



Bettina Schürkamp

Köln

Bettina Schürkamp completed her diploma in architecture at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart in 1995 and attended the graduate course „Histories and Theories of Architecture“ at the Architectural Association in London. For more than five years she worked as a practising architect for architectural firms in England and Germany such as Bolles+Wilson, Münster and Peter Kulka, Köln. From 2001 until 2007 she held a

*research and teaching position at the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture at Wuppertal University. Currently she is completing her dissertation on the Dutch architectural firm OMA*AMO. She writes as a freelance journalist for architectural magazines in Germany and Switzerland and has been publishing in magazines such as Archithese, Arch+, Bauwelt and Deutsche Bauzeitung..*

GENERIC REALISM

Knowledge-Based Design Practice in AMO Identity Studies

Over the past several decades, a new global order has emerged from the twilight of modern sovereignty. Negri and Hardt call this formation ‘*The Empire*’ and show in their writings how it progressively incorporates hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges. Within its open, expanding frontiers production increasingly tends toward a knowledge-based economy and toward the production of immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, or communication. In his publications on “design intelligence”, Michael Speaks discusses how this substantial change transforms critical practice in architecture today. In 2003 Speaks published a number of interviews with architects, such as Greg Lynn, Neil Denari, George Yu Architects or Archi-Tectonics, that give examples of how a knowledge-based economy can inspire architecture today. One of the architecture offices selected was the think tank AMO, founded by Rem Koolhaas. In Speaks’ interview with Jeffrey Inaba, AMO director until 2003, it became apparent that the think tank is in many ways a counterpart to OMA’s architectural practice. Both practices are based in Rotterdam and often work in parallel for the same clients. However, while OMA remains dedicated to the realization of buildings and masterplans, AMO often operates in “areas beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture and urbanism, including media, politics, technology, art, curating, publishing, and graphic design.”¹ AMO has conducted research for companies

1 See for more details <http://www.oma.nl/>

such as Universal Studios as well as Schiphol Airport and produced exhibitions at the Venice Biennale and Venice Architecture Biennale. For the fashion label Prada, AMO designs fashion shows, curates their website and has carried out research on in-store technology for new Prada epicentre stores in New York and Los Angeles.

In relation to the conference's theme, the question arises whether and in which way AMO's design intelligence could break new ground in Negri's and Hardt's Empire. A close reading of AMO's exhibition *The Image of Europe* reveals how the specific use of architectural intelligence opens up new markets in the diffuse Foucauldian network of economical, political as well as cultural power. The identity study about the EU came into being in two stages: an AMO preliminary design scheme in 2001 and the exhibition *The Image of Europe* in 2004. The initial idea originated from two brainstorming sessions in 2001, organised by the European Commission and the Belgian Presidency.² A group of well-known intellectuals discussed the needs and functions of a European capital and how Brussels could best express them. There was a wide consensus among the participants that the European capital should not follow the example of national capitals. In the course of the debate there was much talk about two almost opposing conceptions: Umberto Eco's "soft capital" and Rem Koolhaas' "hard capital".

The Italian philosopher Umberto Eco proposed a non-architectural capital of temporary events and activity. He concluded that the European capital should be more like a server put in the centre of a network. Similar to software this "soft capital" should guarantee the circulation of material and intangible ingredients such as enterprises, activities, markets, public administrative bodies and also exchange in science and arts, the production of religious beliefs, collective behaviour, fashions, etiquette and norms.³

Rem Koolhaas also addressed the richness and diversity of Europe; however, in his presentation he drew a different conclusion and proposed a "hard" rather than a "soft capital". He emphasized that there is not just one Europe but several that are present at the same time. Currently the EU consists of 27 and NATO of 28 member states. Furthermore there are several cultural institutions like the Eurovision or the UEFA that have up to 50 and more member states. On top of that there are traces of historical empires such as the Roman, the Frankish or the Habsburg empires, which are still influential in today's culture. Therefore the

² European Commission, Belgian Presidency: *Brussels, Capital of Europe. Final Report* (Brussels: 2001), p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

AMO conceived a design for the EU flag that became really popular. The graphic designers subsumed all national flags into a common European barcode flag. This striped flag can be extended and read in several ways. It was conceived to embody an enlarged EU.

process of unification in this “Mosaic Europe” consists not only in creating vertical connections between centres and peripheries; at the same time, it is also necessary to continuously relate a wide diversity of institutions, organisations and individuals within and beyond national boundaries.

Hence in his proposal Rem Koolhaas was concerned with the question how a “hard capital” could represent both the diversity and the unity of Europe at the same time. In an analysis of the EU’s visual representation, Rem Koolhaas and his think tank AMO revealed that so far the EU network is more like a non-place rather than an inspiration for a common European identity. Many of the buildings and interior spaces in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxemburg are uniform, standardized office environments that by no means express their public and political relevance. Therefore Rem Koolhaas argued that the hybrid organisation is almost invisible and without eloquence in its communication with the citizens. For a more vivid public appearance, he suggested in his conception of a “hard capital” two particular forms of representation of the European Union’s identity: the first is through communication, both verbal and visual; the second, through the physical substance and buildings of the European institutions. In this respect the AMO proposal incorporates “hard” and “soft” aspects in equal measure. Communication, emblems and architectural representation go hand in hand.

As the initial point of departure for a new EU representation, Rem Koolhaas and his AMO team, led by Reinier de Graaf, proposed an alternative design for the European logo in the preliminary design scheme of 2001. Taken for granted for more than 20 years, the logo has been omnipresent on letters, in the media and signposted on EU buildings since 1955. AMO suggested the circle of 12 golden stars be spread evenly on the blue background, thereby transforming the closed shape of the logo into an open texture and expandable icon. In the new design the stars form an unending plane that can be used in different scales and contexts. In the AMO collages, the new design of the EU logo functions as a background in broadcasting shows or is even enlarged to an urban texture that indicates the EU areas in the city of Brussels. Complementary to the new EU

logo, AMO proposed two different urban scenarios for Brussels as a prospective “hard capital” of Europe. The first scheme identifies possible areas in the present *Quartier Européen* that could be re-inhabited both through new buildings and a new conceptual framework. However, in this area there is not much space for expansion. Therefore the second option suggests creating a more “idyllic” campus outside the present area in the site known as “Tour et Taxi”, along the canal.

Apart from the transformation of the EU logo, AMO also conceived a second alternative design for the EU flag that became really popular: The graphic designers subsumed all national flags into a common European barcode flag. Similar to the previous expandable icon, the striped flag can also be extended and read in several ways. The new design was conceived to embody an enlarged EU, which since 2004 comprises 27 member states. Simultaneously the flag as an emblem is devised to become an inevitable part of everyday life that gets close to people and reaches almost literally under their skin. The most radical form of invading people’s privacy is probably the suggestion of an EU-barcode-tattoo on people’s necks. In this respect the expandable icon communicates on a micro as well as on a macro scale. The notion of a symbolic and physical expendability was influential in the publications of Reyner Banham. The British architecture critic realized that accessibility to the public could be accomplished more likely through the application of culturally loaded, meaningful forms as well as widespread recognisable symbols with appeal⁴. In his opinion, popular and fashionable genres and the enduring fascination of human beings with their bodies lead the designer to the “innate traditions” of relevant products and their immersion in society. Thereby it unifies and visualizes the network as a hybrid multinational space-time-continuum.

The exhibition *The Image of Europe* can be seen as a continuation of those initial ideas and sensibilities. The European Council and the Dutch presidency financed the show at Brussels’ Schuman roundabout in the centre of the *Quartier Européen* in 2003. For three months, AMO displayed three different panoramic collages in a “barcode” tent with the EU stripes on the outside. On the first ring, facing the outside, a selection of EU posters gave an overview of fifty years of public relations, which advertised the growing multinational organization. The AMO collage on the inner wall visualized the unification process since the Second World War. The main attraction of the exhibition was a panoramic collage sur-

4 Nigel Whiteley: *Reyner Banham. Historian of the Immediate Future* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: 2002), p. 318.

rounding the meeting point in the centre, which displayed epoch-making events and individuals in European history from the big bang until today. Large arrows marked periods of historical change and mutual influence.

Working drawings from the OMA*AMO archive reveal how fragments from everyday life, culture and architecture merge in the organizational depth of the panoramic collage. One characteristic of this *Generic Realism* is to use ready-made elements from the Internet, newspapers, film or other media. Similar to strategies in Dada, Surrealism, or Pop Art, the AMO team arranged in a playful way images from these sources on the canvas. One inspiration for this working method might have been Robert Rauschenberg's "Combines". The artist considered the world as one gigantic painting; for this reason, he picked up trash and used objects found on the streets of New York City for his collages.

I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality.⁵

Against this background, the AMO team explored in their collages whether historical fragments could reawaken dormant memories in the forgotten past of cities and thereby form a new unifying European identity. From successive layers of diagrams, images, atmospheres, and cultural references, the designers formed an emerging cultural landscape. Following the collage's inscribed narrative from left to right, the geographic formation of the virtual landscape becomes more and more dense in the course of European history. In the prehistory of Europe and in antiquity, islands rise from the sea. In medieval times, the islands form filled continents, which finally add up to one continuous shape in modernity. In the twentieth century the virtual landscape turns into an apparently unending stream of information and entertainment, which overwhelms and distorts the European movement beyond recognition.

In her book *The City of Collective Memory*, Christine Boyer pointed out that, although the montage and the aesthetic of temporality originated from the early twentieth-century metropolis, it is only the "City of the Spectacle" that utilizes simultaneous stage settings, juxtaposing multiple perspectives and spatializing separate times, as intentional compositional arrangements. As a non-place it exists in a state of constant flux and challenges the traditional architectural practice with a complex synthetic space-time.⁶

5 Mark C. Taylor: *Disfiguring. Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 168.

6 Christine Boyer: *The City of Collective Memory* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: 1996), p. 46.

The AMO team explored in their collages whether historical fragments could reawaken dormant memories in the forgotten past of cities and thereby form a new unifying European identity.

In order to realize architecture in complex space-time-networks, such as the European Union or Negri's and Hardt's Empire, a mixture of "hard" and "soft" aspects might lead to new working methods. Rem Koolhaas emphasised that the combination of an identity study with a masterplan in the EU project allowed them to invade areas that are usually reserved for leading professionals from other disciplines, such as economics, engineering or politics. Through immaterial labour such as a service, a cultural product, or communication, AMO makes contact with all kinds of different groups, institutions and individuals. Therefore in AMO's strategy, immaterial work and extended services go along with commissions in architecture. Another example for the synergy between immaterial work and architecture is the close collaboration with PRADA. For this fashion brand, AMO designs the website, fashion shows, interior spaces, flagship stores as well as a museum of contemporary arts for the PRADA foundation. For all these commissions, the survey of everyday life and of complex network activities is an essential part of the architects' work, which can eventually result into a design for a building. In light of this, architecture emerges from a specified social, cultural and urban situation and finally transforms a "soft" stream of information into a "hard" condition.

In the magazine *Volume*, AMO published a "Timeline of the Timeline" that shows in how many different ways time, space and information can be represented in collages and diagrams. Alfred Barr's influential "flowchart" view of the history of modern art (1936), the Situationists' map (1960), CIAM IV (1933), Buckminster Fuller's "The 92 Elements" (1946) and Charles Jencks *Architecture 2000* (1971) were among the chosen examples. One of the concepts that might have served as an inspiration for the *The Image of Europe* was the exhibition *Mathematica: a world of numbers* by Charles and Ray Eames. With interactive displays, mathematical peep shows and an image wall, the designers invented a display that arranged information spatially. The installation of *Mathematica* was the longest-running corporate-sponsored permanent installation in the world and attracted a large audience. In their 1969 statement "What is design", they

enunciated basic principles that may be helpful to understand AMO's working method. Eames' diagram illustrates how in the design process different fields of interest and concern overlap. In their opinion design is successful if the interests and concerns of the design office intersect with the area of genuine interest of the client and the concerns of society as a whole. "Then it is in this area of overlapping interest and concern that a designer can work with conviction and enthusiasm". However, the example of *The Image of Europe* shows also how this kind of approach in the age of the Empire can easily become a hazardous enterprise that overwhelms the designer with a never-ending flood of information. Is it really worth facing this detailed complexity with new forms of critical practice and architectural intelligence? The Eames probably would suggest that it is because for them "the details are not details, they make the product. The connection, the connection, the connection."⁷

7 Ralph Caplan and Philipp Morrison: *Connections: The Work of Charles and Ray Eames* (UCLA Art Council: 1976), p. 15.