

## Samuel Schultze

Interview Francisco Moura Veiga

It is easy to sit across Samuel Schultze. Leaning back on the chairs inside one of the meeting rooms in the freshly renovated Basel office, overlooking the fig trees in the interior courtyard, one can't help but feeling comfortable. The room I am in is one of the few enclosed spaces in the huge office. Samuel shares the open-office space with all the other workers that make up the Basel office of Burckhardt + Partner, no private office, no wall between him and his employees. This is quite something when we think that he is the CEO of one of the largest architecture offices in Switzerland, with around 350 employees and a history that started in the early 50's of the XXth century, he was part of the Basel Cityscape commission for 15 years and is the President of the Board of Trustees of the Swiss Architecture Museum.

Still, he is no star, he is no Ronaldo or Messi, he is more a Phillip Lahm; a polyvalent figure that holds the team in place through his overview of the game and his understanding of each position's functions.

Just before starting the interview, I tell him that we don't want to hear what the CEO of B+P has to say about "MANNSCHAFT", we want to hear what he, Samuel, has to say. He then leaned back too and we started talking.

**How would you define the architect's role in a project now, today, in this precise moment?**

Nowadays the architect doesn't have the same role as he did in the past. He used to be not only architect but also master-builder and that worked perfectly back then. His fields of knowledge were vast, therefore he was able to implement his artistic ideas backed by a comprehensive amount of information. He would do an apprenticeship, he would learn from his master and further developed his skills. The trade he learned enabled him to look at a task in its entirety, he had the overview. With the separation of design and execution, the architect's role changed. He draws the plans, he is still versed in construction matters but he does not implement his ideas himself anymore, this task was taken over by the "new" specialized master-builder.

**When did this separation between design and execution happen?**

At the beginning of the XXth century when architecture crystallised into a separate discipline. In the last century, the architect has missed out on strengthening his position as leader of the planning and the execution phases and was gradually displaced by the general contractor. The general contractor was better in all matters of accounting and timing and the architect didn't deal with this part of the process because he concentrated more and more on the design part. Nowadays, this kind of specialization reached a new level: today we have planners, estimators, acoustic engineers, e.g. We have specialists for everything.

**These specialists for everything, how do you relate to them. For instance, the office you are heading, is working for companies (such as Roche or Novartis) that request an enormous number of specialists and consultants involved in their projects. Are these specialists giving you the information you need for your work or are they limiting you in terms of the design process?**

I think that our relation towards specialists is rather ambivalent. On the one hand I'm convinced that we need expertise in order to deal with the complexity of

the tasks that we are given today. On the other hand we have to consider the fact that this expertise are also highly restraining for us if we do not question them. Therefore, it is very important that we challenge the expertise they are adding to the project and that we extract what we need to know in order to implement their knowledge in an intelligent way. We have to learn to work with the information the experts are giving us and trust their experience without adopting their inputs 1:1. This is a crucial task. Experts often have a very clear idea of how something has to be done. The job of the architect is to bring together different aspects of a project in an intelligent way. He is supposed to overview the whole process and the entirety of the task. In this sense the architect needs to reconquer his position, which once was hold by the "master-builder-architect".

**And who is holding this position nowadays?**

This position is taken over by construction managers, people who primarily organize, structure. They are used to make logical decisions but have no affinity with architecture. They are trustees, guiders, schedulers... We shouldn't allow alienation of the overview position over the project, otherwise the architect becomes just another expert who is supposed to bring inputs.

**As CEO of B+P you have already been in the position of working as local architect and executing a project for a design architect, I'm thinking of the work you did for Renzo Piano, Chipperfield or Libeskind. How was it for you to hold that position? At the end, you were then also "just another expert"?**

In a way it is an ingrate job when you have been given the task of guiding the "design architect". You act as the go-between who has to fulfil the needs of two parties, the client and the "design architect". The client doesn't dare to give instructions to the "design architect", afraid of interfering with the "Architecture"... The design-architect on the other hand is often struggling with deadlines and financial specifications he does not fully understand. The local architect/project manager is the middleman, the mediator because he speaks both

languages. It is of great importance that he knows well the design-architect's point of view and is able to represent it toward the client, the same way that he has to represent the interests of the client toward the design architect. It is a very demanding job because you run the risk of being ground down between the two positions. And, at the end, your contribution to the project's realisations is substantial but you are not benefiting from it. The design architect is the one who gets the credits and is published. The client is happy and proud of the result whereas you are not getting recognized for the indispensable job you did. This can be quite frustrating. There was a time when B+P worked in this function for Libeskind, Renzo Piano or Tadao Ando, amongst others. It was extremely educational in the sense that we got privileged insights into their working methods and ways of thinking but, even with this conceptual and theoretical compensation, we are not putting ourselves in that position anymore. We retired from this kind of business because we are convinced that we are good enough to realise projects like that by ourselves.

**As you mentioned already, the job description of the architect changed. Also in the design phase we are gradually turning away from tasks that have always been at the core of the architects work (visualizations, layout, graphic conception of the plans) and outsourcing them to specialists. Do you see this as a natural development or should the design process stay in the architects hand?**

I am against an exceeding specialization. I believe that the architect needs to handle the devices himself in order to design, plan and communicate his ideas. Certainly there is a kind of specialization, like budgeting or logistics e.g. where, due to the increasing complexity of projects, the architect couldn't possibly manage everything by himself. Still, we would like to keep that kind of knowledge within the company in order to be able to cover all aspects of the project, during all phases, including the concept and design.

**As president of the "Ortsbildkommission" (townscape Commission) in Riehen and member**

**of the "Stadtbildkommission" (cityscape Commission) in Basel, you had the chance to sit on the other side of the table and decide how the city districts should develop. How did you feel, playing in this position?**

To work for the municipal authorities was a big and essential experience for me. But you shouldn't feel too important and get presumptuous. The committee's first goal is to push the good and outstanding projects forward. Often, these good and outstanding projects are not conforming to the law. So, if you manage to convince the authorities and find solutions together to realize projects because they are above average, then you did a good job. The second goal is to prevent projects below average. And the third goal is to partially improve a great deal of all the other projects. The city's organism is not only living on the outstanding projects, it is living on the average. Average is sufficient, as long as you have highlights in between. But obviously there are limits: A "Stadtbildkommission" can not bring average quality to a high-level because the project leaders are not able to do so. It's not like in university, where you can tell the students what to do in order to get a better grade, it is much more difficult than that. In Switzerland for example, the profession of the architect is not protected (by law). It practically means that anybody can be an architect and hand in a building application. If you talk to this kind of people the way you talk to your students, they won't understand a word. Actually this job is much more about interpersonal relations, comprehension and communication.

**What are your views on the future of the building industry, and the role of the architect as one of the many players in it?**

The architects need to make sure that in the future they still can do normal projects (small scale residential, medium scale housing developments). More and more people want to do their project by themselves because it's cheaper. For instance, to build a single-family house, one could just go to the construction material market and do it oneself. Or small companies that directly address general contractors or contractors and tell them "Build me something. We don't



need an architect who just brings expenses”. For these small scale projects you have pre-fabricated structures, modular structures and general contractors that displace the architect, making him redundant. It is important that the architect can strengthen his position and show that he is needed. Nowadays, architects tend to be judged by “spectacular” large scale projects like airports, museums or projects for companies that use architecture as a marketing tool. That’s all good but the architect has to make sure to not only take on these large scale specific projects but also smaller scale projects. Otherwise “the cookie will only get smaller”. I think the building industry in Switzerland is doing well, and will do well in the future because the current building stock is, and will continue to be, in need of rehabilitation. In general we have to stimulate the building culture. The architects should not only be considered for spectacular projects but for normal residential projects of high usability and good quality.

**What do the words *ecology*, *flexibility*, *standardization* and *typology* mean to you regarding the future prospects mentioned before?**

Usually architecture is particular; you always have prototypes. Architecture is consistently reinvented. On the one hand that is important because we need to come up with site-specific and customized solutions and carefully analyse the given situation. Now the question is if this is going to work as well in the future and if architecture can sustain all these prototypes? And if, in the future, our society can still afford this kind of architecture or will we rather turn to standardisations? Generally the architect does not like the concept of standardisation because he does not have the same kind of freedom of expression. On the other hand, we have to face the economic pressure and it absolutely makes sense to force standardisation. This is a challenge and it certainly can be an interesting topic. For example, we have to find solutions to provide affordable housing space. Housing space is getting more and more expensive if we build it new. This is a never-ending process. In order to provide new affordable housing space we have to find intelligent solutions and standardisation makes absolute sense in this context. Therefore we

have to work with flexible typologies. There was a time where, for every problem, you would come up with an individual and fixed solution. Then the needs changed and the house was not usable anymore. Only old houses with very simple structure survived. They were former office buildings, then residential buildings and are still functioning today. They are flexible enough to fill new needs. Of course the individual house will always exist. Nevertheless, we have to consider both sides and it is important that we develop typologies based on ecological and economical considerations and which can fulfil future needs in a sustainable way.

**Finally, what position should architects adopt when facing the future?**

Architects need to become all-rounders again, they have to widen their horizon. They need to be curious and interested in all the different aspects of a project. They do not have to be experts but they need to know how to integrate the experts inputs in a clever way and to use it in their favour. They need to be the spider in the net, to stand where everything merges in order to have more influence on the design part. They shouldn’t become a pawn at the hands of the client, they should rule the game.