

A conversation with Patrick Bouchain and Nicolas Delon

Pauline Fockedey, Christoph Grafe, Véronique Patteeuw
Paris, September 10, 2019.

*On the first floor of a Parisian building, behind a facade that dissolves perfectly in the neighbourhood, one can feel a bustling energy. People are working in small groups, discussing the build environment, architecture, landscape, society. The architectural office Construire, located in the heart of the Parisian Marais does not have the appearance of an architectural office. One could easily imagine this as the home of Patrick Bouchain. The walls are filled with small objects, traces of a professional journey through a territory of architectural challenges: a newspaper clipping, several colourful postcards, necklaces and samples of diverse materials and books, but also sculptural objects and knick-knacks. Within this Parisian apartment, architecture is not the central theme of conversation. On the contrary. Around the white large table, Patrick Bouchain and Nicholas Delon (*Encore Heureux*) talk about what architecture could possibly do and not do to present circumstances, or even the human condition.*

OASE: In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt is trying to define and distinguish what is private and what is public. She seems to be saying that it would not be enough to distinguish what is private, the space of the intimate, and the public, the space of the political, if we were to make a literal translation of what she explains. In the projects that you develop or accompany, do you choose to abandon this distinction or do you seek the establishment of an in-between?

PB: The separation between private and a public is beside the point. We are not separate private or public human beings. We have confused private with privatisation and public with institution: the public has become associated with the sphere of institutions and the private is often equated with the privatisation of trade and the economy. The in-between is not a third domain, but it is the energy that connects things. How is this energy created? I got into architecture because architecture was an opportunity to address this question. But it's not architecture that interests me, it's because building something means connecting things: connecting the private and the public and therefore the political and the social, the social and the economic, the social and the cultural. It is this area of thought and activity that interests me.

ND: Today what counts in a public or private space is its sincerity. If we have the idea that the public space is for everyone, today we sometimes see that it is quite the opposite. Private spaces, contested spaces, or spaces of the solidarity economy will become the spaces of the regulation of a public power or public authority that no longer plays its role. We are seeing a weakening, in France at least, of this public authority. Latour speaks of the *Anthropocene* and now of the *Capitalocene*. It is the question of economic power, which is the alpha and omega of all architecture. With *Encore Heureux*, we have addressed the public/private partnerships that were initiated in France, exported to England and came back to France at the end of the 1990s. They led to a reduction in the competences of public structures, low salaries, staff cuts and therefore the loss of the capacity to carry out major operations. Once public institutions have lost that capacity, they often no longer know how to do what the

private sector can do. What is at stake here is the construction of the widespread privatisation of our lives, just as the digital revolution is a privatisation of data and therefore of the market value of each one of us. I agree with Patrick's thoughts on the limited significance of the categorisation of the public versus the private. But this still begs the question of the definition, or re-definition, of common purpose. Where do we find it today? And where can architects intervene, with the little leverage they can muster? Paul Valéry once wrote: "If the State is strong, it crushes us. If it is weak, we perish". I like this quote because it shows that it is in the in-between that the collective quality or the common purpose will be at stake.

We have seen the power of public institutions collapse. If we are lucky enough to still have public contractors who trust us, I also see some of our colleagues who have abandoned the public and became the armed forces of private promotion, of privatised life. When the city of Paris, for example, launches a campaign of 'reinventing Paris', in fact it sells land that belongs to the public without asking the public – *us* – for permission; under the guise of 'innovation' the state sells public buildings to private operators who, once they have become owners, do what they want. And that's what we have to understand, it's that we have a legislative system giving the proprietor the power of operation, use and programming. The bottom line is: When a private operator is at home, he is at home.

PB: One day, I was having lunch with [the sociologist] Jean-Louis Violeau and we agreed that the word partnership was perhaps not the most appropriate word for the relationship between public institutions and private parties.¹ We proposed to replace the p for partnership with the p for *parle*-ment, or parliament.² Perhaps it is indeed necessary that at some point the public and the private talk or meet each other to such an extent that even the public might consider that it needs the private sector. Very early on, I realised that there was nothing more stupid than to hold on to the traditional distinction between *maitrise d'ouvrage* and *maitrise d'oeuvre*, or between the role of the commissioner and the role of the designer/builder. That's why I tried to combine commissioning with designing and building to the point of becoming my own commissioner. In fact, I invented the commission as a master builder and I attributed it to myself as a designer, or even as the person who is in charge of managing the use of the finished structure, as a *maitre de l'usage*.

ND: I would complete with the question of legal loopholes. Patrick has shown in his smaller and larger projects that an intimate knowledge of the rules that characterise our professional legal position creates more opportunities for us as architects than we often want to believe. Because I don't think that you, Patrick, ever found yourself in a situation of illegality, or at least not in an illegal situation that could have been blamed on you. (...) It is in these strategies that Patrick developed projects and which were inspirational, and a 'blurring' of spaces and speeches. Constructing possibilities implies enabling the un-expected, the appropriation, which allows for a blurring of categories and spheres.

1 Jean-Louis Violeau is a sociologist and researcher at the "Architecture-Culture-Société" laboratory of the Ecole d'architecture de Paris-Malaquais in Paris. Amongst his books: *Les architectes et mai 68* et *Les architectes et mai 81*.

2 The French term *parlement* is derived from *parler* 'to speak' and originally meant 'speech, conversation, discussion'.

OASE: Should we understand this 'blurring' as an act of distancing oneself from the role of the architect in the more traditional sense? You necessarily must have a position, since one of you (Nicola Delon) is a registered architect and the other (Patrick Bouchain) is not.

PB: I claim *not* to be an architect for various reasons. Encore Heureux are architects, because they have to be. Times have changed; without the title of architect, they would not have a job. In my day I could have worked. Later, I was against this position [of the architect], but maybe today you have to be one because perhaps you can transform things more from within. Because being a non-architect, one is considered to be on the fringe and therefore not listened to. Possibly, in the situations I encountered, I had to be the *provocateur* operating somewhat outside the field to be free to do so. Today, Encore Heureux are perhaps more effective inside the field in bringing about change.

OASE: Arendt focuses on political processes and on political life. Her interest in the agora reflects its role as space for negotiation and exchange. It is also a physical background for expressing conflicts of interest in the architect's expertise, expertise that is both spatial and historical.

ND: There is a weakening of conflict in contemporary society. However, by avoiding conflict, we create violence. Conflict facilitates debate, and challenges us to change our minds, to adjust positions which have been tested in negotiations. We have weakened the possibility of conflict so much, even in our schools, that we risk losing something important. It is, so to say, the brutality of non-conflict, which may subsequently produce violence. That is why I think that the space of conflict and negotiation have to be staged and re-worked into a *mis-en-scène*. Staging, if we draw a parallel with theatre, is not characterised by dimensions only. It is rather a question of the correctness of dimensions, of proportions. In the office, we do not theorise this space, because it is very intuitive for us; it is something that results for us from a collective practice.

OASE: These strategies of scenography refer to the notion of 'Enabling spaces' in the idea of setting in motion, of the act of making possible.

PB: In the theatre and on stage, the placement, the body, the actors' performances make a scenography come alive. We can say that the actor would not have done it without a director, without a text or without an audience. It is an act of collaboration. I want to make architecture in the same way. It is a great moment of freedom, a moment of dialogue, of negotiation, of going back and forth, of failure, of trial and error. You can tell yourself from this experience that I had with you in this conversation: I'm going to remember it, and I'm going to use it because you enriched me.

OASE: The theatre director, Giorgio Strehler, with whom you worked, produced 'significance': a stage negotiation, but also a negotiation of gestures, of a figure in space, using the language of the text and the structure, the geometry of the language, etc.

PB: Architecture and politics are very much linked. It is the expression of a society that produces things. Architecture is inscribed in humanity. To make us believe that it is instantaneous, that there is a client, a call for tenders, etc., is to reduce the act of building. We need to re-expand the act of building by rewriting it in longer histories, or

perhaps in the history of humanity, even on a small scale. In doing so, I attach myself to the one who builds, to the one who will live, to the one who will command.

OASE: Today - perhaps by reclaiming what you have done - we observe an aesthetic of *laissez-faire*, an aesthetic of 'resistance' or, so to say, an aesthetic of 'committed architecture'. An aesthetic that is connected to the way in which certain projects can be implemented, based on know-how, techniques, or materials. For example, it is easier to work with wood than to pour concrete with people who have never done it before. How do you position yourself in relation to this observation?

ND: Earlier we were talking about the theatre and now we could talk about contemporary art, painting, music, this attachment to what seems right to us. The question of beauty, for example. Let's say that for us, this question is inseparable from the process. The process is a collective undertaking, it is a journey and this journey will be seen under different spectrums: the spectrum of economic means, legal means, human means, temporal means. The aesthetic spectrum is inseparable from the others. It therefore has an important presence but it is not fixed, it is not closed. This is the fragility of the thing, because sometimes we make mistakes. Because when you have decided to make an architecture of well-drawn, post-industrial boxes, you draw a bodywork and then it's finished. In our case, we say to ourselves: I don't necessarily know what I'm going to achieve, but I'm going to put ingredients together like in the kitchen and I'm going to make sure that the narrative is accurate, with more or less hindsight. We sometimes refer to 'narrative aesthetics' in our projects. For example, when we made a cinema, we noted that there are a large number of very uninspired shoeboxes with the word 'cinema' written on them, in order to allow them to be recognised as cinemas. In this case, we looked at the architecture of pediments and with a budget of 80,000 Euros, we put pediments that have no function other than to communicate that there is a cinema inside. This project shows a narrative aesthetic. It is not a fascination with form as such, but rather a mixture of references, elements that touch us, architectures without architects for instance, or of intuitive reading. It is about wanting this building to say something. Aesthetics will be at the service of this narrative. We also talk about 'organised do-it-yourself' because it is not an architecture of pallets and scaffolding either. Does this do-it-yourself work produce aesthetics? It is rather a reaction to possibilities and to what is there.

PB: I'm very sensitive to aesthetics. I have an aesthetic point of view on things. But I have a deep doubt each time, if this is an aesthetic that belongs to me or is it an aesthetic that appears and that I use? I am also interested in what is invisible, what is merely hidden and could be made to appear? What would allow a hidden thing to be revealed? Do those things or ideas which remain hidden rest with the client or the manufacturer, with the user, with my collaborators? So I try to reveal the hidden thing. When the thing appears, I think the architecture is un-representable before it is built. We have pre-representation tools, we have tools to elaborate the project that allow us to see where we're going. I am working on what cannot be represented and I try to see at a given moment in the represented place what would allow us to keep as long as possible the appearance of what will make the form at the time of its construction. Construction is also a collaboration: it is part of the ingredients that produce an aesthetic.

ND: I would add that there is also a taste for risk. Because all this, everything we're talking about, is fragile, so you have to have a taste for risk because we're not in an architecture where $A = A'$.

PB: But it's not a risk by combat, it's a willingness to take risks to see the accident or the unexpected happen.

ND: It's a positive risk. But it also requires courage. In other words, you can have a taste for risk without courage, you can have courage but it's a little misplaced, and therefore this courage, this strength of conviction, to start again.