Towards an Architecture of Desire

Andri Gerber in Conversation with François Charbonnet
and Patrick Heiz, March 19, 2019, Zurich

Andri Gerber: Let's start with a really easy question: How serious is architecture [laughs]?

François Charbonnet: Well, architects are responsible for the largest artifacts produced by mankind. Given the fact that these objects are supposed to last beyond their immediate use, and that they should convey a specific cultural value about any kind of environment—for successive generations—I'd say architecture is a pretty serious matter. It is even more serious, should you consider architecture the main agent of our *political milieu.*

Patrick Heiz: ... I would add that even the performative aspects of architecture go beyond solving a problem, and would even question the ability of the architectural project to be an adequate "mediator" of our lives. Architecture can definitely generate an array of potentialities, but in essence, it is inert, which confines it to the "margins" of life.

Gerber: But shouldn't these potentialities also be fun?

Heiz: They can definitely be fun!

Charbonnet: I suppose one would have to define "fun" before one could consider architecture as a form of "entertainment." But there is, no doubt, a ludic dimension to design: for now, let's say that architecture is a serious game, as your initial question suggests.

Heiz: We should also underscore that the central question of the architectural project is not architecture, *per se*, but life, in all of its complexities. Like any other human beings, architects are driven by contradictory and equivocal intuitions and expectations. To project always means identify-

ing and, secretly, staging intricacies; however, it is more often confrontational than it is strategic—and this friction is definitely a source of energy.

Fig. 61: Made in, Zollstrasse, 2014-2019

Gerber: I would assert that there can be no fun without friction! Out of all the topics in the present book, the relationship between the "real" or "actual" and the "virtual" is of particular significance. Related to this, I am very interested in the way you work. You usually produce amazing collages, bringing together references, materials, and many other things, yet they remain quite abstract; they do not necessarily reveal what the building will look like. You vindicate the autonomy of the design process but how do you deal with the moment when these images become real? What happens during this process with this imagery? Maybe your clients expect you to have it built the way the images appear.

Heiz: Well, we haven't built very much much so far; we are therefore seldom confronted with this issue [laughs].

Charbonnet: Construction is really only about solving problems: facing a well-identified issue and solving it appropriately. I am well-aware, of course, that a lot lies in the specifics of "appropriately" ... nonetheless, I think that designing, or rather, "pro-*ject*-ing," is an alienating process. The architect should consider design as a sort of dispossession, rather than an appropriating procedure. Moreover, as the prefix suggests, it is bound to a dynamic consideration, not only because it requires a certain level of detachment, but because of the very nature of an idea which—metaphorically—travels through time at a certain speed, and should live beyond fulfilling its original function. In this regard, the image can efficiently complement the objectivity of the accurate drawings required to realize an architectural project, addressing issues beyond these incontrovertible prerequisites. But a project is always "yet to come"—at least as far the architect is concerned—it is *en devenir*, aspiring, and shouldn't be reduced to a product. What I mean to say is that to delineate architecture objectively is to deny an image its full evocative—and therefore performative—potential. Images, unlike drawings, must be read and experienced, and there are as many possible interpretations as there are eyes beholding them.

Heiz: Once again, architecture is primarily a process, not a product. An image can essentially suggest the existence of meta-information that can be deciphered, while simultaneously triggering a sort of immediate comprehension. The image—unlike an accurate representation—can be detached from its meaning and accordingly raise questions.

Charbonnet: One of our primary aims is to address issues beyond the quantifiable, to engage in a critical consideration of collective memory that seeks to overcome bias and preconceived notions. "What lies beyond"

is really the territory we want to investigate. This led us to *Voluptas*—the studio we are currently leading at the ETH Zurich. In their work entitled *Anti-Oedipus* (1972)[1], Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Félix Guattari (1930-1992) describe *volupté* as a sort of residual energy, that which is left when everything else has been removed. There are many voluptuous moments in the elaboration of an architectural project, even if they remain a secret.

Fig. 62: Sascha Gsell, Julia Meier, Monitoring, Voluptas SS2019

Gerber: Let's discuss this notion of *Voluptas*. Where do we find it, and can this be shared? François, you spoke about the project as something you throw away, and Patrick, you mentioned the relationship that an architect develops with the client. So where do we find *Voluptas*? Is it in the process, in the result, or in both?

Charbonnet: It can take place at any point in the process, for instance, when an unforeseen potential is consciously activated and stands in contradiction—or at least in friction with—one or several of the predetermined requirements. It can also be a personal exchange with the project's stakeholders: what I mean is that *Voluptas* cannot be reduced to a specific

---

1 | Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

feature or narrowed down to a specific point in the process; it is a vague essence and dynamic—in the sense of a "vagabond"—and escapes any definitive categorization. This doesn't mean that it can never be quantified. For example, in our Zollstrasse project—currently under construction—the depth of the primary façade or the sheer monumentality of the public space on its infrastructural side are undeniably voluptuous.

One of the main challenges we face is that, by obsessively multiplying such interpretative "threads," we tend to blur any unequivocal statement. Instead, observers are left with their own (biased) understanding. Our projects demand an interstitial reading, so to speak, and invade programmatic and legislative gaps to critically address a given issue.

Gerber: Regarding the concept of program—there is a nice book by Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991)[2], in which he states that the future is not about being either a master or a slave, but about programming or being programmed. Considering the importance of the program in your work—also in terms of programming games—where would you situate yourselves in relation to this?

Carbonnet: Any architecture is a *rapport de forces*, at any given point in the process, even before any architecture has been conceived. What takes place in the mind of a potential client can only be appropriately described as a *rapport de forces* between expectations, vanity, an economic and political environment, and so forth. It becomes more obvious—almost trivial—when considering the built object itself, which can literally only stand as a reality balanced between substances. The systematic and constant negotiation that comprise the process of designing is also a *rapport de forces.* It is as if architecture was doomed by the constraints necessary for it to exist. The program, as such, is a relevant part of this set of tensions; its potential lies far beyond the simple configuration of square meters. Each piece of a given function is in active negotiation with the others. And most importantly, the program is there to be *re*-programmed and questioned. This is one of the most pressing issues, I think, in the contemporary production of architecture, in which none of the supposed prerequisites are being critically addressed. There is an obvious opportunism—not to say cowardice—coming from the architects who pledge an undiscerning allegiance to any stipulated framework. I do not mean to say that we, as a profession,

---

2 | Vilém Flusser, *Dinge und Undinge, Phänomenologische Skizzen* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993).

should indulge in unnecessary provocations, but rather, that it is imperative we critically engage with program, to ensure more than simply fulfilling its requirements.

Fig. 63: Luca Meyer, Thierry Vuattoux, Parody, Voluptas SS 2019

As a brief example of where we positioned ourselves a few decades ago: in an interview with the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, Renzo Piano (*1937) recalled that, among the nearly 600 competition entries for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, their proposal was the only one to question the actual legislative bulk of the Marais...the only one! It is hard to believe, but what was considered a crucial, critical comment about this situation in the 1970s would undoubtedly be dismissed as an unnecessary provocation today. Is it to say that the world has radically changed in the meantime? Probably not, but our expectations about what comprises the architectural project have certainly fundamentally evolved.

Heiz: ... let me add that there is always a risk of being stranded among the systematic and the normative. To prevent this from happening, we propose embracing life in all of its inadequacies, its chaotic and meaningless details—this constitutes the essential program of architecture, not the form nor the virtuous assembling of materials. Of course, this does not deny the relevance of these notions in the process of designing, nor

ban the service-provider imperative linked to the production of any architecture; it simply stakes a claim for a "dark territory of possibilities."

Gerber: This is why we prefer the term "architectonics" instead of "architecture."

Charbonnet: Architecture is one of the very few fields, in which contradiction should be praised as something …

Gerber: … necessary.

Charbonnet: … yes, necessary! You see, architecture as a discipline is devoid of any axiomatic statements: nothing can be claimed as trivial or essential, because of the very absence of syntax and grammar. As a result, everything must be questioned … this echoes the position of Rem Koolhaas (*1944) in *S, M, L, XL* (1995)[3], when he speaks about the radical insecurity of the architect when making a decision. There are literally so many opportunities to be wrong that the architect's mindset is in a state of constant unrest. Contradiction might well be the fuel of any articulate project.

Gerber: The question is, then: How do you program contradiction?

Heiz: Absolutely! Staging contradictions is what we deal with. This is true not only in our practice, but also in the academic context: to orchestrate contradictions that would reveal what one could call *les failles poétiques du lieu*, the poetical "cracks" of a place, which contain the exhilarating moments of life.

Charbonnet: We also have to admit the difficult time we sometimes have when promoting such an approach with students. The reason might well be that they are unable to formulate a "problem"; in other words, they are only interested in solving one! There is hardly an issue when designing—a program, a legislation, a budget, and so on—that does not constitute a problem *per se*. To properly activate the issue, one needs to leave one's field of expertise behind, in order to engage with the contradictory state of the world, so to speak; in order to stimulate not only greater critical leverage, but also catalyze exogenous forces. To do so, one must acquire specific knowledge—and this quest is everything but complacent.

Heiz: In other words, we ask our students to become generalists, that is, "enemies" of their time, and to obsessively question any type of conven-

---

3 | Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, eds., *S, M, L, XL. Office for Metropolitain Architecture* (Rotterdam: 010 Publisers, 1995).

tions. We are often confronted with colleagues that seem to exactly know what architecture is. Not necessarily in an arrogant way …

Charbonnet: … but often in a complacent way. I mean, complacent toward whatever is revolving around the issue of architecture itself.

Gerber: Let's come back to *Voluptas*. In preparation for this interview, I re-read *Le plaisir du texte* (1973) by Roland Barthes (1915-1980).[4] In this book, he discusses the relationship between an author, his text, and a potential reader, as well as the kind of reactions the latter may have, citing either the order of *plaisir*—pleasure—or *jouissance*—pleasure, delight, ecstasy. While the former takes place at a distance, the second implies a *passage à l'acte*, an acting out, in order to achieve pleasure. I wasn't sure how to locate *Voluptas* in relation to these two forms of pleasures, as the term implies a bit of both. What is interesting in Barthes's discussion is the fact that he underscores the need to have a space in order for play to occur, yet while one can talk about *plaisir* in these terms, the notion of *jouissance* eludes any critical or theoretical approach. Considering the latter, how can you teach *Voluptas*, and how can you discuss it with your students?

Fig. 64: Joël Berger, Noé Lanfranchi, Artai Sanchez Keller, Contamination, Voluptas FS 2018

Heiz: You seem to question the outcome of such a methodology—and you are right to suggest that *Voluptas* embraces both sides of the notion of de-

---

4 | Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

light! I would say that *jouissance* evokes a sort of abandonment (come what may!) while *plaisir* still refers to rational comprehension. The beauty of all this is that one doesn't contradict the other. They are not mutually exclusive notions. We just believe that the three Vitruvian ordinances fail to address the concept of "residual energy," in the sense that *Firmitas*, *Utilitas* and *Venustas* depict architecture in a discerning, categorical, and objective way. *Voluptas* invites us to consider what lies in between or, again, *beyond* these notions. It could well be that *Voluptas* is an emanation of the three ordinances, but we refuse to reduce the concept to this. It investigates an environment driven by more than just political or economic; it depicts a world where *desire* is the prime force behind decision making—a part of the *jouissance* you mentioned.

Gerber: Well, *jouissance* is really a form of *passage à l'acte*, while *voluptas* is more of a yearning for something. So, what happens in this *passage à l'acte* with *Voluptas*?

Heiz: ... as I said before, we neither intend to stifle the concept nor the product at such an early stage in its development ...

Charbonnet: Let's try to identify voluptuous figures of architecture. Once, I said that I believe many *voluptés* lie somewhere else and often in anonymous situations. Examples are Francesco Borromini's (1599-1667) work or projects by Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799)—who raised architecture to cosmic levels—or even more obviously, by Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826). Similar to these French revolutionary architects, figures like Iwan Iljitsch Leonidow (1902-1959) or, closer to us, the 1989 competition trilogy by OMA (*Terminal Seebrugge* (1988), *ZKM Karlsruhe* (1989) and *Très Grande Bibliothèque Paris* (1989)) apply. Or Aldo Rossi's (1931-1997) social housing project in Berlin, where a sample of the Palazzo Farnese's façade is staged as a radical political statement. All of these works express a jubilatory and excessive use of architectural tools. Of course, these are a few all-too-glorious moments in the history of architecture; they simply have one common feature: something that escapes the rational and the quantifiable.

Gerber: It is funny, because when you look at your projects, there is always some element hovering in mid-air. It is like a signature. These seem to be literally excessive pieces ...

Charbonnet: It is more of a *coquetterie* than anything else. In physics, one distinguishes a laminar flow from a turbulent one, in which the trajectory and dynamic of matter escape any predictability. There is indeed some-

thing similar in some of our projects. Once primary functions are fulfilled, the composition is, so to speak, free from quantifiable imperatives. Take the portico of the *Erechteion*, for example, noting how the feminine figures indicate more than the sheer path of the forces: they suggest a very moving contradiction between permanence and a transient state.

Gerber: Absolutely! There is something that escapes reason, gravity ...

Charbonnet: ... you see, Archimedes' admonition to distance the observer from its subject has always been a sort of a leitmotiv—not an ideological stance, but a necessary distancing to witness phenomena in all their complexities. Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth! One can't record nor monitor anything, unless one can stand to the side.

Fig. 65: Made in, ZSC Arena, Competition Entry, 2012

Gerber: Returning to the idea of excess, I was reading Jean Baudrillard's (1929-2007) notion of the "ecstasy of communication." To him, this is something negative that culminates in the "désert de la communication," and is also always self-consuming.[5] Beyond the proximity of "excess" to "ecstasy," is there not a danger in this approach becoming self-consuming, self-referential?

---

5 | Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

Charbonnet: … It could well be.

Heiz: What we have discussed really applies to the early stages of projects, during which the idea travels at its greatest speed; the danger would be to maintain the architectural project in this ethereal state. But we never consider the project to be autonomous as such, and any meaningful architecture is bound to confrontation with a pragmatic and non-poetic reality.

In this regard, we very much look forward to the completion of our first large scale project, on Zollstrasse in Zurich, where a "disproportionate" monumentality meets the most stringent requirements of performative infrastructure.

Charbonnet: I recently came across Robert Musil's (1880-1942) seminal work *The Man Without Qualities* (1930), in which the author describes a sixth sense called the *Möglichkeitssinn*—a sense of the possible. This most fully embodies what we are trying to depict: a sense that escapes the actual impossibility of the present in order to activate potentialities within a speculative timeframe or contextual background. It is essential to us for the simple reason that the architectural project is thus embedded into a completely different dynamic. The question then becomes what it could fulfill and imply, rather than what it actually is: it is really a catalytic impetus, which is open to several equivocal readings. Looking back at *Made in*'s projects, we can say without any doubt that most of them have dealt with this issue in one way or another.

Gerber: Let's return to the notion of architecture as a serious game. Interestingly, Roland Barthes also relates *jouissance* to boredom. The same way one cannot plan for *jouissance* in advance, you cannot anticipate or plan boredom. The playful, the fun is then all about not being bored. Architects have perpetually tried to escape boredom and produce spectacular buildings. I was wondering if you have ever considered boredom in your work. How we can put *Voluptas* in relation to this?

Charbonnet: It is a difficult question because boredom—like its counterpart, excitement—is almost exclusively a matter of perception.

Heiz: … the least we can say is that we have always tried to avoid nostalgia or mere contemplation, in order to legitimize a project. History is indeed a sort jurisprudential array of specific contexts, but it shouldn't be mobilized to validate any architectural stance. It should merely act as a sort of resonance chamber, coloring the project with the traces of the past to trigger active doubt and critical reflection.

But it seems that I just drifted from your question to become evasive.

Fig. 66: Joël Berger, Noé Lanfranchi, Artai Sanchez Keller, Contamination,
Voluptas FS 2018

Charbonnet: Another digression, if I may: Are you familiar with the mov-
ie *Novembertage* (1989/90) by Marcel Ophüls (*1927)? The BBC asked
Ophüls to interview people crossing the Berlin Wall on November 9,
1989, and then again several years later, in order to document transversal
changes in the way people comprehended their newly acquired freedom.
Surprisingly, not all of these people evaluated these changes positively.
Many of them had experienced serious difficulties in adapting to their
new political environment, and mourned the downfall of their previous
state despite their newfound freedom of movement. It is fascinating and
moving—and to certain extent also puzzling—to see how people utilized
their imagination to project an illusionary cultural synchronization with
the other side of the wall. But when the unified territory was formed, this
multiplicity of imaginative potentialities became a concrete reality.
Gerber: In *Novembertage*, there is obviously a very strong temporal com-
ponent: an extended time frame, and then another time after. In gaming,
you have also a very strong temporal dimension: you have a beginning and
you have an end, a game over, and then you can start again and move on.
How do you treat the aspect of time in architecture?

Charbonnet: It is a dimension which is often neglected. As an architect, you are only asked to fulfill an immediate requirement. A short-term perspective drives most of the decision-making processes. But *what* of the effect of time onto architecture?

If we consider the *Portraits* series we led at the ETH prior to *Voluptas*, the images produced were black and white. They became shades of gray, for they were mourning representations, something that had been lost.

Time is definitely a dimension that we intend to investigate: in our competition entry for the ETH Lausanne (EPFL) pavilions, we intentionally "staged" a general law of physics to contradict the peremptory, and all too transient, dynamic of technology: what can be experienced in the present could remain unchanged over time, not as an architectural feature as such, but as the experience of architecture itself. The resilience and appropriateness of architecture should be measured over time. Any architectural project can fulfill immediate requirements; what is more ambitious, and more difficult to achieve, is the "stamina" of an idea, whether it is on a semiological or purely performative level. I tend to think that nothing can really curb the passage of time, and that therefore nothing really is bound to an end, as William Faulkner (1897-1962) noted: "The past is never dead; it's not even past".[6]

Heiz: I tend to think of the matter slightly differently: Yes! A building in and of itself comes to an end—but only for its original purpose. I mean, this is where it really begins, where a situation is activated and later instrumentalized by people. The urban is the sum of all lived experiences, just as Venice is the sum of all sensuous realities projected unto it—it is not built substance on the "margins," as such, but everything that takes place in its vicinity. Building as an author is therefore not enough: one has to consider the actor's side of it!

Charbonnet: One can easily realize how difficult it is to activate such an understanding of urbanity—now that the *oikos* has taken over the *polis*—*oikos* and *polis* do not evolve along the same timeline, and most importantly, do not have the same requirements. While economic stipulations are always quantifiable—if unpredictable—and enslaved by short-term profitability, the urban is a much more diffuse and complex realm, in which highly subjective, contradictory, almost explosive potentialities are being orchestrated. Any rule or norm (whether soft or hard) is actually

---

6 | William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951).

reframing imaginary potentials. It is a very serious matter, just as it is to suggest that any decision can be legitimized through conventions or legal frameworks. A result of this is that one faces non-liable entities more often than responsible political actors. I mean, architecture is simply not being debated, beyond its feasibility or its current appearance.

Gerber: That is odd indeed!

Regarding responsibility, it is interesting that you always present yourselves as an office that does not follow rules. Concerning your planned involvement in video games in your teaching, it is noteworthy that you have decided to turn to a different medium, and one which is highly regulated by rules. Isn't that a paradox, because you cannot avoid rules? If you play chess, for example, you have to respect the rules …

Charbonnet: Yes, but chess is an interesting, yet tricky example. Algebraically, the first move begins a spiral into multiplicity. After both players have initiated their moves, 400 possible board setups exist. After the second pair of turns, there are 197,742 possible games; after three moves, there are 121 million, and so forth. Therefore, there are more possible scenarios on a chessboard than physicists estimate to be the total number of atoms in the universe! Through a series of extreme constraints, you end up with …

Gerber: … more freedom.

Heiz: We are often accused of not playing by the rules in our competition entries; but again, rules are there to be questioned, if not contradicted. We are interested in the conditional, not in the conventional, and consider our practice as *eu*-topian more than *u*-topian!

Gerber: What kind of relationship do *Voluptas* and gaming environments have with the "real"? It seems you are saying that when you are breaking the rules, you remain within a range of possibilities. How "different" will this world be?

Charbonnet: We are not yet far along enough to define, once and for all, where we are going. But what we can say is that we did not initiate *Voluptas* out of frustration with the actual world. *Voluptas* is, instead, a sort of imaginative tool to investigate the condition of the present: students are systematically confronted with a contemporary predicament and are asked to turn these notions into the *agents* of their project. Our aim is to precipitate an accurate understanding of the notion over the years through "combinatory dynamics"—each topic is subsequently perceived through the diffracting lens or active prism of the composition. *Voluptas* is built

upon *desire* rather than upon objective provision: its "Euclidian" form is that of an *arborescence*, a directed tree graph.

Gerber: In this sense, the expertise you bring to games is not that of an architect who builds houses, but rather, an architecture of desire.

Heiz: Yes. We should push towards the non-utilitarian, in order to produce new "desirable needs."

Gerber: I have one final question. It is now quite is clear what you can contribute to the work of game spaces. But what do you think you will learn? I could imagine, for example—if you allow me to anticipate your answer—that one thing might be this missing urban dimension you referenced. Do you think this might be something with which you could engage?

Charbonnet: Well, we are definitely interested in learning about the specific frameworks of the gaming industry; we aim to cultivate and develop, a virtual environment for gaming purposes. The *how* is yet to come, but it is also important to state that this studio will be linked to a research program, which aims to model the forces at stake while designing—not as an exclusive and dogmatic series of precepts, such as the *Five Points* by Le Corbusier (1887-1965), but as a dynamic, driven by an array of what Gilles Deleuze would call *précurseurs sombres*: the prerequisites for any event to take place.

Heiz: To me, one of the true delights of being an architect lies in the intensity of our encounters with specialists, with craftsmen, who embody an inherited form of tacit knowledge. *Voluptas* should be an invitation to generate similar encounters, but in the context of an imaginative and open realm.

Gerber: It is a kind of BIM [Building Information Modeling] of imagination and desire [laughs]!

Heiz: Sort of, yes [laughs]!