

'To Go Beyond or Not to Be' Unsolicited Architecture An **Interview** with Ole Bouman



The complex dynamics of today's architecture require a deep intellectual freedom. This is something that Dutch architectural critic Ole Bouman espouses through his provocative writings and lectures and his advocacy of 'unsolicited architecture'. **Luca Guido** invited Bouman to reflect on what it means to be an architect today and how it might be possible to pursue critical practice beyond the conventional construction processes.

The phenomenon of ‘theoretical meltdown’ has created a varied and complex architectural landscape. In many cases architecture has moved away from the utopian impulse that characterised it in the past, and it seems that as a discipline it is no longer able to relate to the rapid changes in today’s society or properly understand new urban paradigms.

Among those who are currently exploring and writing about the new dynamics of contemporary architecture, Ole Bouman is certainly one of the most interesting. One of his objectives is to make architects more aware of the frontiers of their profession. To him, ‘to go beyond’ – beyond form, beyond language, beyond disciplinary frontiers – is the new motto for architectural research. Indeed, ‘Architecture must go beyond itself’ was the key theme of the first issue of *Volume*, the now quarterly magazine Bouman edits, and which he founded with Rem Koolhaas and Mark Wigley.¹ And ‘Out There: Architecture Beyond Building’ was the title of the 11th International Exhibition of Architecture at the Venice Biennale (2008), directed by Aaron Betsky.

It is clear that over the last two or three decades the way of thinking about architecture has changed dramatically. Today brand, communication, and other instruments of the mass media circus that are subjected to the logic of capital and advertising, play a direct role in controlling the way we think. It is thus no coincidence that Bouman, in his articles and conferences, often deals with the concepts of intellectual freedom, agitation, power, destruction and so on. These are issues chosen by society, issues that are part of everyday reality and far from the classical contents of discipline. But how can we derive from this reality the stimulus to promote a new architecture? According to Bouman:

‘In answering this question, I’d like to focus your attention on one of the phenomenal challenges of architecture: to design without a request. The questions you have posed seem rather instrumental to me, intended to solicit my opinion about something. However, the topics you raise are not about resolving something or expressing myself; rather, they represent fields of speculation and the exploration of opportunities for architecture today.

‘My opinion doesn’t really count. What interests me the most is an assessment of the cultural and historical dynamics in which architecture finds itself today. These dynamics, of a mind-boggling nature, affect everything that we consider architecture or architectural: its

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definition, its mandate, its output, its corpus of knowledge, its education, its inspiration, its legitimacy, its techniques and methods, its social status, its communication.

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‘Architecture as a discipline still has to come to terms with this. What does it mean if a new reality has to be created with brand-new money, on brand-new sites, by brand-new clients for brand new purposes that combine Dante and Disney? Or even without a purpose ... Not all has changed. What keeps architecture for ever connected with its past is the way it articulates the encounter between space and human creativity. Perhaps it is extremely difficult to define a core for a profession that is at risk of being dissolved or realigned with new energies, but that doesn’t mean there is no architecture. As long as we move around through virtual spaces, inside buildings, around buildings, between buildings, in streets, neighbourhoods, cities and landscapes, spatial creativity will have a rationale.

‘The issue is that if you don’t perceive the big-time changes, your creativity will never be as creative as it could be. To make sure it is, you have to go beyond. Moreover, it is a matter of “To Go Beyond or Not to Be,” as *Volume* magazine puts it.²

‘Going beyond the preconceptions, expectations and accomplished facts today is not just a matter of belonging to the avant-garde of architecture. It is now more than ever an existential necessity to continue as an interesting and appealing discipline that keeps attracting the brightest minds. Architecture has always been a very conservative discipline that stuck to its foundations: shape, construction, space and place. But if we consider the emergence of temporary shapes, moving constructions, interactive spaces, non-places, to name a few contemporary architectural

Milan, Italy, 2008

This view at night captures aspects of a part of this very traditional city. Buildings follow a regular logic, aligned to road axes and organised in similar-sized blocks.



Dubai City, Dubai, 2008

Skyscrapers and buildings under construction. Planning governed by complex economic dynamics, money and entertainment, and the densification of spaces and buildings, makes this city an urban and architectural phenomenon hard to interpret with traditional disciplinary tools.

phenomena, even conservatism becomes transgressive. Never before has sheer disciplinary survival equalled such an interesting life.'

It is true that conceiving architecture as a discipline has its difficulties: if we try to understand contemporary phenomena using traditional instruments of interpretation, we will not see very far. Disciplinary autonomy has played a significant role in moving architecture further and further away from reality, but it is now evident that new architectural and urban paradigms cannot be interpreted through theories developed in libraries or university classrooms alone, or through the warnings of obsolete theories such as nihilism and neo-Heideggerism. However, despite this, many important values of the past are still deeply relevant to the challenges architects face today.

Space and time in architecture are still important, but in Issue 14 of *Volume*, Bouman introduced 'unsolicited architecture' – a new form of disciplinary autonomy for architecture, beyond building.³ Such a concept, somewhere between manifesto and provocation, seems to be a challenge, an attempt to retrieve the utopian ideals that have been lost in favour of the logic of capital. However, if we look at the practices of many of today's great architects, we could say that they have escaped the social role and pioneering vision that characterised the work of the masters of the Modern Movement. Or perhaps, more likely, they simply play a neutral role as it becomes difficult to conceive of the new terms of architectural discipline as continuous mutations:

'Now, one particular way to go beyond is to give up on the eternal preconditions of architecture: client, programme, budget and site. Architects always reacted to at least one of these, and most of the time to all four of these pillars of their practice. And if you react, it is always difficult to go beyond. Thus there are a growing number of architects who do not wait until they can react: they just act. They make unsolicited architecture.'

According to Bouman, the time has come to design not as solicited by the client, site or available budget, but unsolicited – that is, by designing the architecture first, then finding the client, site and budget for it afterwards. However, though this idea is interesting, it is not without risks.

Traditionally, architecture's contact with other cultural arenas has been sporadic and, as mentioned earlier, disciplinary autonomy has been instrumental in widening the gap between the practice of building and architectural research. Could unsolicited research, or unsolicited architecture, become a marketing tool for those few architects who can also build it? In fact, the most prominent architectural themes and large-scale urban experiments are already the prerogative of just a few

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architects who are part of the seemingly multinational corporation of the Star System. Indeed, there are nations and cities (especially those in the East) where important architectural firms are viewed as high-fashion shops. Such architects propose something that is a new brand of architecture, but at the same time a logo.

Architects' role in society is blurred and does not always allow for complete creativity. In addition, those who wish to be unconventional in their approach are rarely free from the compromises of the profession. So why should architects make unsolicited architecture?

'Why? Firstly because it keeps their architecture autonomous. The autonomy of architecture was once something about hermetic seclusion from reality; now we know that it is a matter of becoming inclusive beyond any client's expectation. Autonomy is in the drive, not in the territory. Secondly because as a service industry starts to resemble animal behaviour, only responding to a need, request or threat of a client, architecture as an art, a science, an innovation, an ideal, an adventure, an act of curiosity, an aid, a rescue, has its own agenda.

Thirdly because unsolicited architecture first of all relies on self-motivation, free thinking, curiosity, dignity, a sense of urgency and responsibility, and its antenna for opportunities.

And finally because by doing so it ultimately preserves architecture's long-term relevance and legitimacy. Unsolicited architecture is acquisition for the long term and finding new objects for the application of architectural intelligence.'

There are many indications that architects must now act differently than they have done in the past in order to meet the challenges of a changing society. However, it is not clear where architecture is going, and whether it is still necessary as we know it. It is likely that unsolicited architecture will not be the last of the theories; it is simply a part of the current general theoretical meltdown within art and architecture. **Δ**

This interview has been compiled from email correspondence between Luca Guido and Ole Bouman from May to August 2008.

Notes

1. *Volume*, No 1, *Beyond*, Archis Foundation (Amsterdam), 2005. The imprint for the magazine reads: 'Volume – independent quarterly for architecture to go beyond itself'.
2. This motto appears on the spine of each issue of *Volume* magazine.
3. Ole Bouman, 'Unsolicited, or: The new Autonomy of Architecture', in Arjen Oosterman (ed), *Volume*, No 14, 'Unsolicited Architecture', February 2008, pp 26–8. Bouman first introduced the idea of unsolicited architecture in his article 'Unsolicited Architecture', in *Volume*, No 1, *Beyond*, 2005, pp 86–91.