Marco Serra

Interview Rubén Valdez

Few architects may understand the complexity of the relationships between the client, the user and the architect as well as Marco Serra. As a chief architect for Novartis, with a robust trajectory behind him, Serra has engaged at an eye level with most of the vertices involved in architecture, acquiring an unrivalled understanding on the completeness of the architectural process and his different actors.

Italian & Swiss, born in Zürich in 1970, he studied architecture at the ETHZ, graduating in 1996 with Prof. Hans Kollhoff. After working in the office of Prof. Adrian Meyer from 1996 to 1999 and for Diener & Diener Architects from 1999 to 2002, Serra started working at Novartis in 2003 and is responsible for the Campus master planning. From 2002 to 2005 he was architect in charge of the design for the main gate and the car park project of the Campus in Basel. Since 2006 he is the responsible design architect for the conversion project of the Abadia Retuerta into a hotel with spa in Valladolid, Spain. Since 2014 he is the Global Novartis chief architect.

Referring to our current call for papers[1], what is your opinion thinking about the architect, the client and the user, the way they relate to each other and the different situations between them?

Rather than a trinity, it's a new form of Architect.

One single entity that would produce its own architecture for its own usage?

More than one single entity, what I have in mind is how I consider the ideal Architect should work. Today's culture has the tendency to see architecture equal to design. Unfortunately the tendency goes more and more into this direction, and I consider this a problematic development. The basis of the architects has been reduced to a very thin area and has been detached from the construction sites and from the implementation. The practice shows that architects are involved, depending on their profile, first of all on a very high level and in the very beginning. This presumes that architecture can be reduced to the elegant movement of the architect's hand. The architect as a complete, universal actor is more and more disappearing.

Whether we see the architect as an entity that manages all the different parts of his discipline or as a person that builds a language through architectonic gestures. How would you define your position within your personal work, in relation to the trinity of user, client and architect?

First of all I would like to define my ideal character of the architect. I think the architect shouldn't be neither a manager nor a coordinator, nor would I reduce him to a coordinator of disciplines. The important part in an architect's work is to be able to absorb the different disciplines and make them become one, in what is the result of his activity. The architect should be able to discuss with all disciplines at the same eye level without falling into the trap of becoming a superficial generalist. If you have a look at the way medieval monks used to build their facilities, you will be astonished by the exemplary way they did their work. What fascinates about medieval architecture is its coherence.

Probably the coherence comes from the fact, that the architect was the user and the client at the same time?

Having had the opportunity to work for a decade on the restoration of an ancient monastery, I saw that the coherence did not at first, come from an architectonic will, but from the circumstances under which the projects were set up. The monks would define the strategy and the location of the monastery. They would define the architecture including details, construction and materials. They were also the constructors themselves and last but not least they were also the users. Their buildings do nothing else than reflect these circumstances. That is where the coherence comes from. Having said this, I do not argue for regression. I argue for completeness in the architect's work. *Les pierres sauvages*, written by Fernand Pouillon, describes the life of a monk building a monastery in southern France, which I think it is a fantastic illustration of the topic.

Going back to the Santisima Trinidad subject; In your position as a global chief architect, what would be your role in this wholeness of the architecture?

First of all, I'm far away from being a modern monk, overarching all disciplines. But one of the particularities of my work is that the first discussions in projects do not happen about architecture, but about project circumstances. Also, having the possibility to see into different areas and stages of the project gives me the opportunity to see things that as an external architect you generally don't see. Take the start up or the hand-over phases of a project. These are important phases, but despite of this, often architects are not present during these discussions. The start-up is the phase in which you lay out the project basis and therefore you have the most influence over it. The hand-over is the moment when you can learn from all the mistakes. These are very valuable insights.

Talking about design and experimentation, have the usage and building restrictions of the campus been in contradiction with the architects will to experiment?

There is no general answer and it varies from project to project. It also depends how much engagement the company has put into the project. Beyond that, it is not only about the architect, but about the whole team: the general planer, the user and the client. Depending on the cooperation and the energy the stakeholders have put into the project, the result is better or worse. The better the team, the higher is the probability to find good answers to what you call restrictions.

So that in order to achieve a satisfactory building you would need to work again as a single entity, the client the user and the architect together?
Considering that the cooperation is crucial to the result, the question is how you set up teams. Good projects begin by picking the right members and this is why the choice of the architect and his team is so important. You can mitigate mistakes and improve quality by setting up a good structure, but much more effective is the right choice of people. The other aspect you can influence the quality with, is how you set up roles and responsibilities.

So more precisely, how do you chose an architect?
Probably the most important aspect in the choice of the architect is trust. Also reference projects are good but more important is experience. The only way to understand these qualities, is to interview and talk to people. Particularly in an environment of a very sophisticated communication, face to face talks become more and more important. Think about the extraordinary ability of studios to visualize projects. It is really hard to distinguish what has been built and what not. This brings us to the next point which is important in the choice of teams, and this is the visit of projects. Only by looking at realized buildings you can distinguish the quality of the studios. This is why I think that competitions do not a priori lead to the best result. Independently of whether you do a competition or a direct commission, I prefer as a first step the discussion. We had the experience that competitions are not simple because the immediate interaction between planner and client is lacking. Also,

in competitions you need to have a very clear briefing, this is why some companies begin with intermediate discussions in competitions.

Since early twentieth century, different companies like Olivetti, Nestle or Ford have had a wide research in the working space, its consequences on productivity and its social implications. However, they often chose one architect in long term collaboration. Having worked with such a vast group of different architects in the same campus, has added an extra level of difficulty in developing the project?
I think that the choice of architects is linked to the overall philosophy of the company. I have a very high respect for long term thinking, but the longer the timeline, the more difficult is it to continue working with one structure over the whole project. The highest value of working with different architects is that you can learn from them. The challenge is how you transfer these learnings from project to project. We have tried to do that by keeping continuity within the teams, therefore integrating experienced employees in different projects. You can integrate learnings into guidelines, but the best way to transfer learnings is through people.

So in this sense you would say that the client has a constant learning from different practices and that enriches its existence as a client?
Yes, I would say so.

Thinking about the building in an international and local context, apart from the users inside of the building there is another kind of user that perceives the building from the outside. How would this constellation of architects and clients insert itself not only in a Basel context but in an international context ?
To what do you relate it, what kind of perception?

Of course there is an image of the values that the company wants to present. By hiring several different architects you send a complete different message than just hiring one.

I think one of the important messages that you send out is the care for quality. This is both internal and external related. For the external aspect, I think it is related to the company's expectations, which is to attract talents. By setting high expectations onto yourself, you also set high expectations towards the outside. Working with the best teams sets the expectations that we want to be attractive for the best employees, and this is related to the ambition of becoming the most attractive company for the best people. Good people create good companies. The same is true for internal. By caring for the people you send a strong signal, that people is important to the company. The first target of the project is not architecture, but the employees. The idea of attracting and working with the best employees has been instrumental to the idea of working with the best planners. We believe that the best work environment will create and retain the best people.