

# Bridging into New Territories

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See: Joan Ockman, ed.,  
*The Pragmatist Imagination:  
Thinking about "Things in  
the Making"* (New York, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Introducing the work of Powerhouse Company is both easy and difficult for me. On one hand, it is all very obvious. They have, despite a relatively small body of work and only six years of collaboration, already mastered all the good deeds of our profession. Their multifaceted capacity represents a very creative combination of eminent intellectual capacity and great design talent. The work of Powerhouse Company clearly belongs to a contemporary discourse devoted to “thinking about things in the making,”<sup>1</sup> but definitely reaches beyond the diagram. They inquiringly explore the zeitgeist without falling into any of the common pitfalls—bombastic clichés, non-committal irony, pretentious marketing lingo, ego-inflation. Their carefully detailed designs don’t try to knock down or overthrow any present conventions, but are certainly too distinct to blend into the mainstream. One could say it’s cool with a twist or though it’s consistent it’s not too straight to awaken new desires. There is no Oedipus complex at play, there are no father figures to kill. Powerhouse Company appears to be founded on a solid humanistic base and quite committed to rehabilitating the legacy of modernism.

Convinced by these great virtues and their outstanding individual talents, one could track the specific qualities of their oeuvre back to their possible sources. The significance of Nanne de Ru’s time at OMA/AMO, lessons Charles Bessard learned from Ateliers Jean Nouvel, their studies at the Berlage Institute, their fascination with the International Style of the 1920s, the ambiguous connection to Adolf Loos, and their aspirations to redeem the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Unfolded, this genealogy will, without any doubt, provide us with both an intriguing record and a comprehensible offset that anticipates a possible future. The picture formed by this trajectory is quite lucid. The “secret” behind Powerhouse Company seems to be out in the

open. Their approach is more or less fully articulated in “Ouvertures” appearing on the following pages and there is, in my opinion, no urgent need for apocryphal interpretations or elaborate academic justifications of their work. There is, as far as I can see, no need for any further alibi to celebrate their work.

My difficulties have to do with something different. Something assumed but still unresolved in the presented work, and some loopholes in the firewall of their explicit and well-articulated agenda as included in this publication.

Let me start with the most difficult, principal questions that I can’t really get a hold of and issues or taboos they seem to ignore. First of all, I’m struggling a bit with the explicit celebration of uncomplicated network collaboration across cultural and political boundaries. We all know that architecture has become a global business—and that is totally fine with me. Both Dutch and Danish architects operate in countries like Dubai, Saudi Arabia, China, Kazakhstan, Russia, and other regimes known for their problems respecting the same basic human rights that enable “us” as architects to formulate and conduct a critical approach. The founders of Powerhouse Company are obviously not political agnostics. Their critique of “starchitecture” and the tendency to reduce architectural practice to a kind of branding strategy might be an adequate response to this complex problem. But I don’t think it is enough to perform “internal” criticism if you intend to bridge between different political and cultural territories. Their own Dutch/French/Danish collaborative model is ironically also a victim of reactions against “floating” identities. The old nation-states of Europe are, despite all the efforts that have been made, still a significant framework for defining cultural identity. These historic structures of power and cultural logics are still applicable to architecture to a large extent. Even my own attempt to construct a short genealogy was a search for a possible origin or *loco parentis*.<sup>2</sup> The Maaskant Prize used to be a strictly Dutch prize given to a Dutch architect. Luckily the boundaries have been extended over the last decade and the prize record now includes Belgians and international offices such as JDS. But I’m sorry to say that it’s not very difficult to find influential and powerful voices in Denmark that don’t think Powerhouse Company qualifies for a Danish award because they are not considered Danish enough—even though they have always maintained one of their bridgeheads in Copenhagen. I would personally like to change these conditions, and I’m not blaming Powerhouse Company for their mongrel identity. I’m simply saying that globalization’s mix and possible cross-fertilization of cultures is not just an implosion of dividing boundaries or a return to embryonic innocence—but neither is it its antithesis: the celebration of context. I don’t mind a slogan like “form follows climate,” and do not think that it

According to wikipedia, *loco parentis* is latin for “in the place of a parent” or “instead of a parent,” referring to the legal responsibility of a person or organization to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent.

is an oppression of design talent and creativity to comply with local conditions or constraints like wind, sun, temperature, humidity, terrain, and vegetation. I think there are some great design inventions to regain by leaving behind the modernistic idea of neutralizing the climate with great machines. But I'm worried about re-introducing the idea of *genius loci* merely because the notion "place of origin" can be very excluding.

There is, on the other hand, something quite sympathetic about reintroducing a neglected sensibility toward context. For me it is like taking an important step ahead to previous manners. Short-circuiting architectural history, one could claim that there is a triad of context–concept–cosmology imbedded in all architectural thinking. Nanne de Ru and Charles Bessard were born when the protagonists of postmodern architecture began using historical contexts as pure spatial concepts. When de Ru started working for Koolhaas and Bessard for Nouvel, context was nothing and concept everything. At the turn of the millennium, just before their office was founded, the productive value of the paranoid-critical method for injecting vigor into conceptual design began to decline. A new global economy—with booming cities even more delirious than New York—took over and started demanding bigger and more cosmological schemes. A short era of *genius logo*<sup>3</sup> architecture gave us some grand, involuntarily comic architectural icons to study. Pompous emblems were popping up all over the place, islands shaped like palm trees, seahorses, and other funny designs appeared like peculiar zodiacs on the great financial bubble. And then came the crisis of 2008. So I deeply understand why Powerhouse Company—not believing in God—decided to return to context.

Despite all my apprehensiveness, I also have great faith in the potential of rethinking contextualism. I support Powerhouse Company's effort to redefine luxury by giving more space to cost-free qualities like sunlight and introducing a new kind of "middle scale" in between detail and architectural object that seeks to accommodate the human body by means other than pure wealth or an overabundance of limited resources. Architectural luxury beyond the style of the *nouveau riche*—that is something to look forward to.

As antonym to *genius loci*.<sup>3</sup>  
Not the spirit of the site  
but the spirit of the brand.  
*Genius logo* represents  
architecture and urban  
planning as a kind of media  
strategy. See also: Boris  
Brorman Jensen, *Dubai:  
Dynamics of Bingo Urbanism*  
(Copenhagen, 2007).