Architecture Must Help the World:
Interview with Odile Decq

KHŌREIN: Which philosopher did you first read? Who are those you are reading today? Whose philosophy book do you own? Which philosopher did you know personally? Whose lectures and seminars did you attend? Might you be able to provide us with a brief retrospective of your encounter with philosophy and philosophers, above all, French philosophers?

ODILE DECQ: I never formally studied philosophy, even at school as I obtained my baccalaureate without doing the last year, so I never had a philosophy teacher.

However, in my third year of studying architecture, I had to find a job and I met Philippe Boudon who proposed to me to work with him as I was studying linguistics then, prior to my architecture studies, and knew a little bit about Chomsky, Benveniste, etc.

KH: Can you say that Philippe Boudon influenced your work?

OD: I worked with him for four years, and left as I wanted to get my degree. I think he expected that I would continue to do research with him. But I decided not to, I wanted to become an architect. We reconnected ten, fifteen years later.

Did he influence me? I don't know. When we worked together, we would be sitting on opposite sides of a table, I was reading a lot at his demand and I would be synthetizing for him. This is, in a way, how I studied history of architecture. I would also try to read his particular handwriting upside down (which I was able to do). This was my work with him for four years. He was receiving many visitors from architecture and from all over the world and I met them.

In the place where he was working, I was part of a team of four, there were two other members, a sociologist and a linguist (I think), and even though I was merely an assistant, I felt integrated into the team.

KH: Would you say that you were thinking together, collectively?

OD: Yes and no, because I was too young. But my name is on some of his research books.

KH: You wrote about Claude Parent. What was your relationship with Parent and Virilio?

OD: I discovered Claude while I was still studying in Rennes, before coming to Paris. I saw an exhibition of the oblique function in the mid-seventies. But they had already split; they worked together for six or seven years in the sixties, but split after 1968, because Virilio was a leftist and Parent was not; he wasn't on the right exactly, but certainly not on the left, and they were no longer speaking to each other.

I saw their exhibition on "*La Fonction oblique*," which fascinated me. Later on, a young journalist introduced me to Parent, in 1984. And we became friends. And Paul, who was the Dean of the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture, asked me to give a lecture, at the beginning of the nineties. Six months or twelve months later, he invited me to teach there.

At the time I also met Frédéric Migayrou who was working with Claude Parent, and Frédéric and I managed to create a sort of reunion between Claude and Paul, even if their relationship remained contentious.

KH: Can you recognize something from their work in yours?

OD: Absolutely! My first oblique surface was an installation, named Hypertension, in 1993 for the art center "*le magasin*" in Grenoble. Then for the competition for a restaurant on the Champs Elysée, This was in the nineties, and the nineties was a very interesting time for me. There were lots of competitions, I designed my first big building in 1988, the *Banque Populaire de l'Ouest*, and the design was to be published in *Architectural Design*, the magazine run by Andreas Papadakis. I had met him in '91 or '92. I brought him an image of the *Banque* and a little catalogue of our own exhibition "*Maquette Invraisemblable*" from 1989 in Paris. After that, Papadakis invited me to many symposiums he organized with Charles Jencks in London. I ended up friends with a lot of the architects – every symposium was a group of some 15 to 20 architects; siting around a large table. Charles Jencks would give us a topic and we would all talk about it. That's how we spent our mornings, and then in the afternoon

there would be two or three lectures by three persons from the group – never me, because I was too young – but afterwards, we had to send texts that were published in *Architectural Design*.

KH: You prefer the phrase "architecture thinking," which you deployed in a number of lectures. What is it?

OD: At the time there was a lot of talk about "design thinking" coming from Stanford university. There were teachers and researchers who talked about "design thinking." They defined that as a kind of methodology to provide ideas and contexts, and formulate problems that could be solved through design. I too started to speak about "design thinking;" but I started thinking it was not enough, I am not just a designer, I was talking about architecture, which is more than design – more global, broader. So, I thought that for me, it has to be "architecture thinking." And then I had to explain that. When you are an architect facing a question, a problem or a program you need to study and question it through a lot of disciplines, which you only touch upon. Just a bit of philosophy, technology, art, mathematics, geography, sociology, geology etc. – but you know how to manipulate all these disciplines for your work. And then you have to find the nodes within – which are the more interesting places in your overall problem – and bring them together to synthesize all these issues from different disciplines and at the end make a proposal.

The proposal has to be efficient from the larger scale of the city to the smallest detail of a door handle. Architecture is the only discipline that is able to work across such a broad range of disciplines. It allows for every person to answer the same problem differently when each person will combine all these disciplines differently.

This is also why I like to say that I do not instruct my students how to become architects, but I teach them architecture and this is very different. I do not care whether they become architects; I want them to build themselves and decide who to become with architecture in order to help and act in the world.

KH: This means that philosophy is only one of many disciplines within architecture?

OD: Yes. And if you think about Philippe Boudon and his work on scales in architecture, this is similar. I realized after I developed "architecture

thinking" that it was similar to what Boudon was doing when he was doing his researches he called "*Architecturology*."

KH: When you explain architectural thinking, do you feel that you are also explaining your objects, your projects? When thinking architecture, are you comparing it with your practice?

OD: No, not necessarily. It's my life. This much more describing a process of thinking. My practice is only one part of "architecture thinking."

KH: Did you ever compare or harmonize your projects through this?

OD: No, because my way of practicing is much more intuitive, I work intuitively even if I am able to describe in following through which phases it has travel.

KH: This is similar to what Peter Eisenman is always saying, "I do not know what I am doing." Nevertheless, let us try to understand what you are doing?

OD: But this is your task as a philosopher; not mine.

KH: This is the same logic, the same answer as Eisenman's.

OD: Maybe this is normal. Why ask me to explain what I am doing? The way ideas are travelling in your brain and how do they proceed to be conscious is not clearly defined. Some people say "I walk therefore I think!". I can maybe use that as a metaphor "I walk therefore I design." I sometimes say to my people in the office, "this morning, this idea came when brushing my teeth." Brushing teeth is a kind of automatic gesture that you can do without thinking on what you are doing, so your brain is liberated and free to provide or combine ideas.

So, this is why I can say I do not understand what I am doing, I work intuitively, and you are here to give me explanation or your way of interpretation of what I am doing. Maybe this is only an interpretation and someone else can have another interpretation and will explain differently.

I don't have ideology, I don't use specific and constant principles, I navigate depending on the context, the client, the site etc. This is exactly as sailing depending on the wind, the sea current, the sun. Going to a point is never direct nor a right line, this is discursive and evolutive.

KH: We have your sentence: architecture is a discipline that must help the world. What does that mean?

OD: I strongly believe that. Yes. We are inserted into the world and we are looking forward as we don't work for yesterday nor even today. The process of architecture is very long and take several years to finalize a project. So, we need to open our eyes and our brain as wide as we can to every development of the society and the human organization in the world and be curious of evolution of the society. This architecture thinking, this way of thinking builds us to be able to act in the world and make proposals for the world. Architecture teaches how to make proposals. There is first a search, a hypothesis, then a proposal, which comprises complex questions, bringing together all the disciplines we were talking before. After studying architecture, I believe we are able to do that.

Some years ago, I was reading about these big companies that hire philosophers or sociologists to come in and help them to rethink how they are running the companies. My thought was that people trained in architecture could do the same: we are able to analyze, to understand complex question, make a proposal. This is why I think with architecture you can do whatever you want, whatever you can without being condemn to only be an architect in the way we practice today; that, may be, will disappear in a near future thanks to AI.

KH: We are also interested in your use of the word "help."

OD: I think the main task of architects is to help. To act in the world. To consider the problems that we encounter everywhere in it. Because after all, architecture is for humanity; it is not just an abstract thinking.

This is also why I do envy the young students, born after 2000. They are in a fantastic position for inventing a new century when using all the new development of new technologies that are running fast now. I often tell them their main task is to look and be curious of everything happening, then to dream of being able to create, invent and build in the near future the new century in which they will live. They have to do that without forgetting human being. And this is fantastic and exciting.

KH: Let's talk a bit about acting in a good way on the world, about morality. In one of your interviews you say, "we are today in a society where everybody wants to behave as a nice person. No, sometimes, you

can do something bad. Everything that is perceived by users as bad could be interesting." So you are seeking to help, seeking change, but without moral protocols.

OD: It is not exactly this. We want to help people to live better. I don't really have the vision of good or bad. I don't have a moralistic vision of acting. I have convictions and know that not everyone has the same as we are all different and only humans.

KH: We had a conversation with Peter Eisenman where he says that architects are evil. Are architects evil?

OD: Yes, absolutely. It is complicated and even impossible to live with an architect. Because architecture is our passion, our life, and if you are not an architect, this is quite difficult to live with. As architect you are constantly analyzing the situation, constantly making proposals, moving, evolving. And not everybody likes that. Above all, the architect is curious about all in the world.

KH: Could a philosopher and an architect live together?

OD: Maybe or maybe not. I have no idea about that.

KH: Let us take a slightly different approach. You have a school, and we assume that there is something like architectural knowledge. If architecture is a discipline, if it has disciplinary autonomy, that means it produces some kind of knowledge.

OD: I would say that I do not teach; I coach. I don't know what teaching means in the academical meaning. I have conversations with students and through these conversations we are traveling through their proposals and I always ask them why.

KH: Could you tell us the difference?

OD: Teaching is bringing knowledge, telling the student what do they have to learn and do something in a particular way. Coaching is to bring out who they are, looking at what they can do, trying to extract from them something they might not even be aware of. Giving them the more autonomy of thinking and doing. Let them to take position and be engaged with is.

KH: The American philosopher Emerson distinguishes between instruction and provocation. Do you feel you are "provoking" your students to do something?

OD: I only push them to go beyond.

KH: We want to ask you about the topic of institution and protocols. Your school seems to us to be what Derrida called *contre-institution*.

OD: I wanted a free way of teaching. In our school we re-invent something every semester. Bringing new themes, new people for interacting with students, new organization between Studio, workshops and seminars. We try to invent and redefine it every time. In a way, there is no curriculum; a kind of a frame yes, but no curriculum.

KH: How would you describe, let's call it, your architectural style of built projects?

OD: Never. I wouldn't. Because I do not know. I can't define it. I don't have a style; in fact, I do not want to speak about 'my' style. Perhaps somebody else can do it; but not me.

KH: How would you then describe your architecture? Your projects? How do you start designing?

OD: I always say that it depends. I go to the site, I meet the client – always, regardless of the size, where it is in the world. This way, sometimes I immediately have ideas, in part because I have some experience; sometimes not; I take the plane, the train, the car back to Paris, I speak to one or more often two people in my office. I describe what did I saw, how it felt, what are the conditions. I ask them to start to do something. Previously, it was done through models, but now the young generation is not able to make models as well, which is problematic for me. But we were used to make models, put them on the table, play with them and see what happens. I react to that.

KH: Could you tell us something about the overall idea of project MACRO in Rome? What did you want to do conceptually?

OD: We were in Rome, a very preserved city where Roman ruins are part of the cityscape, where contemporary architecture was not really present

in the center. So, I decided to play the game "to go on with a mask." By keeping the facades on the street, covering the whole place by a large roof, we could create inside another world, more contemporary that people will discover when entering and traveling in.

Covering the whole place with a roof to be used is the story of Rome, the rooftop terraces. When we looked at the surroundings of the Museum, we discovered that there were no public squares around. But, for me Rome is a city of squares – so I decided to create a rooftop and a square all together. Then took in our advantage the level differences between the two entrances on both sides for creating hallways going up and down to travel and discover – really discover – the building, via different ramps and passages. This is the story of the project.

At the beginning, if you look at the first images of the competition, the walls were white, but through a conversation with a journalist who said that because I wear black, the walls should be black. I tested and experimented them. I have a lot of stories that I can add, but I am not sure that I could explain it any further why.

Regarding this project, which was done in 2000, I had gone to visit the Guggenheim in Bilbao a year earlier; I spent seven hours, step by step through the whole building. I discovered that there were multiple passages and perspectives that the building provided. I wanted to give the same sense of surprise to the visitors of MACRO. This is a kind of reference, I guess, even if they do not literally relate to one another in terms of design.

KH: Do you use some other media for projects? Like drawing or painting?

OD: I don't draw; I sketch sometimes. Actually, now I dare to sketch, but in the past, I thought my sketching was terrible, so I avoided it. I rather talk a lot. And my medium are the people working for me. We sit in front of the screen, and I ask them to make changes – shift this, do that, etc. If it's still not right, I put tracing paper on top of the screen, I draw on that and we scan it and they re-draw.

KH: France has some famous women philosophers, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Sarah Kofman, etc. – is there a relation between women philosophers and women architects? Are you not thematizing all the time your position as a woman architect? Is it possible to talk about being a woman architect?

OD: It is not easy when you start, especially if you are a woman. But this is life. It has been like this for two thousand years.

KH: Is it possible to recognize your work as a woman architect?

OD: No, I do not want to be recognized as a woman architect; I want to be recognized as an architect. I'm sure that there are differences, that they are differences between men and women architecture, again because we are human and there are differences between all of us. I do not want to be categorized as a woman architect. I even tell young women in school, you can do it, but not if you think of it as being a woman, but only with architecture on your mind.

KH: Does that mean that architectural thinking is beyond this difference between men and women?

OD: Of course. I do not think the two are connected.

But when you were asking me about why I don't theorize or I don't think about how I work, I remembered the exhibition in London in 1995, "Theory and Experimentation," organized by Papadakis. We were the only French team invited to this exhibition. All the American and English participants had theoretical explanation for what they were doing, for their architecture; which we did not. Why was that? Because when you are a young architect in the US, just out of school, you cannot find work, so you start by teaching and doing research. So, you theorize your architecture. And then, later, you find a project, and you try to link your theory and your practice. But in France it was different: thanks to the competitions for young architects in the eighties and nineties, we were young architects who were working a lot, designing projects immediately after graduation. We were experimenting as well, but through projects, not through theory. We also tried to explain what we were doing, but we were experimenting first and theorizing after.

I also wrote a text on the difference between theory and doctrine. In theory, you make a hypothesis and you test it and modify it constantly after the result of your experimentation. This is the scientific approach. While a doctrine is something you announce and you never modify. And this is out of my way of thinking.

Interview conducted by Petar Bojanić and Snežana Vesnić.