

Boris Brorman Jensen er lektor ved Arkitektskolen Aarhus og har fulgt den pragmatiske vending helt tæt på.

Boris Brorman Jensen is a senior lecturer at the Aarhus School of Architecture and has followed the pragmatic turn closely.

BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN

# OPTAKTEN TIL GENNEMBRUDDET THE PRELUDE TO THE BREAKTHROUGH



**It wasn't really a style as such. . .**

The term 'the pragmatic turn' was coined by the American philosopher John Rajchman in his characterization of the new architectural perspective that emerged in the mid 1990s, driven mainly by the influence of OMA and Rem Koolhaas. Rajchman's characterization of Koolhaas & Co. drew parallels between the philosophical tradition of pragmatism and a particular approach or way of addressing architectural issues.<sup>1</sup> Rajchman was not onto a new style or emerging new -ism. The pragmatic turn essentially describes a new method that has also been called diagrammatic or diagnostic. And that is an important point to keep in mind in the attempt to portray the group of young architects who were to have such a strong impact on Danish architecture in the 2000s. One of the more pressing questions is, of course, whether that description of the method still works. Or whether the pragmatic turn is gradually being watered down, developing into more conformist mainstream formalism. In my opinion, there are clear aesthetic commonalities and no doubt whatsoever that the 'band of brothers' that Carsten Thau speaks about is influenced by the prevailing spirit of the times. The group is held together by more than just a working method. The ones who have been commercially successful have all been very adept at communicating in a language that everyone can understand. They know how to use the new IT tools, and they master the new visual possibilities offered by the electronic media. They were the first to take the step from crayon to Photoshop. They were the first to abandon balsa wood and box-cutters in favor of blue foam and CNC routers. They replaced a clergy of brooding semioticians, all in black, and gained popular appeal with their fun and sexy project presentations, complete with animated graphics. They were also fortunate enough to hit the job market at a time when the global economic boom was creating an unprecedented increase in private construction for speculation purposes. Now the economic crisis has set in, and the pace has slowed. I see clear signs of weaknesses, and certain interesting

**Det var egentlig ikke en stilart...**

Begrebet den pragmatiske vending refererer til den amerikanske filosof John Rajchmans karakteristik af den arkitektoniske nyorientering, der udspandt sig i midt-90'erne med OMA og Rem Koolhaas som dominerende omdrejningspunkter. Rajchmans karakteristik af Koolhaas & Co. trak paralleller mellem pragmatismens filosofiske tradition og en særlig tilgang eller måde at håndtere arkitektoniske problemstillinger på.<sup>1</sup> Rajchman var ikke på sporet af en ny stilart eller spirende isme. Den pragmatiske vending betegner i udgangspunktet en ny metode, der også er blevet kaldt for diagrammatisk/diagnostisk. Og det er vigtigt at have i baghovedet i forhold til forsøget på at portrættere en gruppe af unge arkitekter, som kom til at sætte afgørende præg på 00'ernes danske arkitektur. Et af de centrale spørgsmål, der trænger sig på, er selvfølgelig, hvorvidt den metodiske karakteristik stadig holder. Eller om den pragmatiske vending lige så langsomt er ved at blive udvandet til en mere konform mainstream-formalisme. Der er i mine øjne nogle helt klare æstetiske fællestræk på spil og slet ingen tvivl om, at det 'band of brothers', som Carsten Thau taler om, er besmittet af tidsånden. Der er noget andet og mere end blot arbejdsmetoden, som binder gruppen sammen. De, som har klaret sig godt kommercielt, har alle været rigtig gode til at kommunikere, så enhver kan forstå det. De er alle blevet oplært med nye it-redskaber, og de håndterer med legende lethed de elektroniske mediers nye visuelle muligheder. De var de første, som tog skridtet fra farveblyant til Photoshop. De var de første til at lægge balsatræ og hobbykniv fra sig for at gå over til blåt skum og CNC-fræsere. De afløste et sortklædt præsteskab af dystre semiotikere og vandt folkeligt gehør med deres sjove, sexede og grafisk animerede projektpræsentationer. De var også heldige at ramme arbejdsmarkedet på et tidspunkt, hvor den globale boomøkonomi for alvor satte gang i det private spekulationsbyggeri. Nu har finanskrisen sat ind, og der er en vis udmatning at spore. Jeg ser nogle klare svaghedstegn dukke op og flere interessante alternative røster, der er begyndt at ytre sig mere og mere overbevisende. Men der er, synes jeg, stadig en god portion talent på spil og en masse interessante diskussioner i gang, der kunne være med til at fastholde og forny den opnåede styrkeposition. Den opbyggelige kritik vil jeg vende tilbage til senere, for det er vigtigt at forstå lidt af baggrunden for det generationsgennembrud, der nu lettere irret kan fejre sit eget kobberbryllup. Hvad var det, der igangsatte den udvikling, som har gjort dansk arkitektur til et bemærkelsesværdigt fænomen på den internationale scene. Hvad var det for faglige miljøer, som fostrede 'the Danish School'?

**En kort forhistorie**

Det var ledende skikkelser i det akademiske miljø i USA, der artikulerede den såkaldte pragmatiske vending i arkitekturen, men selve opgøret med de foregående ismer, nyrationalismen, (post)strukturalismen og den semiotisk inspirerede postmodernisme, kom andre steder fra. Urs scenen stod på Architectural Association i London i midten af 70'erne, hvor Rem Koolhaas underviste og sammen med en række fremtrædende kollegaer stiftede OMA. Den store udklækningsanstalt blev OMA's kontor i Holland. Herfra kom den første generation ny pragmatikere, og herfra blev den kreative hovedkraft eksporteret videre til forskellige fagmiljøer i resten af verden. Forhistorien kulminerer allerede midt i 90'erne med udgivelsen af *S,M,L,XL*, hvor den første generation af X-OMA'ere allerede havde startet deres egen tegnestue.<sup>2</sup> PLOT kan i den sammenhæng betragtes som barnebarn af den pragmatiske vending. JAJA Architects er fjerde generation – eller OMA-oldebørn, om man vil. Det er klart, at der er gået noget i arv, men jeg er ikke helt enig med Winy Maas i, at det, vi nu ser, blot er epigonernes triumf. Som jeg ser det, er der tilføjet noget væsentligt nyt. Vi er 'beyond the diagram'. Koolhaas' isnende ironi er ikke bare afløst af nogle sensationslystne 'welfairytale', men en oprigtig interesse for udviklingen af velfærdssamfundet. Den surrealistisk inspirerede paranoid-kritiske metode, som Koolhaas promoverede i sit retrospektive manifest *Delirious New York*, er ude af systemet. Efterkommerne har sluppet angsten for normative statements og forfølger nu i stedet nogle langt mere håndgribelige idealer. En humanistisk impuls, der



MVRDV + ADEPT: Projekt til højhus, Rødovre, 2008.  
MVRDV + ADEPT: Project for high-rise, Rødovre, Denmark, 2008.

alternative voices are growing stronger. Nonetheless, I still see lots of good talent and many interesting debates that might help preserve and renew the position of strength that has been achieved. I will return to the constructive criticism later, because I think it is important to understand the background for the generational breakthrough, which can now celebrate its copper anniversary with only a touch of patina. What led to the development that made Danish architecture such a remarkable phenomenon in the international arena? What were the architectural environments that gave birth to 'the Danish School'?

**A brief prologue**

The so-called pragmatic turn in architecture was articulated by leading figures in the American academic environment, but the underlying rejection of the preceding -isms, neo-rationalism, (post-)structuralism and semiotically inspired post-modernism, originated elsewhere. The original venue of that phenomenon was the Architectural Association in London in the mid 1970s, where Rem Koolhaas taught, and where he founded OMA together with influential colleagues. The hotbed for the new perspective was OMA's office in the Netherlands. That is where the first generation of new pragmatists emerged, and from here the creative drive was exported to professional environments around the world. The prologue culminates with the publication of *S,M,L,XL* in the mid 1990s, a time when the first generation of former OMA architects had already founded their own architectural firm.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, PLOT can be considered a grandchild of the pragmatic turn. JAJA Architects is fourth generation – or OMA's great-grandchildren if you will. Clearly, something has been passed down, but I do not agree fully with Winy Maas that what we are seeing now is simply the triumph of the epigones. As I see it, something new and essential has been added. We have gone 'beyond the diagram'. Koolhaas' chilling irony has not simply been replaced with sensationalist 'welfairytale' but with a genuine interest in the development of the welfare society. The surre-

har taget selv newyorkerne med storm og rejst nogle interessante diskussioner herhjemme omkring bedre, billigere boliger. Der eksperimenteres med nye hybrider mellem forstadslivets utopier og byens klassiske boligtypologier. Interessen for bæredygtige løsninger virker reel, og der er mere end markedsgøgl på spil i eksperimenterne med nye typer af offentlige rum. Superkilen er i mine øjne en intelligent re-aktualisering af Duchamps objet trouvé – og bestemt ikke fladpan-det ‘copy-paste’. Der må trods alt være sket en eller anden form for adoption af det oprindelige tankegods. Den hjemlige arkitekturdebat har tilsyneladende haft indflydelse. Inspirationen fra Holland skal ikke fornægtes, men der er, synes jeg, på ingen måde grund til at være flov over den ‘danisering’, som har fundet sted.

### Udviklingen set fra Århus

Den pragmatiske vendingers relationer til den filosofiske tradition tilbage fra William James, John Dewey, og C.S. Pierce og sammenhængen med det modernistiske tankegods og de senere postmoderne arkitekturteorier er beskrevet i mange andre sammenhænge – bl.a. i 2004 i *Arkitekten*.<sup>3</sup> Men det er koblingen til det hjemlige fagmiljø og den danske tradition ikke. Der har fundet en form for prægning og værditilførsel sted, som ikke er særlig godt belyst. Hvorfor blev det ikke nabolandet Belgien, som overtog stafetten, eller England og USA, hvor Koolhaas har undervist det meste af tiden? Hvad var det for en modtagelighed i Danmark, der opfangede og videreudviklede inspirationen fra Holland?

Jeg tror, en af forklaringerne er, at den modernistiske planlægningstradition led en forsinket død herhjemme – og at der heldigvis stadig finder kompetent planlægning sted i Danmark. Hvad betyder det? Det betyder blandt andet, at vi simpelthen har bedre byer at arbejde med som arkitekter. Den totale sammenblanding af by og land, som Koolhaas pegede på i flere af sine essays, har sejret ad helvede til. Jeg var i Holland for et par måneder siden og tænkte disse tanker, mens jeg sad i et lokaltog og kiggede ud af vinduet. Strækningen fra Schiphol Lufthavn til Rotterdam, hvor OMA har kontor, er så grim, at jeg næsten begyndte at græde. Selv de smukkeste designede bygninger i verden kan ikke redde situationen. Den interesse for en ‘metropolitan arkitektur’, som Koolhaas i sin tid forsøgte at reformulere, har fundet et godt laboratorium i Danmark. Bjarke Ingels har flere gange sagt det samme på en lidt anden måde. BIG ser København som deres hjemmebane. Det er her, alle de indledende træningskampe er foregået. Vi har en planlægningstradition, som gør en forskel! Det er den ene pointe. Den anden pointe er mere snørklet og må illustreres med en øjenvindeskildring fra Arkitektskolen Aarhus.

Den gamle planlægningsafdeling på arkitektskolen lukkede og slukkede i midten af 90’erne. Nogle af de tilbageværende lærerkræfter måtte søge andre steder hen og skaffede forskningsmidler til det såkaldte velfærdsbyprojekt. Her sad nogle lettere afsporede typer, bl.a. Tom Nielsen, Morten Daugaard og senere undertegnede, og læste “Whatever Happened to Urbanism?” og andre dødsberetninger om den gode by, mens vi forsøgte at etablere kontakter til forskellige tegnestuer i Holland. Der blev sendt rigtig mange studerende af sted på praktikophold, og Adriaan Geuze kom forbi skolen som gæsteprofessor i foråret 2000, men vidensoverførslen gik mest den ene vej. Hollænderne var avantgarden, og vi forsøgte at lære alt, hvad vi overhovedet kunne, af de enormt selvsikre besøgende. Der var noget underlig asynkront på spil. De var helt klart foran dengang. Men det lykkedes os med afsæt i deres erfaringer at udvikle et mere tidssvarende og nuanceret bybegreb og videregive vores viden til de studerende. Der er ikke blevet uddannet kandidater på Arkitektskolen Aarhus med speciale i det offentlige forvaltningssystem, siden planlægningsafdelingen lukkede, men der er opfostret en kohorte af talentfulde arkitekter, der interesserer sig for urbanitet på mange andre niveauer – også for den del af byen, som ikke er velsignet med historiens dybde.

### Fint, men hvad med lidt selvkritik!

Det forhold, at jeg har været med til at uddanne mange af dem, som portrætteres i nærværende publikation, afholder mig ikke fra kritik,

alist-inspired paranoid critical method that Koolhaas promoted in his retrospective manifest “Delirious New York” is out of the system now. The descendants are no longer afraid of normative statements and now pursue far more tangible ideals. A humanist impulse that has taken even the New Yorkers by storm and sparked intriguing discussions in Denmark about better, cheaper homes. Architects are experimenting with new hybrids of suburban utopia and classic urban residential typologies. The interest in sustainable solutions seems genuine, and there is more than sensationalism at play in the experiments with new types of public spaces. In my mind, the Super Wedge is an intelligent revitalization of Duchamp’s objet trouvé – and definitely not just a case of mindless ‘copy-paste’. Arguably, some adoption of the original mindset must have occurred. Apparently, the domestic architecture debate has had its influence. The inspiration from the Netherlands should not be denied, but there is no reason to feel embarrassed about the ‘Danification’ that has taken place.

### Current developments, viewed from Aarhus

The relations of the pragmatic turn to the philosophical tradition dating back to William James, John Dewey, and C.S. Pierce and the connections with the modernist mindset and subsequent post-modern architecture theories have been described in many other contexts – for example in 2004 in *Arkitekten*.<sup>3</sup> But the link to the domestic architectural scene and the Danish tradition has not. There has been a process of imprinting and a transfer of values that is not particularly well understood. Why was it not Belgium, a neighbor to the Netherlands, that picked up the baton – or England and the USA, where Koolhaas has taught throughout his career? What was the nature of the receptiveness in Denmark that was able to capture and refine the Dutch inspiration?

In my mind, one explanation is that the modernist planning tradition survived longer in Denmark – and that competent planning still, fortunately, takes place in Denmark. What does that mean? Among other things, it means that as architects, we simply have better cities to work with. The fusion of urban and rural that Koolhaas described in several of his essays has been devastatingly successful in many places. I was in the Netherlands a few months ago and thinking about this as I was sitting on a local train, looking out the window. The stretch from Schiphol Airport to Rotterdam, where OMA has its offices, is so ugly that it almost brought me to tears. Even the best designed buildings in the world cannot fix this. The interest in ‘metropolitan architecture’ that Koolhaas once attempted to rearticulate has found a good laboratory in Denmark. On several occasions, Bjarke Ingels has said the same, in slightly different words. BIG views Copenhagen as their home ground. That is where all the practice matches have been played. We have a planning tradition that makes a difference! That is one point. The other point is more complex and has to be illustrated with an eyewitness report from the Aarhus School of Architecture.

The former planning department at the Aarhus School of Architecture closed down in the mid-1990s. Some of the remaining teachers had to find employment elsewhere and managed to secure funding for the so-called ‘welfare city project’. Here a group of wayward people, including Tom Nielsen, Morten Daugaard and later myself, were reading “Whatever Happened to Urbanism?” and other stories about the death of the good city, while we were trying to make contact to various Dutch architectural firms. Many students went to the Netherlands as trainees, and Adriaan Geuze swung by the school as a visiting professor in spring 2000, but the knowledge transfer was largely one-way. The Dutch were the avant-garde, and we were trying to learn as much as we possibly could from the hugely self-confident visitors. It was an oddly asynchronous affair. They were clearly in the lead back then. But with their experience we were able to develop a more contemporary and nuanced concept of the city and pass our knowledge on to the students. Since the urban planning department closed, the Aarhus School of Architecture has not produced graduates specializing in public management, but we have raised a cohort of talented architects who



COBE & TRANSFORM: Projekt til børnehaven, Sundholmsvej, København, 2010. COBE & TRANSFORM: Projekt for kindergarten, Sundholmsvej, Copenhagen, 2010.

og jeg mener vitterligt, at de forskellige kuld af tidligere studerende fra AAA, som nu sidder hos BIG, COBE, EFFEKT, APEPT, TRANSFORM, NORD, JAJA og andre steder, rent faktisk har noget at byde på. Dan Stubbergaard har ‘tjent’ hos både MVRDV og PLOT, men COBE kunne ganske enkelt ikke levere så mange kvalificerede projekter fra mindre design- og byrumsopgaver til større masterplaner og strategiske udviklingsprojekter uden hjælp fra en hel masse selvstændigt tænkende arkitekter. Det betyder selvfølgelig ikke, at alt er i sin skønneste orden. Jeg bekymrer mig ikke så meget om de ændrede kommunikationsformer. Jeg nyder faktisk, at der ikke længere bliver talt så meget sort i arkitektkredse. Jeg er lettet over, at kasse-arkitekturen blev udkonkurreret – men jeg ærgrer mig over, at den tradition for facadekomposition, jeg selv blev uddannet i, er trængt i defensiven. Jeg ærgrer mig også over, at den sanselighed, som engang kendetegnede den nordiske arkitektur, ligger underdrejet, ligesom den tidligere interesse for kontekstens betydning ofte kan være sværd at spore. Det går rigtig godt, men jeg mener helt klart, at man bør forvente lidt mere af 00’ernes danske arkitekter. Lidt større forskellighed i udtrykket for eksempel. Jeg ved, at de bliver irriterede på hinanden, når projekterne ligner hinanden lidt for meget. Det irriterer også os andre.

1. Se John Rajchman: “A New Pragmatism?”, i Cynthia C. Davidson: *Anyhow*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1998, pp. 212-217.
2. Se reference: OMA – *the sublime start of an architectural generation*, (ed.) Bernard Colenbrander, Rotterdam: NAI, 1995.
3. Se *Arkitekten* 2/04 om “Ny pragmatisme” (hvor den hollandske arkitekt Roemer van Toorn i øvrigt forudser meget af den kritik, som rejstes i dag).

take an interest in urban architecture on many other levels – including the aspects of the city that are not blessed with the depth of history.

### Great, but what about a little self-criticism!

The fact that I have been involved in training many of the individuals who are being portrayed in the present publication does not preclude me from taking a critical stance, and I really do believe that the former graduates from AAA who are now with BIG, COBE, EFFEKT, APEPT, TRANSFORM, NORD, JAJA and other firms have a lot to offer. Dan Stubbergaard ‘served’ at both MVRDV and PLOT, but COBE would not have been able to deliver so many qualified projects, from relatively small-scale design and urban space projects to larger master plans and strategic development projects without the contributions of a large number of architects with the capacity for independent thinking. Of course, that does not mean that everything is hunky-dory. I’m not really concerned about the new forms of communication. I actually enjoy the fact that architects are less prone to jargon gibberish. I am relieved to see the end of boxy architecture – but I regret to see that the tradition of facade composition that I was trained in has been forced on the defensive. I also regret to see that the sensuous approach that once characterized Nordic architecture is in retreat, just as the former interest in the role of context can often be difficult to spot. The current development is very positive, but I definitely think that we should expect a little more from the Danish architects of the 2000s. A little more variation of expression, for example. I know that it bugs them if the projects turn out too similar. It bugs the rest of us too.

*Translated by Dorte Herholdt Silver*

1. See John Rajchman: “A New Pragmatism?”, in Cynthia C. Davidson: *Anyhow*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1998, pp. 212-217.
2. See reference: OMA – *the sublime start of an architectural generation*, (ed.) Bernard Colenbrander, Rotterdam: NAI, 1995.
3. See *Arkitekten* 2/04 on “Ny pragmatisme” (where the Dutch architect Roemer van Toorn actually predicts much of the criticism that is being raised today).