Interview with Dietmar Ebene

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Beginnings and influences

How did you become an architect? It has been said that the craft tradition in your Vorarberg area was indeed an influence, or was it more of an inner impulse?

When I was a child I did not even know the profession of an architect, I wanted to become someone who would contribute to increasing the quality of living for ordinary people and so I was interested in becoming a writer or a craftsman. Because of my childhood experience, craftsmen were the people who built the buildings. So I was always interested and deeply impressed by the feeling when a building was built and it became a valuable part of our built environment. So in my understanding to make a building means to begin the process for one hand it is determined by a question of understanding and knowing and the ability to make use of this knowledge and transforming materials into reality.

During your formation period, did you have any master that influenced you deeply, personally or otherwise?

There were two people who influenced me deeply during my application period. One was Hanses Meyer. Not as an architect but because of his way of radical or fundamental thinking and the other one was Schulze-Flöß, with whom I worked personally for many years and who was the partner of Yona Friedman who did super-structural visions, for example city of Paris on the 12th level or city over the Channel.

One could think that this position is not only a Vorarberg matter but something that links German culture with construction, even with a certain continuity with Werkbund. Hanses Meyer could represent the less artistic position at Bauhaus, more committed to a specialized work far from the praise of creativity.

The question is not about creativity, but rather a question of what kind of orientation the different directors of Bauhaus or their predecessors had - in architectural terms which are the driving forces that generate the form. Gropius was very much focused on the question of industrialization and the working process which generated the form. Hanses Meyer was very much related to the social and political issues generating the form, and Meis did give a specific orientation to Bauhaus but followed very much the structural possibilities that generate a building and which very obvious, he was not interested in program or function at all.

Mr. Ebene, thank you very much for granting us this interview. In line with our tradition of interviewing great practice architects with a deep body of thought behind, we are very glad that you agreed to lend us some of your time. Being aware that instead of a ‘Just-do-it’ behavior sometimes we speak (and ask) too much about architecture, we dive into the following dialogue.

Discipline

You used to speak about “participatory construction” as a wider understanding of the traditional construction of Vorarberg where the client, the craft of industry and the influence of crafts, especially wood, were very deep.

How can the international expansion of the architect’s field, particularly at your office, maintain this level of control?

My discourse about participatory construction involves a wider understanding of how to use all the knowledge of the people who are working in the buildings - so the participation of craftsmen or the building industry is a very valuable decision in our architecture. Thus, it is very clear that already in the stage of the design process, we think very much about integrating these people into the decision making process of design. Therefore, the traditional understanding of doing a schematic design, a detail design or a construction design does not really relate to our way of working. I may say it more easily – we only have to take the decision once but it has to be done on a very high level of knowledge.

It is true that in our area there are craftsmen with a deep knowledge of wood, glass and concrete and the performance of these people in their field is definitely excellent in relation with other areas.

What is the role of the construction site process in your projects? Is it simply a linear execution of the conceived project or is there any kind of interaction with local agents once the building process has started?

The building site process is a linear process in the execution of a project. The interaction with local agents and craftsmen and people who work in the industry is part of the design process, not part of the construction process. So if the amount of time dedicated to planning increases, it will result in a less expensive building and shorter construction times.

We feel that you lean towards a certain autonomy of Architecture as a discipline. Can we still speak about volume, structure, envelope, efficiency away from any kind of intellectual speculation?

To talk about architecture as a discipline, talking about volume, structure, envelope, program and surfaces involves speculation on an artistic, intellectual and social level regarding the architectural process in every field. These five subjects are the questions you have to answer in every project. These speculations and your interests will have influence in answering all of these questions but the main question in 21st century architecture will be the contribution to the public sphere, not the use of the building any more.

Compactness, central core, do you think that your architecture could be recognized from a formal point of view?

I hope that my architecture will not be recognizable in terms of personal authorship, as a person, but can always be seen as a contribution to the site in which it is built. Only one of the contributions of the architecture is the formal point of view understood by me in the question of the dialog to the existing environment.

Compactness and neutrality values that still stand today?

Compactness is, in certain climates, the most efficient answer to reduce the carbon dioxide footprint of buildings – because in the most populated areas in the world. The depth of the building used nowadays is only a backwards orientated tradition, thinking about cross-ventilation. But since this problem can be solved in many other ways it is only a leftover of wrongly understood modernism.

Neutrality is a word I would never use, but maybe it relates to two different questions: not to fix the
Private design in architecture does not exist. All architectural design is always public – a contribution to society and as long as politics represents society, both politics and architecture deal with society.

Are still computers simply rationalistic tools to enlarge the scope of architects?

No – computers are tool that enhance the ability of architects in many different ways - first in geometrical terms, second in the ability to have much more available data about your project: structural data, economic data, ecological data and social data. So computers do help to increase your knowledge of the background of the design.

Do models have an increasing role in your design method?

If you think about physical models, they are the central point of the education of architects.

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What would be, in your opinion, the links with other disciplines? Despite some experiences in your practice with Olafur Eliasson or Adrian Schiess, would it be social sciences rather than artistic or philosophical ones?

When we speak about collaboration with other disciplines, how would they be considered to belong to very different groups?

One group is related to a better understanding of the project like physicians, social artists, economists, philosophers etc., and the other group is disciplines who can contribute something in the question of the formal appearance of the building such as artists or structural engineers.

Can design be democratic?

Design can never be democratic, but there can be design choices, and in a lot of public issues I think that this is reasonable.

Today we read, view and listen much about cohousing, progressive housing, unfinished housing. At your "Cooperative" or "do-it-yourself" houses, were you using those concepts avant a lettre?

Yes, 35 year ago we practiced a lot of the elements that you mentioned about the development within houses, self-housing, self-built houses, unfinished housing, cooperative housing - that is how I started dealing with buildings; but in all these models, also as an architect but mainly as a craftsman and a mediator of these processes. When I show these examples to the young people nowadays there are always two phenomenons: first I tell the young people that what they talk about nowadays, we already practiced 35 years ago. Second they ask me "why don't you publish again a book on this projects, which I did 35 years ago?" and I always answer: maybe.

Why are there no people in your photographs?

Your question is a little banal. Maybe they asked me before. In your photographs, which I did 35 years ago? and I always answer: maybe.

Your web site has a tag called “Position” which could reveal the need of doing so for an architect. Do you think this is an intellectual and cultural position or does it rather deal with service and social commitment?

In a company like ours you need many different positions and different understandings of our profession. So if you consider yourself more as an intellectual or cultural person or more as a service oriented person, with a high social commitment – it is a question that is up to you. As a company, it is useful to use all the different positions which I see as resources for contributing to a project.

What is the role, in your opinion, of Professional associations?

In your early years with Vorarlberger Baukünstler you had a strong position towards the chamber of Architects...

My expectation regarding Professional associations is that they should fight for the development of architecture but if organizations fail to do this, I have no reason to join them.

Site and place

Your site plans both on your website and in your beautiful books are just a graphic contrast between empty and full shapes. Is there any intention to disregard any other considerations?

Yes, the initial question is about empty and full spaces. Many other considerations about the cultural, social, economic and material background are integrated in our projects as much as possible. Why do I use this black-and-white drawings? Because in my understanding the dialog with the surroundings, as I mentioned before, can be seen very clearly in these drawings and, also as I mentioned before, the goal of design is to develop it as much as the buildings cannot be found any more clearly in the black-and-white drawings.

In your opinion, how have the Vorarlberg landscape and geographic conditions influenced your architecture?

Vorarlberg influenced me in two very different ways. First the necessity to deal with topography, and second the very specific way of dealing with the built environment as an expression of the cultural thinking and background which were developed throughout its history. The most important condition was the poverty of this area for hundreds of years, which generated a very high awareness in terms of using the materials available in the most efficient way.

But we could also consider the Vorarlberg landscape as a social organization system; a certain number of settlements that create a flexible and not bureaucrat network with a really contemporary feature: when urban meets rural. Do you think that politics has a link with design?

I am not really interested in this question of urban and rural because the separation of these two is an intellectual misunderstanding, since the urban environment never existed without any rural backgrounds and rural never existed without any urban concentration.

But there has always been a strong interaction between urban and rural environments. If you analyzed Vorarlberg with social key figures such as income, education, profession, divorce rate, lifespan, you would always understand Vorarlberg as a city. When you see the built environment you would always understand it as a rural development. Sure, there is a strong relation between design and politics, as long as politics is representing the majority of the society.

Therefore, private design in architecture does not exist. All architectural design is always public – a contribution to society and as long as politics represents society, both politics and architecture deal with society.

Office

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Sustainability

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Is life real is the 2266 building as good as you planned? Rude is a good question to ask and other animals inside the spaces to temper climate. At the end of time there is once again a lesson from popular architecture. You stated that your architecture was more 'every day architecture' than 'Sunday architecture'. Do we need to look backwards to move forward?

No, we do not need animals inside the room but real life is even much better than we ever expected. Therefore, at this moment, there are 6 other projects of 2266 in Zurich, Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Paris and Lingenau in progress.

University

Knowledge, practice, we definitely speak about University. How does your teaching practice at University interact with your professional practice?

The interaction between my practice and the university is given by me using the knowledge I have as an architect and bringing this knowledge to the university. But at the university I developed specific methods to bring this kind of knowledge to students, who have specific different backgrounds according to their knowledge. If you are interested in more you can find it in a book called "from the city to the house".

Your master at Zurich seems to focus on urban issues as also the interaction with some other professionals is based on technological support. Are those the main fields of design research or can we also consider, 'Research by design'?

To place and design an appropriate window more than a box or a conceptual envelope; to introduce reality and phenomenal issues in design, how difficult is to teach that in a school ...

Architectural teaching is always based on very different abilities. An architect has to do the same as a patient leads. On the other hand he has to increase his knowledge about the person who wrote the music and the historical cultural circumstances, but he does not need to understand the mechanics of his instrument. That is exactly the same way I see architecture.

You have a wide experience as a teacher and also in management, as educational director during your Dean period at Zurich. Do you believe in a common European educational system?

My last obligation at EHT, being the study director, was to develop a new curriculum which will be put in place in 2017. I had to deal with this question. I believe in a common European educational system in the sense that we will share common European goals and many regional contributions or different models of Universities, Academies or Schools, and how to reach these goals.

When a project in Spain?

I talk to a lot of Spanish people and try to understand Spanish culture better.

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