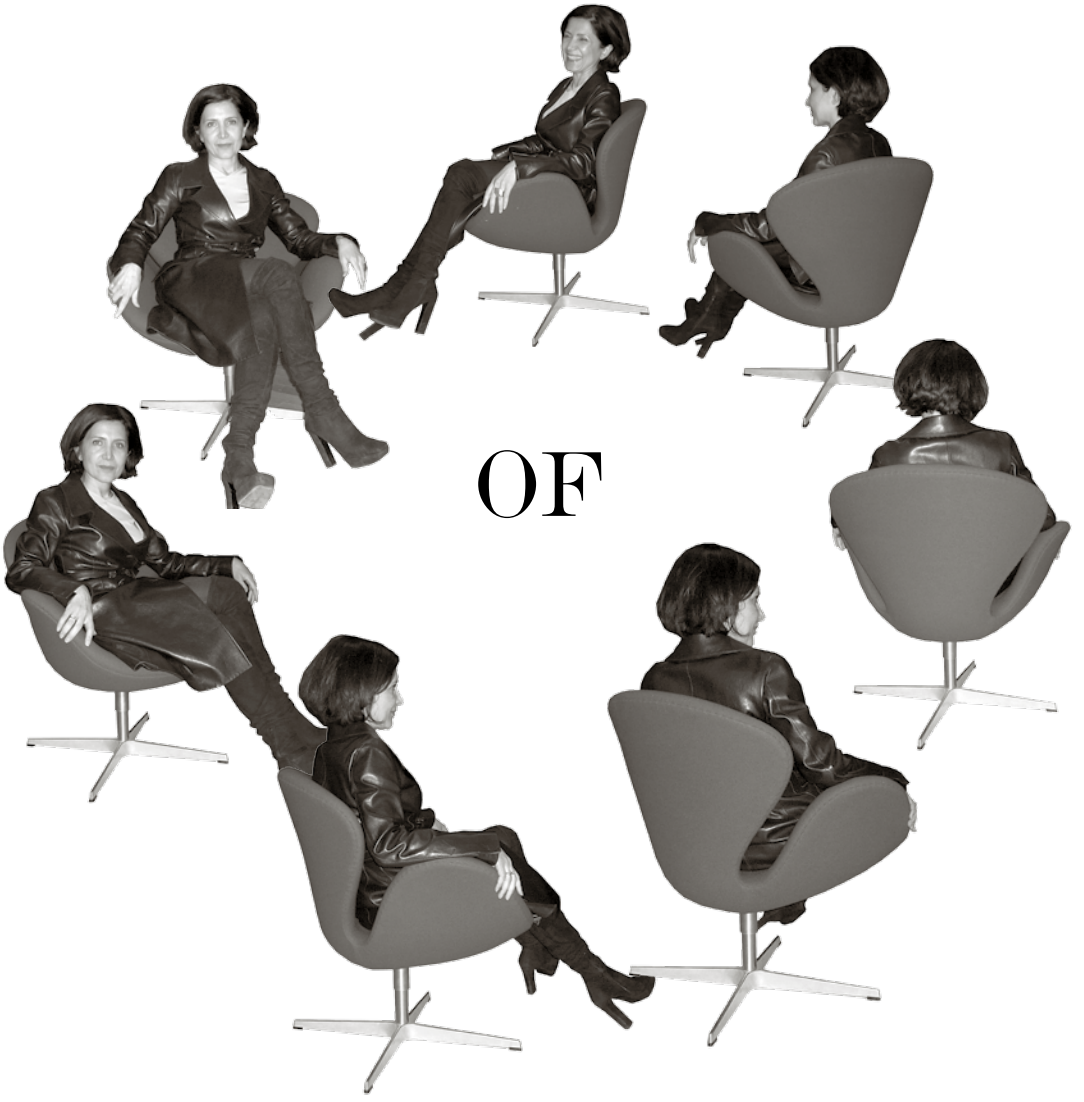
THE FUNCTION OF ARCHITECTURE



Boris Brorman Jensen met with Farshid Moussavi at Harvard Graduate School of Design to discuss the production of added value and how architectural practice, research and teaching, influence and stimulate each other.

BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN: *This issue of CONDITIONS is focusing on possibilities to expand the ambitions beyond the given assignment. So the question is, do you think architecture should try to engage? What is the right strategy to ensure the production of common value within architecture?*

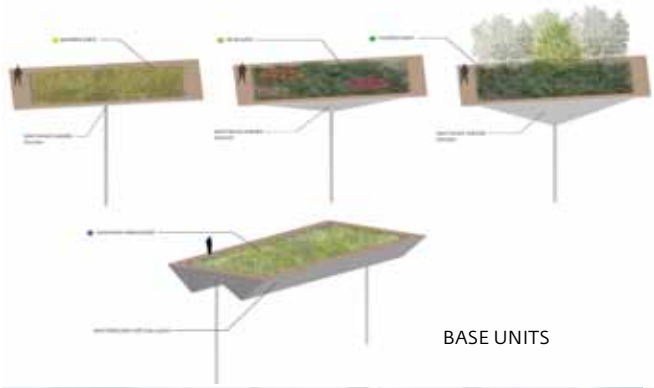
FARSHID MOUSSAVI: I just gave a talk at Columbia University basically addressing this issue. I presented the research I have been doing through my teaching at the GSD: "The Function of Ornament" and "The Function of Form". I was trying to explain the overriding ambition behind these two books. How we define the word 'function' and how we understand the function of architecture. If we claim that architecture plays a role in society we are basically also saying it has a function in society. Since the beginning of early 20th century we have understood function as utility. Focus has been on utility and the object in its own terms, and I think we need to do if we are committed to claim that architecture is a cultural activity and that architecture produces culture. Architecture doesn't represent culture, it produces culture. We have to look at how built forms or objects perform. This does not mean that it doesn't matter how it is made, but we have to connect the production of architecture to how they perform.

BBJ: Ok! Let's relate this to your own practice. Fifteen years ago you won the competition for the Yokohama International Port Terminal. The competition brief asked for a ferry terminal. They got that, but they also got a new type of urban landscape, a looping boardwalk, and a complex structure employing a whole set of different activities. Is this strategy of added value something you deliberately looked for, or was it more a result of your design process?

FM: No, I would say it was absolute deliberate. It was our first project so I have to admit that it was more intuitive. We got a brief and a site, but of course we wanted to add value. That is why you enter international competitions. It is because there is an ambition beyond just delivering the basic requirements. It is about how you put resources and requirements together in a way that gives certain added values.

FARSHID MOUSSAVI

is an architect and educator, and co-founder of Foreign Office Architects (FOA). Since 2006, Farshid Moussavi has been Professor in Practice of Architecture at Harvard University. She was trained at Harvard Graduate School of Design, University College London, and Dundee University. She has taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna where she acted as Head of the Architecture Institute, the Architectural Association, the Berlage Institute, and the Hoger Architecture Institute, and in the United States at Harvard, Columbia, Princeton Universities, and at the University of California in Los Angeles. Moussavi's research has been materialised in two books: Function of Ornament (2006) and The Function of Form (2009), both developed through her seminars at Harvard' Graduate School of Design. Moussavi serves on the RIBA Awards Panel, the Steering committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. She is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Whitechapel Gallery as well as the Board of Trustees of The Architecture Foundation in London.



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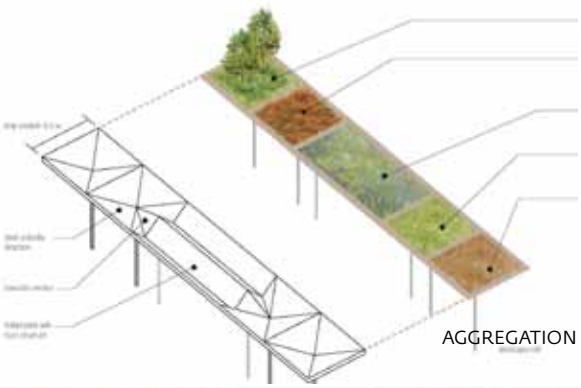
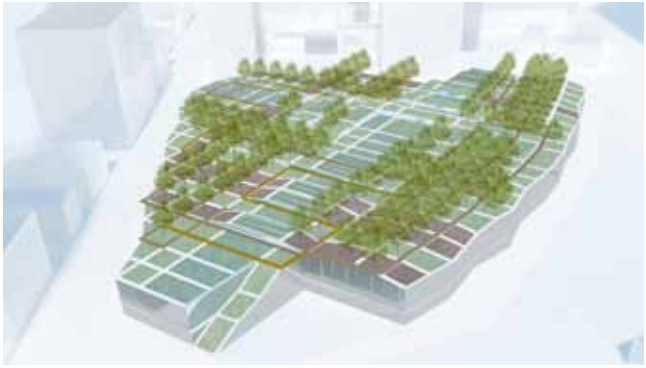
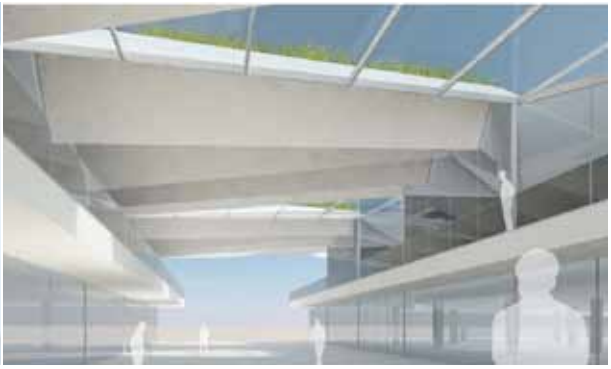


AGGREGATION



Chris Vant Hoff

AERIAL VIEW



INTERIOR

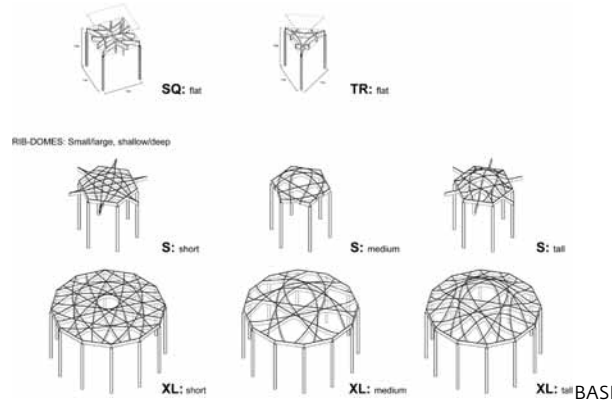
We were not necessarily thinking about it with enough distance, but it was absolute deliberate. We looked at the relationship between the terminal that was supposed to be built and the broader possible picture of the city. The waterfront of Yokohama is an important feature. It's a harbour, but there were not any places in the city where you could come in contact with the water and where people could meet. All we knew was that there was going to be a new leisure development close to one of the train stations that was supposed to shift the centre to the harbour. So we saw the building of the pier as an opportunity. It would become a second pole connecting this other leisure development that was perhaps 20 minutes walk away. We were thinking of the pier not just as a terminal but as a leisure destination and a public space – we would activate a space in between. And in fact that's what happened! Nobody asked us for a piece of urban design and we did it entirely naively. And what happened while we were building the terminal? The city started to develop the space in between and now people walk from the leisure development to the pier. The terminal has become a kind of destination. I think good architecture has always done this. Buildings do this to a lesser or greater degree depending on what you are building; for example, residential projects with no public access are obviously more limited. But the way the building is placed, the way shadows may fall on it, its proximity to and view over other buildings and the angle of the building itself all have an impact on the context in which it is located. I think architecture has always done that. Don't you think so?

BBJ: Well my first experience of added value within architecture was as a student when I visited James Sterling's 'Neue Staatsgalerie' in Stuttgart. I was instantly fascinated by the way he connects public space with the museum's sculpture garden and how the building becomes a part of the city's infrastructure. The inner space of the building basically becomes a part of the city.

FM: I think you are right, but I'm not saying that we are all the time looking for new ways in which we include public space. You could say it's about the connection between the building and the context. It could also be about adding value that is more internal to the project. I think that's basically what makes architecture a critical discipline. This is what gives architecture a social and cultural role. And I agree that the Sterling Museum in Stuttgart was (if you like) one of the first grand projects where instead of lifting the building off the ground and letting the city flow under it, people were allowed to go through it. Well I'm not quite sure. It might be rooted in Le Corbusier's Carpenter Centre…

BBJ: Louis Kahn once said that: "The purpose of architecture is not social reform!" Do you think he is right, or should architecture always try to offer something to society?

FM: I think that statement can be



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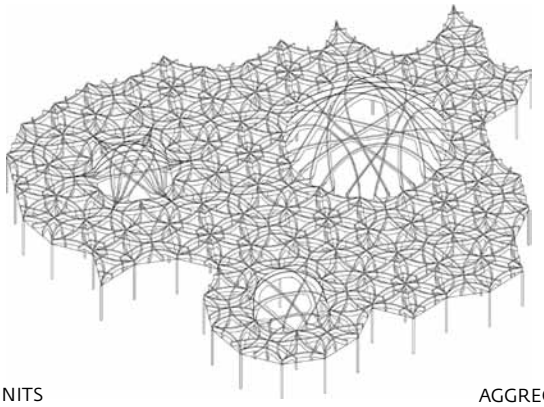
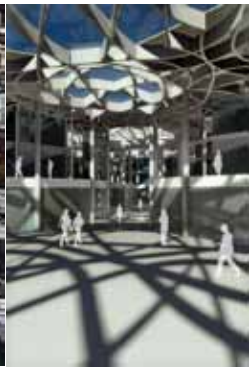


AGGREGATION

Evangelos Kotsioris

AERIAL VIEW



INTERIOR

misinterpreted. I think the word reform is somehow problematic. I believe that architects do impact the social, mental and political realm that we are part of. I really believe so. Architecture and the built environment give us experiences that affect the way we think. It constantly influences the way we conduct ourselves therefore making it a social activity. I just don't believe in the reform bit, especially in the light of the world that we live in today. I don't think it is possible to guarantee that people will perceive architecture in the same way. We will all be affected by it because we occupy it, we go around it, we go through it, etc. but I don't think we can guarantee how people will perceive it. The idea of a 'reform' is somehow based on a kind of ideology that what is happening is bad and this alternative is a better way to do it. I just don't think that we can adopt such a casual proposition that suggests such a limited and confining solution. I think there is a more loose relationship between people and architecture. However, I think that maybe we could argue that architecture has a more powerful social role now than at any other time. When people have interest in the social aspect of architecture, they always come up with some kind of mechanism where architecture becomes social; for example, the addition of symbols to architecture in order to relate it to society. But we don't have a shared understanding, common culture or even mental reading of these things. Therefore to rely on these one-to-one commutations between what architecture is and how it performs is problematic. However, I am very interested in architecture's affective role. I think buildings affect and transmit certain sensations that are pre-individual. Buildings are there before the moment the individual comes in and perceives them, or absorbs them into their experience. You can imagine a two-stage process that transmits these forms or effects. As a consequence of how they are made and assembled, what they are made out of, their scale, the way they transmit light and sound, the way they sit in their context, each one of us relates to those sets of sensations differently. This gives certain elasticity to architecture. Postmodernism's exercise of adding symbols was, in a way, limiting to architecture. Architecture is abstract and pluralistic by nature. It connects to everyone differently. This fact, coupled with the great diversity of our society, makes architecture an incredibly powerful field. In a society that lacks wholeness, common memory, common understanding, suddenly architecture has an ability to unite. I compare it to going to a movie or a concert. When we go to concerts we all listen to the same music. But how do we translate and interpret the concert? The sensations that the music projects into the concert hall – how do we translate that? We don't know. But it influences us all, and that is why we go. If I go to a movie that has a sad ending I always end up crying, but if I look around there are people sitting there perfectly happy. These are great examples of how we each are affected differently by things that perform in

front of us. I think architecture has the same abstraction and the same performative quality that music, film and contemporary art have. And that is why I think it is incredible powerful.

BBJ: You are both a practicing architect, a publishing researcher and a teacher. How do these different activities affect each other?

FM: –Practise is generally very slow; doing projects of a certain scale takes a few years. What is interesting about teaching is that you can stand back and connect what you do every day with the office and see it against a wider geography. What are you doing in one place how does it relate to what other people are doing in other places? It allows you to see what you are doing right now in a project and how people were doing it fifteen years ago. Teaching allows you to stand back and see your project in a wider perspective and compare it with other cultures. You can see what you are doing, how it is evolving changing or varying. It is this broader perspective that teaching brings into practise that I find very fruitful. In the end though my interest in architecture is ultimately about practise! I'm not interested in architecture if it is not going to influence people and influence our lives. I liked it be practised, whether it is by me or somebody else. I like to understand it as a theoretical field in which those forms of critical activity are actualised. What is great about coming from the office into academia is that I bring problems that I encounter at the office and can then frame discussions. They don't necessarily have to be pragmatic problems. For examples, I did research for several years on large retail projects while simultaneously working on retail projects at the office. I realised how in the UK shopping malls were shifting from the periphery to the inner centre – a move that gave them a huge transformational role in city centres. Almost every single city north of London has had its city centre redeveloped by one of these shifts. I thought it was important to look at the problems these big projects bring into the city, because they are very large. They disconnect and bring in a scale to the historic grain that is alien. They are also very blank because they are mostly inward looking; they almost internalise the urban space. They are an interesting problem! I ran this issue as a research project and eventually the ornament research grew out of it. There is a broader scope to it, but it grew out of the fact that these large retail projects don't need windows and historically retail architects have introduced some kind of facade architecture. They make them look as if they are a palace for example – the Selfridges Department store in London for example. There was an opportunity to say, if the envelope doesn't have to represent the interior, then what can it do that is more related to the urban space outside? In what other ways can a building envelope perform that is not about representing the interior through transparency?

BBJ: So the ornament research was looking for new interfaces between the big box typology and the city?

FM: Well the ornament research grew out of it. But ultimately we were also looking for all kinds of other buildings, buildings that were not opaque. It grew out of recognizing that there are types of buildings that are blank typologies: concerts halls, retail projects, libraries, storage houses, sports halls and others, blank typologies that are often very large. In what way was does their envelope perform in their context? Where do you see their role?

BBJ: You are currently doing a studio here at the GSD together with James Khamsi called "The Function of Roofs: The Urban Mall". Can you tell us a bit about what you are trying to achieve?

FM: Yes! The intension is to take the roof, a highly technical element that is much reduced in space because it is merely surface, and look at it as a medium that has to negotiate between the interior and the exterior. It is a surface that has to negotiate between structural and environmental. Possible landscape issues also exist if the roofscape is to be used on the exterior. We are looking at the ecological role of a building. Part of this ecology is obviously the way people relate to these spaces. How, for example, does the scale of a roof, the design of it, the way it is assembled, become an aesthetic element that will provide some kind of coherence to the space below? In a way it is similar to how old style markets used to operate. We are very comfortable with the clutter that happens in a market because of the way the canopy unifies and gives some kind of coherence to the space. The canopy designates the space where the activity will take place. We are even intrigued and quite delighted to see the hustle and bustle that happens in a market. Historically, the problem of malls has been that the roof is not designed well, and it is the one element that never changes, whereas the shops below change and so do their storefronts. The roof needs to also have that flexibility and we haven't had the spatial system organizing the space below. We expect the space below to organise itself because it changes all the time. So there is an ambition to see the roof in the context of a mall where it can allow for the flexibility that is required by the floor, and remain as a means of coherence to the bricolage-like clutter. We are looking at the mall as a landscape, a piece of urbanism. It provides an opportunity, not as a way to heal the environment but rather to construct a new kind of nature in the city. The roof of a mall is very large. It makes a huge difference if you suddenly bring a massive piece of green into the middle of the city that didn't exist before.