Epilogue: Recalibrating the Profession

This book addresses a particular period in terms of architecture thinking, focusing mainly on societal transformations and the role of architecture from 1968 to 1989. At the same time, its intent is broader than historical documentation of the architecture debate in this period. The particular pattern-seeking of ideas here is aimed at appraising this work in terms of its continued conceptual and material significance to the challenges facing architecture today.

It is my hope that the very notion of a plausible relation between the social and the formal can reintroduce breathing room in a debate marked by utility and instrumentality, which are both eminently modern notions. Allowing ideas and buildings to be discussed both on their own merits and in relation to one another may provide a more entangled way of looking at architecture. Understanding architecture in terms of situated autonomy and embodied knowledge takes it out of the realm of modernist conviction and into a contemporary discourse on agency and limitations. I hope to have shown how deeply the 1970s resonate with the current time, offering valuable insights into the intended and the unforeseen effects of architecture in its complex negotiation of social intervention and formal articulation. There are additional examples throughout the 1970s that lend credence to this resonance, such as Bernard Tschumi's 1977 'Advertisements for Architecture' that call attention to the sensuous nature of buildings, showing the state of decay of the canonical modern villas and reinterpreting architecture through its unforeseen material effects.[1]

The main argument put forward in this book is that the work of Ungers and Koolhaas (both written and built) reveals particular features relevant to the changes facing architecture today. In order to do so, I have highlighted a number of core ideas in their work – written, drawn and built – that I believe hold potential for a more entangled reflection on and in the discipline.

Both architects have been part of, or at least present for, significant changes in architecture over the past 40 to 50 years, engaging with the legacy of modernism and its critiques by Team 10, with the rise of postmodernism and with new ideas on the city, to name a few focal points.[2] Their ideas have undergone various iterations over the past decades, but their key features are built on a shifting sensibility in the 1970s, when the globalizing economy increasingly became part of local concerns, and at the same time, the limitations of architecture as a redemptive force also became more apparent. Rather than a traditional history, this book attempts to provide a plausible theory of architectural ideas from the 1970s forward, that is conceptualized, materialized and entangled.

As the world transitions into a future that is increasingly difficult to predict, the built environment is relevant but not a determining force – it sits somewhere between innovative applied art and service profession. At the same time, the synthesis required of the architect – all the systems that need to be connected – is a type of expertise that is increasingly important. While many architecture manifestoes of the twentieth century have been alternately optimistic about the range and impact of architecture on society, or focused internally on the disciplinary ability to provide individual awareness of the logic of inhabitation and built form, the challenges of the twenty-first century do not allow for either position as exclusive approach.

In some ways, the public position of the architect has become more rather than less important, but not as the modernist genius with an internal motivation and highly individual drive. The field of architecture continues to require a strong internal drive, but adapted to a more pressing need for collaboration in the face of great challenges. Climate adaptation is clearly first and foremost: as the IPCC report of October 2018 unequivocally demonstrated in hard facts, the climate is heating up faster than any current measures can temper.[3] At best, the world can hope to limit the temperature rise to 1,5 to 2 degrees Celsius, which will already require major adaptations in the built environment, from reconfiguring the coastline areas vulnerable to flooding, to the urban centres suffering from higher temperatures than the surrounding countryside. The contribution of the built environment to carbon emissions, currently around 40 per cent of total worldwide emissions, needs to be tempered. Experiments with different materials and reuse are small steps towards decreasing the impact. On a larger scale, addressing urban heat islands and 'greening' cities are being expanded. In many domains, the challenges are so large that they seem difficult to address in a single work,

but the variety of engagements in material reuse and systemic approaches to resources and energy use are beginning to give rise to a number of interesting experiments.

The economy and the climate are demonstrably at odds, and architecture's strange hybrid self-identity between art, service, economic driver and future scenario suggests that a close self-examination could help reinvigorate the field, if it takes its social responsibility seriously. This is not to say that the future will be safeguarded by a more ethical profession, but the innovation that goes into current requests of developers for smaller apartments and higher profit margins might be put to better use in finding habitable and adequate dwellings in coastal areas, or tiny houses that provide sufficient spatial quality to house not just an urban elite. On this level, the effects of the 2020 pandemic have raised crucial questions on housing security, as well as shown the need for a healthy urban environment.

Beyond the urgency of climate change, there are also issues of social justice that have become increasingly present. While not everything falls within the responsibility of architecture, our built environment does project a portrait of how we wish to live. In essence, it expresses a cultural unconscious, but it is also self-conscious, allowing it to push forward with new ideas. And if Churchill was right, and our buildings shape us, then there is potential to transform society – although neither as widely as presumed by the Modern Movement, nor as radically as suggested in the 1960s. Instead, there is a subcutaneous, surgical potential to nudge inhabitants towards slightly better choices in relation to a living, breathing Gaia.

What Ungers and Koolhaas both show in their work is a wide-ranging intellectual and professional engagement with society at large. Their recurring refusal of social impact in their interviews is less an indication of cynicism or helplessness than it is a tempering of expectations. Counter to what is often understood, these two architects, like their many colleagues worldwide, are deeply serious about architecture, and put stock in its importance to society. They are impatient with the suggestion that architecture is mere window dressing and cannot abide by the notion that it is irrelevant. Yet they are equally marked by the unbridled optimism of the mid-century experiments: they are aware that their production is part of a greater economic and cultural cycle, and therefore limited in its range.

And their own work is limited as well, by their experience and their styles. While Koolhaas has often referred to the many contributors in his office, his presence is also sufficiently dominant to allow others to fade into the

background. In the many shifts of the office over the period 1990 to the present, collaborators and partners have often founded their own office rather than remaining in the OMA constellation. This suggests that the narrative of the visionary architect is currently still too strong to allow equal and valued contributions to clearly rise to the surface. This is in part attributable to the forceful presence of Koolhaas in the office, and in part to the architecture media that still appeal to the notion of the solitary genius. Nevertheless, more recent experiments in the formation of architecture offices such as London's Assemble and the Belgian BC Architects show that the field is also evolving. Collaborations and new ways of working are systematically explored by a younger generation, and the current culture of building may catch up. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, architects seem to be assuming a greater variety of roles, such as developer or founder of housing cooperatives, while project-based collaborations are also on the rise. Assemble is perhaps the most visible collaboration in the architecture media, but other collaborations are to be found in European countries, such as ROTOR in Belgium, and Superuse Studios in the Netherlands. These last two offices in particular, which both focus on circularity and reuse, demonstrate the need for a broader expertise, which is not necessarily part of the traditional organization of the architecture office. The images of many young designers clustered around 'the master' – think, for example, of Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier – feel somewhat outdated in this day and age.

Moreover, the intertwined relation between architecture and society means that it is not easy to escape the restrictions of the cultural field and time. The collective unconscious seeps through, also affecting the public presence of the architect. For example, OMA's renovation of Rijnstraat 8, the 1992 building of the former Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment – now housing two ministries and two governmental organizations – has been criticized for failing to provide sufficient workspace. Yet the parameters for office space were provided by the client, based on a number of assumptions about remote work and flexible workweeks. As the building itself manifests these conditions, it seems natural to question the architect's design. Yet should we not also question the assumptions of the programme brief, and by extension, the culture that is transmitted in this manner? Questions such as these surface throughout Reinier de Graaf's book *Four Walls and a Roof* (2018), which collects various observations on the practice of architecture in a global economy that show how dependent the profession is on cultural contexts and assumptions.[4]

Shifting Architecture, from Visionary Projects to Entangled Approaches

Rather than retreating into its own boudoir, architecture as a whole may benefit by embracing a more complex approach. The challenges currently facing the profession are multiple. The high-profile production often assumed to be the final goal of studying architecture – a museum, a library, a large villa – is only a marginal part of the building stock. Instead, much of what is needed is a thoughtful manner of building what Willem Jan Neutelings has often called the 'bulk' of architecture. There is a vast need for considered renovation and transformation projects, to renew the existing building stock. In urban centres around the globe, there are infill projects that require a careful negotiation of their surroundings.

Around the world, housing security is shifting rapidly and asymmetrically, which also raises architectural concerns. As attractive urban centres become magnets for global capital, the housing markets shift, pushing out social housing in favour of real estate that facilitates high-income speculation.[5] In some areas, this has led to increasing protest (such as the Toronto rent strikes of 2018), while in others 'tiny houses' or other downsized living environments are gaining traction.[6] For now, the urban centres or their directly surrounding rings are still growing, attracting many new occupants, but the question is how long this will continue with rising real estate prices, and particularly in the wake of the 2020 pandemic, when a series of lockdowns recalled the value of greenery and public spaces in urban centres.

While there are many new challenges and developments, there is an undercurrent in the work of Ungers and Koolhaas that continues to hold relevance: the openness to different influences and to a changing profession. Situating architecture at the crossroads of a disciplinary autonomy and a service to society, there are elements in their approach that appeal to long gone days of authority, yet there are also more hopeful aspects, which suggest that the architect might provide some expertise in connecting various systems and needs.

Koolhaas and Ungers's teaching and writing in particular provide a view to other approaches. Some of the earliest work of Koolhaas – the dry observations of the *Haagse Post* articles – provides a foundation for observing without judgement, for taking on the surroundings with an interest. And while the portrayal of Koolhaas as a visionary may not be the best way forward, the various collaborations in and outside of the office do suggest some

potential. The work of Ungers stands as an example of a broad intellectual approach with extensive knowledge of historical examples, which he used to illuminate the qualities present in architecture, and the type of knowledge and reflection needed to achieve this. The challenge now may be to face forward with both historical knowledge and a collaborative mindset as standing practice in architecture, rather than as exception. This may require rethinking design curricula as well, fostering a more collaborative and situated approach in the studio.

Two aspects of the twenty-first century seem fairly uncontested: that the global dependencies and interconnections have resulted in an unprecedented complexity, and that climate change presents an urgency that can no longer be ignored. In the face of these issues, architecture might appear to be just a marginal endeavour, but it has some features that make it valuable for addressing future challenges, provided an increased culture of openness and collaboration is fostered. Bringing order to (apparent) chaos: the idea put forward by Ungers in 1976 that our image-work is a manner of structuring the world around us, may help to understand why architecture often maintains such evocative power. Additionally, it synthesizes complex interdependencies; the architect ensures that different systems and structures are brought into a coherent whole. The spatial structuring of these interdependencies requires the ability to understand interfaces and interference. Finally, as a field situated 'between' many others – part engineering, part creative endeavour, part social analysis – architecture reveals the ambiguous nature of knowledge, and in so doing can help to more fundamentally grasp the mutual benefits of different perspectives.

In a lecture given online in 2020, Anna Tsing noted that the contemporary to her is about teasing out lines of thought that both show the patchiness of current developments and push back at the singular narratives of modernity.[7] More to the point in addressing the projects presented here, she noted how the central 'designers' of the current age (referring mainly to an engineering mindset, but the comment may equally hold for the visionary architect) have rarely looked beyond the boundaries of their project to the unforeseen and unintended consequences. This approach to the world at large, seeking out the unexpected and the unpredictable entanglements of people, animals, things, holds great promise for rethinking the role of architecture in the twenty-first century.