

# Maarten Delbeke

Interview

## 1- In your opinion What are the defining traces of contemporary society's identity? Either in a global or local context.

In the western context, the only one I can claim any familiarity with: an extreme degree of self-absorption, with the attendant prevalence of identity politics and primary emotional reactions, such as indignation or outrage, over rationality. I find it striking how genuine and crucial emancipatory movements — regarding such issues as all aspects of identity — have transformed into issues that are so easily manipulated by both consumerism and populism, all while humanity as a whole is facing literally existential threats.

## 2- How do you position yourself towards these traces?

I'm conflicted, as I recognize the potential value and variety — as well as necessity — of the trends outlined above, and the potential of new technologies and media to radically change the ways in which we think, interact, and do research. So I try to engage with these questions, critically and to

the best of my limited ability.

## 3- Is Architecture relevant to the building of the identity of a society? In which way? or Why not?

Historically, architecture has legitimized its existence by proclaiming its capacity to express the identity of society. The fact that buildings are rooted in the soil, often built at least partly from locally available materials, and accommodate customs that can be alleged to be local or particular to a given society, has been used since Vitruvius to argue for the necessity of architecture, and the need for architecture to reflect the values of society. The fact that this argument has been so pervasive, has probably to do with the fact that buildings are essential to our sense of place, and that many monuments express some notion of political or social order. However, neither 'function' is a prerogative of architecture — our sense of place, for instance, is as much informed by 'architecture' as by 'non-architectural' buildings, by landscapes, smells and sounds, languages and accents, and social interactions and events. So I believe that this slippage — turning a very generic

sense of how buildings define a particular place in a specific society — or in the life of a random group of individuals — into a prerogative and legitimization of architecture, should be viewed very critically. I do think that the work of the last decade or so of architects and planners to think about, and work with design and planning processes, regulations, real estate development, user participation etc is very relevant, and reflects and possibly transforms processes in society, also because they engage with collectives, as opposed to either individuals or abstract entities such as 'the city' (as in city branding through architecture), 'the region' or 'the country'.

**4- Are you conscious of your role, as an architectural historian, in the building of an architectural and social identity?**

As a teacher of architectural history, I have increasingly become aware of that role. On the one hand, because so much of our historical patrimony has come into being through processes involving the construction of political or social identity — raising the question of exactly how and why architecture enables such construction, and to what extent it makes architecture complicit in sustaining particular power structures. On the other, because as an architectural historian we tell stories, and need to think not only of the subject and plot of our stories, but also who our audience is. It is more diverse, with more varied cultural and intellectual backgrounds than when I studied architecture, and it has also different political sensibilities, some more sophisticated than mine at their age, but also some less — the latter is especially true with regard to a sense of history, which in my experience has changed radi-

cally over the last 20 years. So we need to think about how to make these stories accessible, enticing, and relatable. In my view, this situation does not necessarily entail changing the curriculum per se — I do believe that we have to teach and research things we know something about, through our studies and lived experience, which in my case is the highly canonical European architectural history of circa the last 500 years. But it does challenge us to find new kinds of stories, and finding new ways of doing history, so our stories can become parts of other stories as well.

**5- We would like to focus now on a specific Identity Building process: Assimilation. It is the first process, out of the four we proposed, we are approaching in this cycle. It entails two different motions: one by the ones who wish to be assimilated and another by the reigning identity which assimilates. How do you see this process and these two moments in the history of architecture, specifically in print?**

I find assimilation a very problematic notion, as it implies — as in your question — a duality between a 'reigning' identity and another that wishes or has to 'assimilate'. The preoccupation with assimilation is perhaps a side-effect of the astounding process by which the sophisticated deconstruction of ontologies such as identity as occurred in the 1980-90s has resulted in the reification of different identities over any consideration about what might actually be shared, and about what might be complex and ambiguous if it is not explicitly identified and flagged as such. At the same time, it should be granted that architecture opens itself to this question precisely because architecture exists as a cultural practise by its claim to

embody the values of a society (cf. question 3). In that sense, architecture is almost by definition an attribute of a 'reigning' society — see the dedication of Vitruvius to Augustus. Piranesi suggested that the Roman empire fell because the more primitive people coveted its sophisticated architecture; no assimilation here, but conquest. But these are ultimately highly limited perspectives on very complicated historical processes, where roles often reverse and entangle. Again, here it is our task not to settle on one version of the story, but to keep doubting and asking questions. This complexity is, I think, well illustrated by the role of print in the diffusion of architectural models. What does it mean when we encounter a Serlian portico in Peru, executed in painted wood? Of which of these two motions does it form part? The way we answer these questions tells us much about our implicit assumptions (for instance, about how we interpret and value sophistication), and the degree to which we want to believe that architecture is capable of exerting hegemony or authority.

Maarten Delbeke (°Bruges, 1970) studied architecture at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture at Ghent University, where he obtained his PhD in 2001. After the Scott Opler Fellowship in Architectural History (Worcester College, Oxford), he became a post-doctoral fellow with the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (F.W.O.). In 2005–6 he started teaching at the Universities of Ghent and Leiden. At Leiden he led the research project "The Quest for the Legitimacy of Architecture 1750–1850", funded by a VIDI-grant from the Dutch Science Foundation (N.W.O.). In 2014 he became full professor at Ghent University. He is the founding editor-in-chief of *Architectural Histories*, the online open access journal of the European Architectural History Network (EAHN).

Maarten Delbeke has been Visiting professor at Griffiths University, Australia (2013) and Visiting scholar at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal (2004). He has obtained several grants from the Belgian Historical Institute in Rome (B.H.I.R.) for research at the Belgian Academy in Rome. He is member of the advisory board for *Architectural History*, the journal of the SAHGB, and OverHolland (TU Delft), and a member and previously president of the Board of Directors of the CIAUD-ICASD, which publishes the architectural journal A+. He is a senior member of the Belgian Historical Institute in Rome. From 2006–2009 he was Field Editor at CAAReviews for Architecture and Urbanism until 1800.