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Tom Emerson

A+

ARCHITECTURE
IN BELGIUM

6a architects
NEVER MODERN

CONFÉRENCE | LEZING | LECTURE

11.05.2015

GUIDE | GIDS | GUIDE



Mayfair Shop
Paul Smith,
London

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Isabelle Kruyts : + 32 4 230 12 74
isabelle.kruyts@spi.be
Bernadette Marcourt : + 32 4 230 12 67
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The British firm 6a architects wraps up the 2014-2015 Bozar Architecture / A+ Architecture in Belgium international lecture cycle season on 11 May. Continuing the coproduction developed since the start of the season, this lecture echoes the latest issue of A+, which deals with temporary architecture. Indeed, 6a architects has developed several highly refined projects for galleries, exhibition design and shop interiors. Generally speaking, they concern the project lead-time, on the one hand, and the supposed permanence of architecture, on the other, a singular look you can learn more about in the interview published in this guide. Their most representative projects include the South London Gallery and Raven Row art exhibition centre in London, the renovation of the fashion section of the Victoria & Albert Museum, and more recently Paul Smith's shop in London's Mayfair, which won last year's Civic Trust Award. Their Tree House project is currently featured in the *City Outside the City* exhibition organised by the V&A at De Singel in Antwerp and 6a architects will be the next guests of Maniera, which has invited them to develop an original furniture project. Bearing in mind this topicality, we are delighted to welcome Tom Emerson for his lecture in Belgium.

Marie-Cécile Guyaux
A+ Programme co-ordinator

This hand-out is published on the occasion of the lecture of Tom Emerson organized by Bozar Architecture/A+ Architecture in Belgium at the Centre for Fine Arts Brussels on the 11th of May 2015.

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4^e editie/édition - 13:00-20:00

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< SEMINARS

- Rudy Ricciotti:
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The permanence of continual change

6a architects, the London firm formed by Tom Emerson and Stephanie MacDonald in 2001, has completed a string of remarkable projects in the British capital. As a prelude to his lecture at the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels on 11 May, Tom Emerson spoke with A+ about exhibition designs, historical contexts and materiality in his firm's projects.

The ephemeral dimensions of architecture hold an important place in your corpus of projects, particularly in terms of interior layouts or exhibition designs. How do you see the temporary character of these projects compared to the durability that is culturally attributed to architecture?

That's a difficult question. We think of our projects as permanent, but at the same time we know that those places will change again in future, sooner or later. It's not a standpoint on the ephemeral but rather a way of fitting in with the natural changes in the city, the programme variations, large-scale neighbourhood redevelopments. We are part of this continual change. Our projects are often based in existing buildings, historical neighbourhoods, which have been regularly redeveloped. For example, the Raven Row gallery in Spitalfields, dates from the end of the 17th century

and has been redeveloped almost continually ever since. Thirty years ago this area of London's east end was completely bulldozed to allow the financial district to grow. It would have been impossible to envisage a modern art gallery in this building ten years ago.

In exactly the same way, the projects that we are building now are new, but they are also strongly influenced by the earlier sites and they still have an element that imposes itself from the outside: like old foundations or a party wall. That goes for the new residential apartment building we're now conceiving in Cambridge, for which we based our competition plan on the recurring elements in the existing buildings. Buildings around a courtyard are common in Cambridge, but they are always empty, with a perfect lawn you're not allowed to walk on: so we have dreamed up a courtyard very



Raven Row, Contemporary art exhibition centre, Spitalfields, London, 2009.



Raven Row, Contemporary art exhibition centre, Spitalfields, London, 2009.



6a architects x Paul Smith, 11 Albemarle Street, Mayfair, London, 2013.

similar to the classic courtyards, but filled with a forest. We are also interested in the spatial distribution between the rooms and staircases, which is something else that is very specific to Cambridge, and to Oxford, with the aim of changing it.

The title of your book is 'Never Modern'. In 1991 Bruno Latour published 'We Have Never Been Modern'. Does your approach to the temporality of projects perhaps agree with the ideas of Bruno Latour?

With Irénée Scalbert, it's a thought we have had for a long time on Bruno Latour's argument, on the division between culture and nature and on the necessity today of trying to bring them together and be a bit more natural; to replace revolution with evolution in the creation process. We try to work in a kind of historical DIY way, to find signs, tangible or cultural indices that sometimes reveal the anecdote, and that arise from the situation in which one is building. We try to assemble them to create a project and find the materials from which several situations will emerge.

Both on your website and in your book your projects are presented in a highly narrative way, almost like illustrated

fairytale. Does narration also have a place as an architectural design tool in your practice?

It is perhaps not something one thinks of deliberately. All our projects are located in very dense situations, laden with stories, often drawn from many sources, and disputed. So one always tries to find a common thread that weaves through the historical truths. We do not try to develop stable conceptual principles, rather we follow paths, tracks, that sometimes lead to dead ends and sometimes lead us into the light to explain a place and little by little write a different history for the project. The narration also allows us to be more supple, more agile, to think up solutions that are not rhetorical. In a London context, where, with the exception of commercial projects, everything is slow, complicated and challenged, narration is a way of taking hold of the project and getting it moving.

Is that linked to the quality of your clients, who do not expect big gestures and stable concepts, but rather prefer to go on a journey with the architect?

Yes, that's part of it. Our clients do not have any pre-conceived ideas about how a project will look when we start. Art galleries are contracting parties that are used

to work with artists. The journey is very important in our opinion and these clients are not buying a concept or a product, but rather a process, a relationship.

For Paul Smith's shop in Mayfair, for example, we arrived without a plan to show, but we already had the cast iron in our heads. We gave Paul Smith a wide selection of examples of how cast iron is used in London, in engineering and infrastructure but also as decoration, like sewers, city lights, fences and gates. Cast iron is found in front and behind every space in London. That's what interested him. He was hooked on a process rather than a final object.

Materiality actually seems to be essential in your projects. How do you define the experience of the material when designing your projects?

In fact, we do not associate a material to an atmosphere. With the exception of Raven Row, all our projects are completed on small budgets. So we have to very quickly find pertinent and realistic construction strategies. Once the construction method has been established, be that wood, plaster or cast iron, we work on it to exhaust its possibilities. In London, the material palette is mixed and approximate. It revolves around wood, steel and brick. It's not very pure. That doubtless also explains why we don't work from concepts. In Switzerland, where I teach, one can build something completely in concrete, from the foundations to the roof. I think that sometimes, we would all like to be Swiss... but we are not.

How do you address this question of materiality with your students at ETH in Zurich precisely?

We work in two complementary ways. On the one hand we do large-scale surveys of cities and landscapes, often post-industrial sites. On the other hand, we try out the building at 1/1 scale. We then try to find strategies that trace the landscape and the materiality that ensues from it. Often the links are found in the margins and these are minute traces that play a part in the definition of a place or a territory.

The current issue of A+ focuses on interior design and ephemeral architecture. You have completed several such projects, for exhibitions and art galleries, as well as for the Oki-ni store. What are the main points that prevail in your approach to this? Could it be said that the Oki-ni store is designed like a theatre space?

Oki-ni was our first project. It's a menswear shop on Savile Row, London's prime destination for bespoke

suits. It's fairly experimental: you cannot buy anything there. They don't have any products, only examples. All sales are online. At the time, in 2001, it was fairly radical and it was part of the resistance of the street to the immediate satisfaction of consumption. In this conception, we wanted the space to be very open to the street, so there is no display window. We also wanted to create a confusion of typologies. For example, by giving the space more of a domestic than a commercial quality – with heaps of felt in the measurements of a bed arranged on the floor, partition walls at the height of a doorway serving as rods; or by taking inspiration from the shape of the plan of the proscenium of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico, which creates a false perspective; or by creating a floor on a slight slope. All of these elements to allude to other typologies of spaces so as to create a different atmosphere. In the course of the months, the managers tested several sets with the objects. It was very interesting to see how some were very attractive and others were not. They retained this design for six years.

For exhibitions, we create two types of design element: furniture and walls. We mainly use the works as our starting point, the dialogue between the works and the walls, the path followed by visitors. With regard to furniture, we always try to create very light, very small furniture, so they can be reused after the installation. We give them a certain look. It's clear that they are part of the building, but they must be light.

Limited edition furniture is currently being prepared for Maniera and will be presented at Henry Van de Velde's Hotel Wolfers in Brussels on 24 April 2015. Would you be able to give us a foretaste?

It's a set of simple objects, a table, a stool, a low table and so on. The project is centred on plywood furniture with wallpaper. It is connected with self-build, for our technological generation in a way. Every home, or almost every home, has a cordless drill nowadays. So it's linked to the notion of crafts, but it's a work that is still being developed so I cannot say too much...



Oki-ni Flagship Store, Savile Row, London, 2001.

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Plan-A architectuurbureau - © André Nulens



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