

# FOA INTERVIEWED BY PAUL FINCH

**Paul Finch:** What is the role of exhibitions for FOA?

**Alejandro Zaera-Polo:** We have done only a few monographic shows. We've been trying to use them as a way of gaining some distance from our daily practice. When you are working on projects you are involved in a number of things that don't allow you to see what you are doing on a larger scale. That is what we've been trying to do in our series of exhibitions, setting up a system to assess where are we going, how we can assist that process and whether we are making any progress, rather than simply letting the practice be driven by immersion in commissions.

**PF:** The dilemma in this sort of exhibition is the extent to which you make it retrospective, or make it say something new about some unknown future condition. You're trying to look at what you've done, but also to divine where that is leading you as a practice, irrespective of where the next commission comes.

**AZP:** It's not as if we are testing prototypes for future buildings. It's more a way of devising an instrument, a tool, that will enable us to fine-tune the practice as a whole and to assess where are we going, the identity of the practice, and whether there is a consistency. We are trying to theorise the practice of what we call the second generation of globalised architects.

**PF:** What was the first generation? Do you mean the International Style?

**AZP:** No, more recent. Corb (Le Corbusier) was obviously one of the architects that practised internationally, but in his time the situation was very different. Even people working transnationally were far more dependent on a particular city. I don't even know whether Mies van der Rohe can be considered in the same way...

**PF:** He used to work in Germany and then he worked in America.

**AZP:** Exactly, he was well known but finally he had these two locations, and I think that the first really globalised generation were the so called "star architects", now ranging between 55 and 75 years old. This was the generation that emerged after the crisis of Corporate Modernism (the generation that emerged through The Architect's Collaborative, SOM, etc.). The large corporate practices entered a crisis in the late 70's: nobody believed that architects were doing scientific research or collective work. The star system emerged as an alternative to this. There are a number of people that see themselves as a star in a constellation, playing the same game from different positions, being competitive but at the same time having a strong relationship with each other. The main argument they use to operate in this environment is style. So the consistency of the work of each architect developed as a signature, a brand, that they could deploy anywhere worldwide. This was neither good or bad: it was an evolution of what existed before. But we think that conditions now are such that the level of globalisation means there is a different pace of communication between locations. The commissioners are more informed and interested in architects looking at the client's own problems rather than being landed with a signature building.

**PF:** How do you differ?

**AZP:** We think that our generation is generally more interested in working with specific materials

or locations. We are much more interested in engaging specifically with localities, and exploring their potential when seen from a distant perspective. A lot of people in our generation have said style is not important — every project is a work on its own, you have to start from scratch every time. But this is also crazy. You cannot have an architect thinking that every new commission is an entirely new thing so that you have to almost erase everything from your mind and start from scratch...

**PF:** The old joke: the same difference everywhere. You can't avoid bringing your beliefs to a particular situation. Does this mean that in reviewing your own work through exhibitions you operate a Darwinian selection process? Can you see ideas you once held dropping off, if they were only useful once and couldn't be used on more than one occasion? Or are you trying to synthesise every idea you have ever had so you can relate it, in some way, to your work as a whole?

**Farshid Moussavi:** A bit of both. In the ICA exhibition, we've been more interested in the evolution of ideas rather than the ideas that have been dropped or those that continue to develop. The experiment throughout the exhibition is to look back at the work and see where the repetitions are and what are the tools and techniques that we carry with us. Also how the work relates to context or what we refer to as ecosystems — the issues, parameters and problems that are fed to us from the outside. So the exhibition tries in some ways to map the trajectory of the office as an evolutionary idea.

**PF:** When you come to a new situation, you're using techniques of analysis and identification of certain conditions in a certain place, and you can see how you've used these techniques in projects to date, both built and unbuilt. Does this mean that you're happy with the idea that we could only identify one of your buildings if we saw the analysis drawings, or do you like the idea that people could look at the completed building and say that it must be by FOA?

**AZP:** What we are doing with this series of shows is in fact developing a number of prototypes or forms and organisations that become almost first nature. The initial name that we had for the show was FOA's Ark. So it's as though we've been collecting or breeding these animals in different ecosystems. Because we work across different 'ecosystems', you start hybridising, importing them and exporting them, testing them in different grounds — we very much like this idea. In fact the show is called *Breeding Architecture*, it's like winemaking, in a way. The wine-maker knows he produces a certain effect if the wine is cultivated in a particular way. There is a relationship between closed organisations and ecosystems. That doesn't mean you deploy a stylistic idea no matter where you go; you deploy a seed that 'takes' in a certain way. Learning what seeds are required by certain ecosystems is part of the experience.

**FM:** This requires expertise that the practice develops in time, and that is why we needed to wait until we had a population of projects sufficiently large to start thinking about them.

**PF:** An ability to cultivate ideas in a different environment is a good basis for doing international competitions. How do you balance the attraction of working in a particular country with the sort of client you may end up working with?

**FM:** What we are trying to put forward is that it is not only people who work outside of where they are based who face this situation, this also exists in London for people who practice here. This situation has reached such a level that we can no longer assume that the kind of culture around us is something that we all understand. You cannot really typify our clients, their ambitions are different, what they want from a project is different, and so there is no longer a consensus on how architecture should be practised. This is something architects also face in their own homeland, to

some extent we have all become foreigners in our own land. Of course when you travel it becomes more extreme. When we went to work in Japan it was more difficult to communicate at a basic level as we didn't speak the same language, but people also had less and less in common.

**AZP:** That's one of the reasons why in the ICA show we don't just have an analysis of the projects, instead we have two rooms: one of them we call operative systems or seeds; and the other one ecosystems. This follows the idea of architecture as something that synthesizes not by design or by some sort of artistic will, but through negotiation of things that we are taking with us: seeds, tendencies, operative systems and what we call environments and ecosystems. Our relationship with clients, climates, building technologies, capacity of construction industries, notably alters the growth of the species.

**PF:** Does this mean a formal environmental agenda? How do architects with environmental concerns take on board an environmental agenda without ending up in predictable design dead end?

**FM:** Our first experience of this was when we worked on a competition for a national park in Toronto. It had to become a destination park but they didn't know how they wanted to use it. We talked to all the consultants we were working with and realised that if we would divert the storm water pattern from the natural dendritic pattern we could 'grow' a certain micro-climate that would encourage marshy vegetation, while cleaning the water. This was done by reconfiguring the earth and topography, but the ultimate goal was environmental. Architecture can deal with all these issues and find the opportunities in these systems.

**PF:** The justification for some aspects of current modernism is environmental. The reason that you have to have this kind of architecture now is that it's good for the planet and it's really good for cities. Obviously there is truth in this but it's an argument to suit the times. A generation ago the justification was about form, function, the integration of engineering and so on. But what you are saying is that it's the process of thinking about an entire condition, rather than thinking about single technical problems, which is important. This combination of analysis, proposition and process in relation to building and landscape is a very distinctive aspect of your work. Perhaps that is because in the global condition, an attitude to earth, to surface and to object is something you regard as seamless?

**FM:** Well we always say that we are very interested in the relationship between architecture and the fabric that it sits within, that projects are not grown in a vacuum, they grow in a particular context. So in many contexts they are urban projects, either parks or infrastructures, and they therefore grow almost seamlessly out of the public ground. They proliferate in the public ground rather than become objects that sit on it but are disconnected. Not all projects are landscapes, and in fact the show is trying to communicate that even some of the projects in a dense fabric — that are much more 'boxey' — are connected to the ground in a topographical way. There is a continuity, a formal investigation that ties them together.

**PF:** This might mean that for any given situation there is almost an inevitable answer, once you've done your analysis, except if the brief changes. Let's suppose you do a black box, it's in an urban situation, you've got some topography, you do some analysis and you've got a design that breeds and grows. But then somebody says, it might be the planner or the client, no, it can't be at that angle and it can't be at that height, and incidentally it can't be that colour either. Do you say that your design process can simply start again with the new conditions, or does your analysis say that the proposed changes are wrong?

**FM:** No, this is not a univocal system; you are likely to have a multiplicity of solutions in every situation. The best one achieves maximum consistency across the space. I think our South Bank project is a very good example. What is important is working in a diagrammatic way rather than working with the final shape as a kind of departure point. That way the process is more robust in the face of changes. We didn't really have an exact brief; we were told that one half of the site cannot have more construction, the other half is open metropolitan land, you can't build above a particular level, but you can build below it. Then there were a series of levels and connections that one needed to make. For us, the project was very interesting as it had to be a topography that needed to remain, by nature, robust to a larger or lesser brief. The vision was always to give to the city a very large open space, never to present it as buildings. It had to be a larger open space for the city, it didn't matter if the angle was more acute or less acute, as long as you made sure the connections from the bridge to the Shell Centre were made, but the rest of it we actually changed quite radically.

**AZP:** Compared to colleagues in other countries we are very interested in the technical content of building technology. But we are also trying to see if there are constants, certain architectural organisations or architectural structures that result from being engaged with different locations.

**FM:** We were taught in different places, with very different kinds of education. I am very critical of my architectural education now that I have been a teacher for ten years or so. I think that at the time, when I went to school, architectural teaching was more like shopping, you found or made discoveries purely by accident, which I think is very different to architectural teaching in Spain. There was too little architectural discipline and this is something that we have tried to teach our students — not ideas, but a discipline to be able to face ideas, not ideological positions, but ways to construct constantly a position in relation to reality. This notion of discipline is something that really lacked in my education, instead, you might accidentally discover a book or magazine that somehow inspired a project. I think architectural education has moved on a lot in the UK in all the schools. It is much more about research, about teaching and discipline, a discipline of thinking.

**AZP:** My education was strict, but in a way the design input was also quite random. It was a very large school, and you fell into one group or another almost by accident. But there was a huge weight of technical content. I used to be able to calculate the structure of an eleven-storey building with a calculator, calculate the size of the reinforcement bars, I could calculate the air-conditioning, all of these things. When I went through my education I was very critical because I was thinking, 'Why the hell do I need to do that, I will never need to calculate this'. But finally, the fact is that it gives you a certain knowledge. I cannot now sit down and revise the formulas but I know what the rough size will be. And then the price, the air-conditioning, calculating the structural sections, etc. This is something in my brain that comes back all the time. I think the distinction between tactics and strategies is interesting. Perhaps it is one of the differences about this second generation of late capitalist architecture or globalised architecture. The first generation was more strategic, and the second generation is very tactical. Rather than placing yourself in position of being the great strategist you get involved in the nitty-gritty everyday discussions about mechanical services, etc., and things start to happen. This is something that occurs a lot here in the office: we are not generals, the great ideas come from the bottom up, from the emotion of tactics...

**PF:** What are the key things that you think have emerged in your work, the key strands which are really the root of what FOA does and its approach?

**FM:** We want to highlight the fact that through this process of growing individual projects in their own contexts, almost from the bottom up, we have grown a kind of species. This is very important,

it is precisely the relationship between architecture and technical issues: the engineering if you like. I want to go back to the issue of education; one of the problems that we often find in the UK is that architects are always faced with a particular process of accountability. This goes back to the fact that architectural education is supposed to be some kind of eccentric moment in your life when you are very creative and very introverted and detached from technical issues. Therefore when you go into practice, architects are not really accountable for these technical issues. Whenever these issues come up, they have to be supported by others. Basically the discipline has become more and more specialised. Of course you cannot specialise in everything, you always work with a team, but it is very important that the architect also has a knowledge of all of these things, in order to be able to fine tune them and to explore them as architectural opportunities. This is what we very much like to do in the office, not to grow architectural ideas detached from life issues that are involved in the project such as: the site, the environment, the structure. All of these may be present, or some of them may be absent in a certain project. Let's say we ignite possibilities that are emergent in a certain situation.

**AZP:** When we get a new project we look at similar ecosystems. We have an arsenal of forms or organisational systems that respond to scale, density, climate, whatever. This immediately locates a project, enabling us to consider tools that we used in previous projects, and to also see the engagement of the ecosystem that is bringing some new field of research into the practice. We think the process of our work, what we show in the exhibition, is currently more of an assessment tool than a generative tool.

**FM:** It could become that, but the challenge is how to allow contingent and specific issues to be generic, which is what we've been pursuing here. Ideally we would like to have an office large enough to include a research unit to push our practice forward by alienating ourselves from our own past, even though it is not entirely possible, so that we could branch into a new situation and be open to new discoveries. It would be very nice if it were possible to set up a research project that would provide insights and also act as a fast-forward element.

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