

# WHAT'S NEW?

**BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN (THE AARHUS SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE) IN CONVERSATION WITH MIKKEL FROST, CARSTEN PRIMDAHL AND KOLJA NIELSEN, AKA CEBRA.**

**BORIS:** It's now ten years since the three of you started CEBRA and five years since you published the first portfolio 'CEBRA\_files\_01'. What new developments are you going to tell us about?

**MIKKEL:** Naturally we have done a number of new projects since the publication of CEBRA\_files\_01, and in the process we've gained a new consciousness about our own production. The first book was a bit like a manifesto where we tried to get our ideas out in the world. To a certain degree, we have been successful with this and that's why we feel that it's now time to add some form of consideration that provides a better understanding of our background. We've started to realize that the form universe that unites our projects is more complex and different to how we first thought when we started out. Many of our former projects have changed status because we can now see them in a wider perspective.

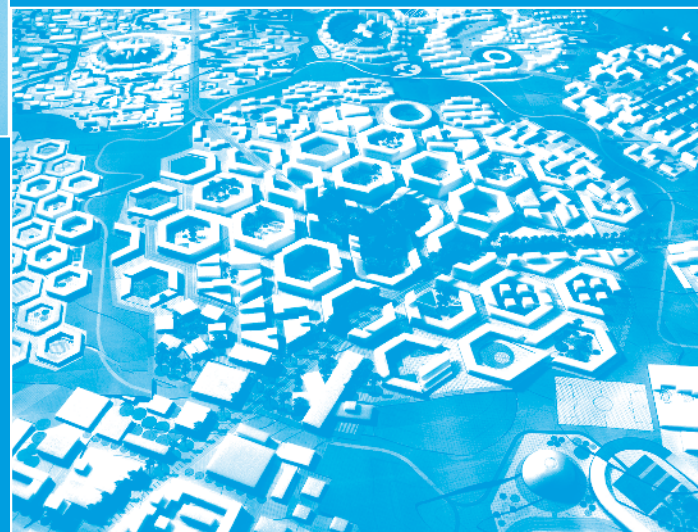
**BORIS:** What did you imagine in the start?

**KOLJA:** All three of us had some experience from other practices before we took the leap and started CEBRA. Our starting point was a joint commitment and a clear agenda to do something different. Back then we wanted to break with a certain tradition in the profession that starts the design process by developing a good organizational layout and then trying to find an architectural expression through the choice of materials, facade composition and so on. Obviously we have brought other ideas along with us, but we had a collective understanding that idea, flow, concept and form are intrinsically linked to the motivation behind a project. This was something we were passionate about doing differently and so, without wanting to sound banal, we started defining ourselves.

**CARSTEN:** We took the inspiration for our name from a zebra to reflect the fact that we consider ourselves a team who work together to develop and test new ideas. A zebra is a flock creature who can't survive alone. Our practice is not an ego trip. CEBRA signals that we believe in knowledge sharing and creative cross-pollination. The next step was to formulate our dogma, 'CEBRAlogy'. In this, we identified a core set of values that could steer the design process in a certain direction and form a creative platform from which we could work. We have a clearly humanistic base and consider ourselves to be a variety of what can be called Scandinavian welfare thinking. But CEBRAlogy is deliberately designed to be flexible enough to overcome ideological rigidity, which has proved highly beneficial because we have continually been met by obstructions and problems that challenged us in a way that ideology alone cannot solve. In reality, what characterizes us is a specific way of approaching things. This approach is hard to pin down as a fixed ideological element. What's more as time has passed, we have gotten better at exploiting and managing the complexities that automatically arise in our projects.

**BORIS:** Do you see the consistency in your work retrospectively?

**CARSTEN:** Design processes are learning by doing but, of course, we don't work blindly and can, as time goes on, see that certain subjects appear time and again to form a sort of direction. In this way, we are less reliant on a manifesto and more interested in self-reflection. We have also started tracing our ideas and viewing our projects in context. For example, we have started to put building typologies in a sort of periodic table which



we call CEBRAglyphics. This is neither a family tree, nor a chronology but a non-hierarchical list of basic components or typologies which appear in various projects. The idea for CEBRAglyphics is relatively new and came quite spontaneously.

**KOLJA:** We didn't initially realize the implications of the table but it has become increasingly relevant for our work. We have started to use this new tool as a reference when we start new projects and it enables us to miss out certain introductory phases. With CEBRAglyphics we can navigate to a basic typological figure that provides an early identity model for the project. What's more, it has also proven to be highly suitable as an internal communication tool. By using the table we can avoid problems with what we call 'quantum leap' situations by drawing on previous experience and projects, which new employees cannot be expected to know. CEBRAglyphics has become our Rosetta Stone that translates lots of implicit references to more tangible examples and specific solutions.

**BORIS:** There's a paradox we need to address before we follow up on the question of the importance of typologies in your architecture. The name CEBRA refers to a social animal whose skin forms a pattern that makes its form indefinable. But it distinctly seems as if it is form that is important for you. At the end of the day, are you not incredibly excited about form?

**MIKKEL:** It's funny you mention it because we often feel that our need to express ourselves is restrained. If we could, we would undoubtedly start some more frivolous form experiments and would love nothing more than to further develop our mode of expression. We have to confess that we have an almost neurotic tendency to take one form of expression and see how far we can go with it. We call this OCD design: architecture of obsessive compulsive disorder. But there is also an element of false logic in the current construction management rationale that dictates that everything which is not square or modular is arty-farty and expensive. We meet the same prejudice in many competitions and find it frustrating that cost-effective building processes have to be constrained by unimaginative matrices.

**KOLJA:** It's especially depressing if you consider that it is now 40 years since Jørn Utzon created his espansiva modular system and proved that repetitive elements can easily create previously unforeseen variations. Since then there have been great developments in industrialized production processes. Just think of Gramazio and Kohler's work.

**MIKKEL:** But if we get back to the importance of the form, I'm proud that you call us excited about form. That is exactly how we would like to be perceived! Of course, there is always an internal logic at play. We have created a diagram of all our different plans, and it's ironic to see that we use three very elementary architectural forms: the square, the circle and the 'bar'!

**BORIS:** But what about the section?

**MIKKEL:** The section is incredibly important and can take these three basic figures in very different directions – that much is clear. It is, of course, an exaggeration to say that we only have three forms to play with. While reducing our projects to a geometric trilogity is almost meaningless post-rationalizing, it does aid self-analysis and put things in perspective. Many of the elements in the plans that accompany the essay *Cooking* have been taken from master plans where we work in a scale that makes it necessary to use simple stamps, which just indicate some general town structures that are not at all worked through on a design level.

**BORIS:** Let's go back to the question of your relationship to typologies and geometric forms. Throughout history, there have been many attempts to define certain institutions in relation to a set of fixed typologies. For example, new rationalism in the 80s and the neoclassical prelude to the modern breakthrough, where architects tried to put the modern buildings of the time, such as post offices, railway stations and industrial factory buildings, into an existing order. Is CEBRA haunted by some sort of archaic connection to identity, function and geometric forms?

**CARSTEN:** That way of thinking is not entirely foreign to us as we actually use a form of subconscious typological logic as a critical tool. For example, if we feel a project is going in the wrong direction we stop. A kindergarten should not look like a prison. Our projects send some typological signals – so there must be a typological importance at play in our work. On the other hand, typologies are also surrounded by ridiculous clichés. A kindergarten does not necessarily have to be bursting with color. It's true that classic Euclidean geometry appears in many of our projects but we don't feel that we are slaves to archetypes. The hybrid forms we create in many of our projects almost seem to neglect the classic archetypes and as you know we enjoy twisting and turning geometrical building blocks in the extreme.

**KOLJA:** Something that is really exciting is that institutions are continually changing. A post office today is very different from a post office 25 years ago. Functions change leading to wonderful new hybrids. We have worked a lot with schools, which are in a state of constant change that makes new demands on the physical framework. You could go back to some of the classic types of school but this would, in many ways, be a shift towards the authoritarian. The classroom in Arne Jacobsen's Munkegårdsskolen in Gentofte is pretty standard and regular but the organization of the whole building is radically different when compared with, for instance, the authoritarian schools we know from the start of the past century.

**BORIS:** As a society, we grind to a halt if we cannot redefine the role of our institutions. I think that is an important point. Which roles do fixed typologies play?

**MIKKEL:** The concept of typology is an interesting subject to discuss and it is thought provoking that our projects are found in a universe of defined basic forms. We are not interested in continuously returning to a predictable starting point of stable archetypes. We are always looking for hybrids of well-known models, like the school on Bülowsvej (2009\_22) or the school in Larvik (2010\_42), where the dated horizontal program with long connecting corridors and inner courtyard rooms are turned upside down. Larvik is a complete cross-breed school, that feels like a town school in the countryside in the middle of the suburbs. This mix of program types and contexts has resulted in an exciting environment for the pupils to learn and given the school building complex a prominent position in the local area.

**CARSTEN:** The jury panel initially questioned the proposal because it didn't match up with what they had imagined, but they simply couldn't get round the fact that we had drawn up the best school.

**BORIS:** What was it that they challenged?

**CARSTEN:** We had the most sustainable project with a realistic budget, but they just saw the proposal as odd! We overstepped some cultural codes, and probably also the committee's perception of schools as a typology. It was never our ambition to provide some sleek images of something predictable. We wanted to bring a new dimension to the conventional program.

**KOLJA:** But it's true, we do like things that are odd. We often choose to go with the slightly oblique, and perhaps that is a weakness. The odd beauty we strive to create is an acquired taste. We would no doubt be commercially stronger if we tried to make architecture more mainstream and appealing to everyone. You could say that we insist on architectural design that is neither completely predictable nor in line with current trends.

**MIKKEL:** Another reason for us being slightly odd can be found in our background. Carsten has worked for Neil Denari and I've been with Bolles+Wilson. Neither Denari nor Bolles+



Wilson can be accused of being particularly concerned about moving into mainstream architecture. And this is something we have taken with us. Our architecture lies in the cross field between the commonplace and the crazily spectacular.

**BORIS:** It's interesting because in your essay *Ugliness* you write that architecture has to meet conventional standards of beauty unlike the free art forms. If not as an absolute value, then at least as a form of consensus between architect and client. That means you are unable to create an architectural version of Munch's *The Scream* or Von Trier's *Antichrist*. You are, if we are to take your essay seriously, forced to be like Claude Monet and stick with water lilies!

**MIKKEL:** Thanks for that interpretation, Boris!

**BORIS:** But you should remember that although today Monet is regularly found adorning the walls of respectable cafés, in his day he was considered shocking.

**KOLJA:** That's so true! At any rate, we try to break down clichés and expand our understanding of beauty. You could say that beauty contains

a form of boredom that we want to remove. Beauty has to be continually expanded to become what has never been seen before. Oddness is not a sensational strategy based on not quite achieving beauty. Oddness is, in our understanding, a way of pushing comfortable conventions over the edge. By odd we mean the twist or the shift that is needed to stop our work drowning in bland good looks.

**MIKKEL:** The Fuglsang Hug development (2005\_14) in Herning is a good example. It is based on some highly regular white boxes, but to avoid ending in a cul-de-sac of conventional modernistic retro, we decided to bombard the boxes with neo-brutalistic window openings. It is close to being an eyesore but we are not trying to be eccentric. Fuglsang Hug is a suburban development in an man-made lake environment. The dark frame is a slightly ironic reference to Venice and a thinly veiled declaration of love to Friis

& Moltke's holiday park, Lakolk on the Danish island of Rømø. The result is a playful graphic feature that removes visible story lines to make the apartments in the complex appear as large individual villas.

**BORIS:** I was at Fuglsang Lake quite coincidentally a while back. I wasn't aware that you were behind the design but I was in no doubt that it was CEBRA. How can that be?

**CARSTEN:** That's funny. We try to overcome some clichés but our projects always acknowledge a modernistic heritage. We also have a thing about windows! We've heard that before from others. When we had just started, we were very aware of the tough economic logic behind rational building processes. We wanted to realize our ideas and see them built, but we didn't want to be forced into a straightjacket. Our strategy has always been to explore the framework as much as possible within the given rules of play. Turnkey contracts give us

constraints that we accept as basic conditions for play while we still try to fight all restrictions with creative power. These are the conditions for the majority of jobs today.

**KOLJA:** An Icelandic developer once said to us "There's a lot of cutting and pulling going on in Denmark". This is our way of working to find new ways through the system of rigid regulations and it is reflected in part in our work with typologies. Most probably because we know in advance that there are some things that quite simply work. The challenge is to continue to reinvent traditional solutions, add some unexpected qualities and ensure new forms of experience.

**BORIS:** You mentioned Friis and Moltke as an important reference. I didn't know that you were fans of theirs.

**MIKKEL:** It's not something we feel obliged to shout about, but Friis and Moltke's buildings from the 60s and 70s provide us with a great source of inspiration. The spatial qualities they bring out of the section are something we try to continue. And strangely enough, our portfolio of work looks very similar to theirs: schools, sports halls, kindergartens and single family houses. And to return to a previous subject, Friis and Moltke's brutalistic-inspired architecture is admired by many architects, but it is not a style that has become particularly popular. Some architecture is most appreciated by other architects, and we have a challenge to spread our architecture to a wider circle. We actually experience that many skeptics start to appreciate our projects if we are given the chance to explain our ideas in more detail. Unlike many other professions, architecture is something that everyone has an opinion on. Friis and Moltke's brutalistic architecture is great – even though it does not try to please or live up to more conventional taste references. It's clear that there is a balance. We have to listen to external criticisms but we also have to believe in our professional judgment.

**BORIS:** Should we not be wary of architects who proudly declare themselves to have OCD?

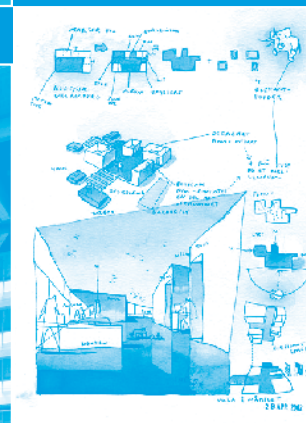
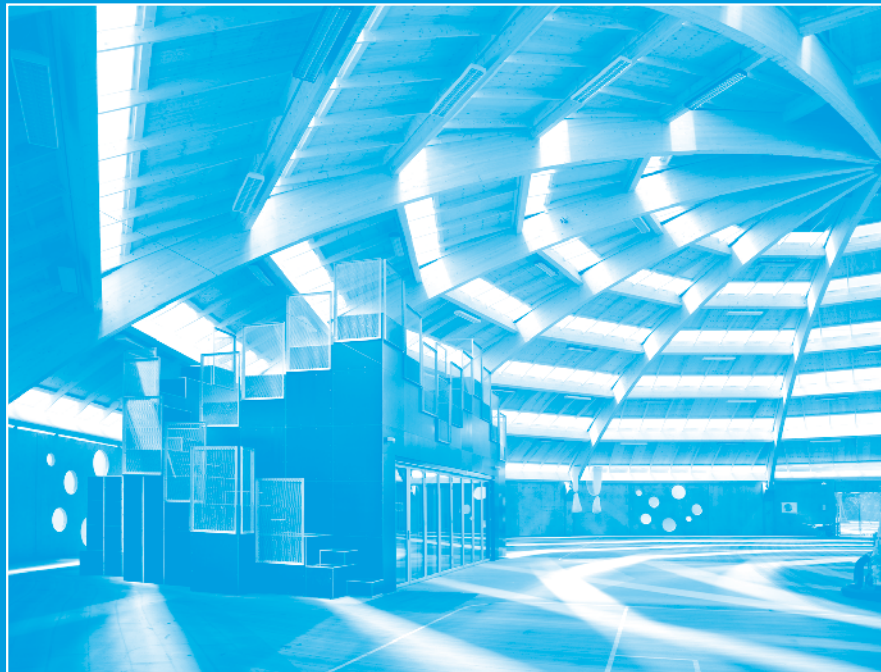
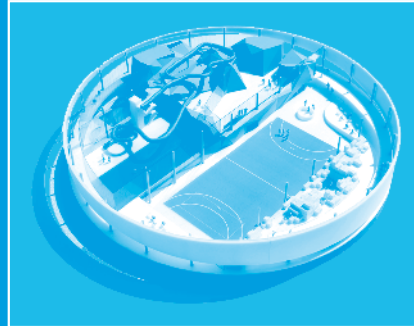
**MIKKEL:** OCD is, of course, a caricature and not at all something compulsive. Our form of OCD is fuelled by fun. What we call architecture of obsessive compulsive disorder, is in reality the courage to say, 'damn it, let's do it!'. When we discuss various model proposals for a project we often go directly after the misfit if it sends some signals about an interesting direction, or if it brings something surprising.

**KOLJA:** Once in a while, we have to take a humorous look at our ideas and sometimes we choose the idea that smacks of trouble just so we don't get bored. The compulsively neurotic use of squares at Fuglsang Hø, for example, is a way to force through something new. We can only become better architects if we dare to experiment and knowingly run the risk that it can end as a complete and utter fiasco. Pursuing a particular tangent and taking it as far as it can go can provide professional satisfaction. Tirelessly going through every aspect of a project can help create a coherence from the bigger picture down to the details and it gives a clear agenda at construction meetings. It keeps the project moving when everyone understands that a particular project is about, for example, pixels.

**MIKKEL:** What we mean by OCD design is maintaining enthusiasm throughout the entire project. We are not very good at saying: That was the end of the project. We carry on working with projects until we are stopped by a deadline. Our playful form of architecture of obsessive compulsive disorder is pretty harmless. It is not a manic formalism we are trying to push through. Our houses need to be designed to be lived in and we are very concerned with making people the focal point of our work. For example, there obviously has to be good natural light in our buildings. Ensuring basic qualities such as these is a fundamental premise in everything we do. It is almost like a fetish for us to provide comfort.

**BORIS:** I can definitely recognize what you are saying. You seem rather preoccupied with interior spaces and clearly work a lot with the inner rooms of the buildings and their furnishing. Many of your buildings have in-built 'super furniture' and circle around what you might call 'the middle scale'. You might almost get the impression that some of your best building projects have taken shape in a process that starts in the furniture's meeting with the body of the building.

**CARSTEN:** There is definitely a middle scale at play. Design that is neither building nor furniture but something in between. Strangely enough it's not something we are very conscious of. We have an intrinsic understanding that our houses are lived in by people. We work with plans, interiors and how the rooms can be used. We've used the idea of



'Gesamtwerk', or total design, since the start, even though this is often quite difficult because this middle scale never has a budget for us to work with interiors and the body of the building. The inventory budget is rarely included in a project, which means that some architectural practices are not bothered about how the tiles in the bathroom of a corporate headquarters should be laid. But this is not how we work and so we often have a number of discussions with the construction team about the definition of extra and fixed inventory.

**MIKKEL:** The middle scale helps to animate the spaces and we believe that it is quite simply important to work with it so we can't help ourselves. Our work with 'the human scale' luckily also allows us to bring humor into the project. Far too many interior perspectives are created with rendering programs' predefined 3D library elements, but a residential unit with a good atmosphere requires far more than just color and the addition of catalog furniture. Architecture doesn't

stop with the wallpaper. You can't just talk about the middle scale as furnishings. It is an architectonic intervention.

**BORIS:** Mikkel, you held a lecture at the Aarhus School of Architecture about your residential projects where you used the expression 'elephant foot' to describe one of the main themes in your plans.

**MIKKEL:** You can see that theme in many of our projects, not just the residential ones. It started out as a way to solve the problem of long dark corridors. Put bluntly, the elephant foot is the middle scale's print in the projects. It is the instrument used to create variation and take the spaces out of fixed situations and make them suitable for certain activities or functions. We try to alter the spaces as if we were using super furniture surrounded by flow space. The elephant foot is a bastion in a social room and you can find the principle used in many of our larger scale projects. It started out in some of our earlier residential projects and has turned into an architectonic way to define particular affiliations in a larger common space – for example in The Igloo in Greve (2008\_31), Kloden in Odder (2009\_01) and Godsbanen in Aarhus (2009\_13). It is actually a really sensible principle as it is an effective way of expanding the framework. A 'box in a box', if you can describe the principle in that way, creates an injected room and gives extra space. You'll find the same feature elegantly developed by the Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto. Several of his houses appear almost like furniture themselves.

**BORIS:** The idea of moving different rooms and activities into each other brings me to a theme used in some of your latest projects, which I think has an interesting perspective. I'm thinking here of your experiments to create new relationships between city and suburbs. In several projects, you have worked to combine lifestyle opponents in new hybrids. I'm thinking here of buildings and structures that combine urban and suburban typologies such as Villa Vista (2005\_41) and Magneten in Malmö (2007\_58).

**KOLJA:** It's true that the ultimate form of living would have to be living in a detached house in the middle of a city. Or the opposite – loft living with a view over the woods and beach.

A combination of urban and nature. This fascinating cross-over is a theme we've tried to address in several projects. In a wider perspective, it's about the great need to make cities and towns more attractive for families with children, as well as the need to rethink the suburbs. Sustainability is just one aspect of this. Decades of the strict functional divide of city life have made our generation of architects start to consider new ways of using the city.

**CARSTEN:** Magneten in Malmö is a great example. The urbanization of the suburb, and also the opposite trend of suburbanizing the city, is something we have just started to see and this is a trend we will continue to look at and explore. Right now we are working on a new sustainable suburb outside Aarhus, which will rethink the dream of city life in the countryside. It is a really interesting project, which you are going to have to come back and see in a few years.

**BORIS:** It certainly sounds like there's lots more to say on that subject. So let's finish here on a cliff hanger...