'real architecture', as makes itself felt in Jan Tabor's comment for the Czech section of *Wonderland*, seems long obsolete to the young generation facing these changes.

Off-architecture also means the chance of realizing the claim, reasserted time and again over the last century, of a social and political architectural practice - "to explore the possibility of applying architectural thinking in its pure form - liberated from the need for realization." (Koolhaas) For the excessive building boom of the post-war era all too often reduced modernism to a mere 'aid for modernization', as Nikolaus Kuhnert put it in the editorial of the *Off-architecture* issues. It would be essential not to let one's own intellectual and creative work be reduced to the built object, the architectural product.

What does this argument mean for the teams presented here, what are the positions they take? Some of them were already presented in the 'off debate' and published in *archplus* 166/167: BeL, *blauraum* architekten, no w here, *osa*, Peanutz Architekten, *urbikon*, *ü.NN*. The others could have easily been included as well: *blacklines*, *complizen* Planungs-büro, *jomad*, Mr. Fung. What they all have in common is a widened awareness of challenges; the idea of getting beyond the built object which nevertheless is a basic part of their repertoire. The emphasis here is on 'basic', which means that they cannot be reduced to being non-builders, as is also evidenced by the selection

for the exhibition. Still, their main focus is on the (critical) confrontation with contemporary culture, as is explicitly stated by BeL. In a provocative manifesto, which was published in *archplus* 166, they argued on this matter and also gave a demonstration of their polemical talent; an essential ability for living up, and pushing ahead the debate which has become pretty rare these days.

Another thing they have in common is their working structure and method: 'Off-architecture indicates a new type of network culture. From Hamburg to Leipzig, from Cologne to Berlin, more and more groups are joining together, describing themselves, in most cases, as "loose collaborations"'. At the same time, local scenes are beginning to emerge in the cities. A critical mass of architects exchange ideas, go public, work in networks.' This characterization from the editorial of *archplus* 166 holds particularly true of *osa* and *blauraum*, but also applies to many other teams. Thus, for example, Mr. Fung describe themselves as a team that consciously trespasses the boundaries of the profession, cultivating a view from outside. The very name Mr. Fung is a playful allusion to pop culture: it sounds rather like a music label than like a serious planning office. The threshold for a non-professional public is deliberately kept low. The merchandising of Mr. Fung T-shirts on their homepage is also playing with the mechanisms of the pop business.

Another example: the international origins of *blacklines* in Europe and Africa have sensitized them to global thinking. Thus, in one of their projects, they address the

problem of water shortage, one of the most pressing unresolved natural-resource questions of the future. To implement their pragmatic and poetical approach, *blacklines* work together with the renowned Fraunhofer Institute.

The other teams, which cannot all be mentioned here, work on a similar basis, but each has chosen their own focal activities and themes. One of the main themes of this generation apparently is the confrontation with existing architectural urban structures. The question of the potentiality of the city, of the city as a way of living, is addressed in pragmatic, rather than academic, terms. Answers to that question lead to 'situational practices' (Wilfried Kühn, *archplus* 167), as can be found, for example, in the interim-use concepts proposed by several of these groups. (On this subject cf. the editorial of *archplus* 166, and Nikolaus Kuhnert, *Off-Architektur*, in *Archilab* 2004, *The Naked City*, Orléans)

The Fat Years are Over

'At first sight, however, the open structure of these networks is only the crisis management of miserable economic conditions. The architectural job situation and economic prospects hardly allow long-term commitments, let alone a permanent office address. These groups make a living by doing bread-and-butter jobs. One does odd jobs here and there, the other holds a university post, and the third one writes his doctoral dissertation.' (*archplus* 166) Given this state of affairs, can one still have a clear conscience to proclaim an 'off-architecture'? Isn't this just whistling in the dark for mutual reassurance?

Certainly, the situation holds a great danger of self-marginalization. We should nevertheless be aware that the

'fat years' are over and will not come back again. Instead of succumbing to the typical German depression, we should try to realize our possibilities and stake out our claims: there is no lack of spirit, creativity, dedication, and intelligence.

However, what is necessary and what the example of AMO shows is that 'architecture as method' is not just a perspective for large offices, but can be found, if in nuce, in the practices of many of the smaller offices presented here. This is what puts these practices 'on' and could get them off the economic offside. Small beginnings can be seen everywhere, but what it takes is conscious reflection and specificity. In the view of *archplus*, this might be a perspective to overcome the frequent theoretical blindness and to find one's own position. Offices should be seen as laboratories, as research stations for the development of 'architecture as method'.

Office plus, Design plus, Architecture plus

This is perhaps the first generation that sees in the notions of consumerism and media no longer mere catchphrases, but has developed an adequate understanding of them so as to come up with adequate responses - and not just images again - for the mass society.

'A generational change is beginning to emerge. First and foremost, it makes itself felt in the question of the professional profile and of how to address the communicative needs of mass societies. The issue in question here is nothing less than the professional prospect of architects: will the architect evolve towards being a communicator and mediator so as to meet the communication

needs of highly developed mass societies, or alternatively will he remain the same old generalist as ever who just withdraws a little further into his shell in the face of these developments? The matter of communicative competence is the first decisive turning-point:

Communicative competence starts on a small scale. The office is no longer the classic office. The office is an exhibition space, a discussion platform, a bar. Office plus.

It continues in design. Design is no longer classic design. Design is communicative, situational, and temporary. Design plus.

And it does not end with architecture. Architecture is no longer classic architecture. Architecture is communicative architecture: Architecture plus. *archplus*.

This 'plus' factor opens up perspectives. How to realize them will be the task of forthcoming debates and practices.' (*archplus* 166)

- Anh-Linh Ngo

The article quotes from the editorial of *archplus* 166 by Nikolaus Kuhnert and Susanne Schindler: *Off-Architektur*, p. 14 ff.; *archplus* 166 and 167, *Off-Architektur* 1 und 2, Szenen und Netzwerke, October 2003.