



OLIVER THILL

Oliver Thill is a German architect based in Rotterdam. With his partner André Kempe he runs the office well known for its residential housing interventions. However, recently Oliver is focusing more and more on public intervention. We talked with Oliver about his teaching approach and the necessary skills to swim in today's ocean of architecture.

“ Architects who are able to survive nowadays are always the ones extremely sensitive in the communication. ”

Elizaveta Sudravskaya: Can you tell about your study background and university years?

Oliver Thill: I come from East Germany, where we were really influenced by this social communist education. I started to study in 1989 in Dresden and it was very interesting historical moment when the old professors were kicked out, the new professors were coming and there was a complete chaos. We had to organize our education by ourselves. We invented the project, we did the project and afterward we went to professor to get points for it. It was a fantastic condition and this freedom does not exist any more nowadays. During my studies I got a scholarship to stay half a year in Paris and half a year in Tokyo and that was really nice way to discover the world. I finished in 1996 in a small provincial city, where was not much work for an architect. We decided to go to Holland where we worked for different offices for a couple of years. Later we won European and started our own practice. It was rough and quick. It was a good time when we won some awards and developed the office. The crisis of 2008 was very critical and sixty percent of our commissions were canceled within half a year. We were luckily saved by the commissions outside Holland.

ES: Where does your interest for residential housing typologies come from?

OT: In Eastern Europe 1968 never happened and modernism movement continued until 1989. There was never a cultural revolution like in the West. Growing up in a communist context always gave us an idea that the future would be different and realization of housing estate was one of the ways to show this future. It was not only providing housing for the masses but it was also ideological statement. When we were children, it was already fascinating. Housing was a wheel to build the new society and architect was the person in charge of it.

We always had the fascination to constructivist tradition and were spending time in the library reading books by Hannes Meyer and looking through the projects by Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe and Bruno Taut. It was the reason why we went to Holland, a country with uninterrupted continuity of modernism. When we came there, housing cooperation was still very strong and a lot of mass housing and social housing was built. It seemed to be a perfect place for us to start and we felt really comfortable. We extended our interest and experience from study into professional reality, which was an enormous luxury.

ES: At school, we usually do not put much attention on the building costs and investment. Do you focus on this issue in your teaching activity?

OT: As architects, we are not purely academics. Architecture is a very physical experience and it is very much about the process of building. You have to be an entrepreneur and an opportunist in a good sense of the word. You have really to understand the processes you are participating in, based on problem solving, creation of funding and dialog with different groups. It is especially important in urban planning where you have to work with many different organizations. We have to bring this skill to university, because we

need to teach how to swim in this reality. And best way to learn swimming is to throw someone into the water.

ES: At your lecture you said you are looking for a XXI century housing typology. Do you have any answer by now?

OT: There are a lot of things happening in society that will demand a totally different architecture. We have quite dramatic demographic changes. The amount of old people will double in the next thirty years and it is a substantial change in our environment. We also have a lot of social changes. In 60's and 70's the nuclear family was still a dominant model of production of the cities, now it presents only twenty percent of the housing market. The most of the housing we do is for the elder people or for the singles and students. Periphery is not attractive for these groups of people, who want to go back to city centers and this demands different housing typologies. Immigration is another important issue. A lot of people are coming from different cultural context and they demand certain conditions. The housing is a very interesting and dynamic field. In terms of economy we now have to be more compact, efficient and flexible. While on the other hand, we have all the European rules about sustainability, which makes the building more expensive.

ES: Do you think the process of digitization will effect new housing typologies?

OT: I do not believe there is a need for a completely electronic house, but the changes caused by digitization in Dutch cities are quite dramatic. The extreme phenomena is happening: twenty percent of offices and thirty percent of retail became abandoned. People can easily work from home and buy things on internet, instead of coming to the office or going to the shop. Italy is a bit more conservative and resistant in this way. It is a question of a lower income that permits you to run the infrastructure. Even if results of globalization are a bit different, in the end we all would suffer from the same phenomena.

ES: Which skills do you appreciate in the young architects coming to work with you after university?

OT: In our office at the moment one of the main issues is the language skills. We only hire people who speaks English in combination with different languages. In the rest, it is about your attitude and mentality. We do not reflect so much in our work and look for people with American "just do it" approach. We have a clear separation between production and reflections. In a way we adopt our work to the skills of employees, so they can give their best. As a boss, I am trying to bring the people in their most active position. You should be able to listen very well and it is not easy. A big problem of our profession is that many people become architects because they do not want to communicate. Sometimes they are antisocial people who prefer to work on their own and produce what they like, but then you come to real work you have to communicate with a lot of people, motivate them, to be aggressive or friendly according to the situation.