Articles   Dublin School of Architecture (Former DIT)

2004-09-01

Producing Knowledge Through Architecture

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Noel Brady in conversation with Alejandro Zaero Polo and Farshid Moussavi of Foreign Office Architects

Foreign Office Architects recently visited Dublin, where they attended the RIBA Annual Conference 2004 and presented a paper on their scheme for the BBC Music Centre at White City (London). *Architecture Ireland* contributor Noel Brady has interviewed practice partners Alejandro Zaero Polo and Farshid Moussavi on recent projects, the publication of *Phylogenesis*, their beginnings and what the future holds.

"Bundle Tower" for the World Trade Center

NJB

Starting at the end, Phylogenesis (exhibition and book), it seems like it is an attempt to bring everything together, an attempt to make sense of your work.

AZP

What is interesting about *Phylogenesis* is that our office started out as an ideological, experimental practice and as the work has been evolving, it has become a lot more pragmatic. We think that we can only theorise about what has gone before.

NJB

A sort of post rationalisation.

AZP

Exactly. Instead of starting from specific principles, we like being able to develop things as they come. *Phylogenesis* was about trying to define our style, trying to find a way to explain or explore the repetitions in the work.

NJB

You have been previously quoted as saying that the work took not just an ideological position but a scientific position, a pseudo scientific position, that there are rules that we need to discover, and let them determine your architecture. Was Yokohama (Port Terminal) a wake-up call, to say that there is a limit to this?

FM

Yokohama was a product of that way of working.

AZP

We are still interested in that way of working. Whatever about post rationalisation – when a scientist elaborates a set of theories on a finite set of cases from which they extrapolate certain rules, then this is precisely what we were trying to do.
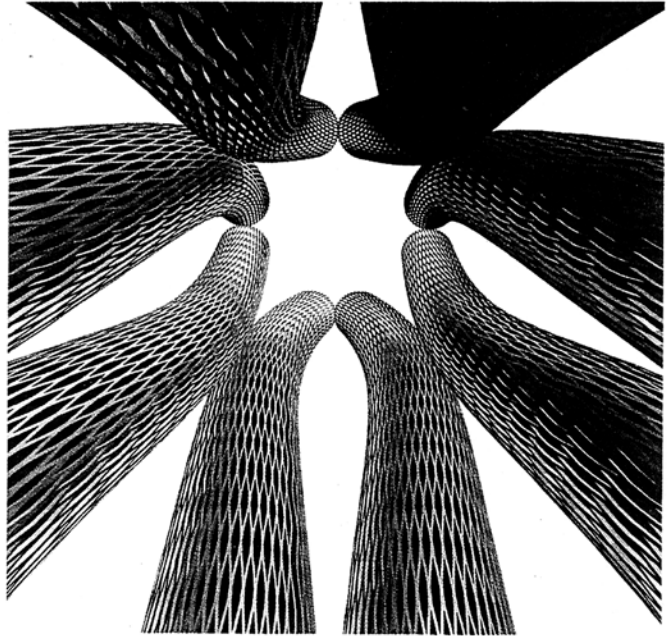
NJB

However, in a scientific situation it is about finding a stable environment. The ideal of the scientist is not just to determine the rules but also to replicate the condition so that the rules can be confirmed. But for you the rules are shifting.

AZP

I believe that the good scientists work in a very similar way. Maybe it is a pseudo science, but science is also a pseudo science, because it is subjective depending on a finite number of cases. We do not like the mystery of the artist or the mystery of the kind of person that is a guru. We do believe that in order to communicate with clients, in order to communicate amongst us, and amongst different cultures, we need to put things on the table in an open manner without protecting it with the aura of the artist.

FM

It is not only at the level of communication. All those feeling factors that people normally have need to be produced in technical means in a kind of building or architectural project. What an architect needs to do is to build the means to produce environmental, temporal and optical factors. The problem is that all architects have to resort to technical means to do this, but that they rarely communicate it. We are more interested in being conscious of the fact that we need certain tools to produce it and we make the tools to fit together.

NJB

This also unties it to its tectonic value. It is an interesting hybrid, with your background of OMA and the work with Rem Koolhaas, you are responding to culture, you are responding to people and at the same time bringing in a tectonic condition, which it appears Rem has left behind, becoming more of a diagram, a surface.

FM

It is about, on the one hand, to say that architecture relates to things that are outside the architect, individual people's concerns, politics, economics and, on the other hand, that as architects we need to develop an internal discipline. We need to make that continuously grow; that technical arsenal that we have to engage in these external factors. It is kind of external as well as inside.

AZP

I would like to comment on the relationship with Rem, because he is very important for us in terms of training, and it is true that we are more interested than he in going back to that disciplinary core of architecture or practice. He says himself that he is good at throwing things away as new things emerge. But I think, deep down, I do not know how, he is deadly interested in that side of architecture.

AZP

Phylogenesis would be an attempt to try to rationalise this core of our practice. To be able, not so much to forecast how this is going to proceed. We do not dare to say that this is going to be the kind of DNA of what will happen from now on, it is only partially that.

NJB

Of course we do not have the luxury of the scientist of a finite range of cases for experimentation because architecture is subject to external influences. How do you determine what you include?

FM

This is when the word scientific can be misleading it is a subjective exercise. It is up to the architect to select and leave aside elements.

AZP

Science is subjective also.

FM

There are certain opportunities in certain external sources and finally our ambition is to extract architectural potential from these not to be slaves to everything that comes into our view.

NJB

This is perhaps most elegantly described in the "Bundle Tower" for the World Trade Center (WTC) site? Do you find it difficult to achieve the same clarity of idea with the complexity of a brief like the BBC Music Centre.

AZP

The "Bundle Tower" was a commission by the Max Protech Gallery to make a sketch for the development of ground zero. We did not know anything that is happening underground, we did not understand anything about needs, so it is an idea, an abstract project whereas the BBC is exactly the opposite. The BBC is a project where we had to deal with property heads, the musicians, and the acousticians; it was really a project about mediation.

FM

It is easier to compare the WTC because there are typologies that you can compare it to.

NJB

You mentioned prototypes in previous interviews and it seems to fall within the scientific and mechanical or physical idea of building but there seems to be emerging an idea of archetype. Perhaps this is why the tower is very strong, because it is a prototype that becomes archetypal. How do you see your work in relation to these two aspects, for the future?

AZP

I think that both are possibilities for a project and I never heard of this idea of the archetype it is an interesting proposition if you look at it in relation to the WTC or Yokohama, now that everyone is trying to explore this hybrid of building and landscape. It is very exciting when a prototype becomes something that has a generic value as O'Donnell and Twomey were saying (at RIBA conference presentation), generic things come out of the particular. In the case of the Bundle Tower, we started from the average lease size of offices in New York.

FM

We start from the bottom up. Basically the objective is through architecture to produce knowledge.

AZP

And that is what happens in the best projects. Those that don't reach that level – maybe they are good practice or an interesting exercise in mediating.

NJB

Regarding the ecological and the green imperative. Is this an area that you are interested? In the manner in which you diagram (a project or problem) you refer to DNA, to genes, which are references to the organic yet the forms of large parts of your work has an inorganic feel to it. The "Bundle Tower" WTC is a very strange mix between these two poles.

AZP

The organic is just one more material in which we might be interested. We are not necessarily in favour for or against the organic. Basically, the way we describe the work is a sort of third way between the rational and the organic. Traditionally, architects were classified as being rationalist or organic. Precisely what we are interested in is to develop an intermediate path now that we have computers, we can set up processes that makes a building that grows for us.

FM

There is a very important reason why our work ends up looking the way it looks. I think that we work, we use computers, and we are not interested generally to work in images. We like to grow, to generate the projects, an assimilation of sources. From the way we work, we suspend the moment in which an image is crystallised into an image as long as possible so that the project is as open to as many influences as possible. The amount of information that we hold becomes denser and denser, and therefore the geometry that we develop to bring these together gets more complex than one normally is used. When one has to adopt a geometry to hold the project, to negotiate with many factors, it does not have to be anything other than simple.

NJB

This echoes a concept of chaos and the presence of self-similarity in organisations that appear complex on the surface but at a detailed level are made of simpler elements. However the presentation of the work concentrates on the image.

Yokohama Port Terminal

FM

We try to communicate the whole work, for instance the first time we presented Yokohama we talked about the process, and the image is generated out of that. From when we won the competition to completion Yokohama took $7^1/2$ years and our lecture became longer and longer. We are glad now that the building is a finished chapter and we do not talk about it anymore. It used to overtake everything we do and we have to somehow end the process.

NJB

It was an incredible trust to hold an open competition and to further trust a young firm to complete the project.

FM

It does not mean that people were not nervous. I think that the client is now very happy. They were proud of their link to the West, they were proud for example of the original pier which was built by a British engineer. We were a British firm and there were constant reminders that everything made sense for us to be there. But really they started with us knowing that it was a huge risk.

NJB

You have a new office, where to next, more international work?

FM

We would like to build more in the UK. One has to be realistic. Different cultures have different risk factors. That has nothing to do with the fact that we were not born in the UK. If you look at the major British architects, the first major works were always outside and then they worked back in the UK. We had to do Yokohama to prove that we were able to do big projects that we could be trusted, after that we had a number of commissions and now we are being constantly called. I think that this is a common trend and we do not have anything to complain about.

NJB

Your idea that the office is a flat organisation and that everyone makes a contribution to the process. You could say something similar happens in other offices like Herzog & De Meuron. It has become so big and corporate that they are in danger of loosing the edges. How will you be able to retain the rigour?

FM

I like the quality of their work so I hope that, if we ever through history become as big as them, we can achieve the same quality. I realise that when you get to that size you cannot be on top of every project to the same extent. Their commitment to experimentation and quality is amazing and I hope that if we get to that size, it is a benchmark we can achieve.