EFFICIENCY AS NECESSITY

A conversation with Kersten Geers

An economy of means.

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The Un-expected_An architecture of Efficiency. Image courtesy of Esteban de Backer.

This interview is the fifth in a series of interviews conducted by Esteban de Backer to question the status quo of efficiency in architecture.

Kersten Geers founded OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen together with David Van Severen in 2002. In 2008 they were awarded with the Belgian Prize for Architecture and in 2010 with the Silver Lion at the 12th Venice Biennial of Architecture. He is founding member and editor of *San Rocco* magazine, and frequently publishes essays on architecture in a variety of magazines and books.

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ESTEBAN DE BACKER [at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the studio space]: I want to propose a list of topics for our conversation: pragmatism, constraints, means, intentions, materials, construction, representation, and experience. And I thought we could shape the conversation around some of your projects, such as the Arbor Drying Hall in Herselt, Belgium; the Handelsbeurs bridge in Ghent; and a series of studios you taught at Columbia University, the Mendrisio Academy of Architecture, Graz University of Technology, and EPFL Lausanne that were published recently in a book called *Architecture Without Content.*

PRAGMATISM

EdB: To start with pragmatism, I'll read a quote from a text entitled "In Favor of Logical Architecture" by the architect Alejandro de la Sota: "Architecture, when it exists, is the outcome of a clear approach to a real problem."

The procedure for doing logical architecture is a good one. One defines a problem, with all its wide-reaching implications, and gathers as much data as possible, bearing in mind all the viewpoints and ramifications possible. One then studies all the potential ways of solving the problem. One studies the possible materials for building the possible solutions. And then one comes up with the final result.

In a text for *2G* entitled "Words Without Thoughts Never to Heaven Go," you also wrote that "a great number of buildings are pragmatical clothing for rather undefined content. In many cases any attempt to make architecture starting from sheer pragmatism becomes wishful thinking."

With these two quotes in mind, how would you read the idea of a pragmatic attitude in the work of OFFICE?

KERSTEN GEERS: I'm totally convinced that if you want to make architecture survive in some way, it needs to deal with the most pragmatic problems. There is little money within the context we operate, in France and Belgium, so we try to make the simplest and most visible solution possible. There is never an abundance of funding to legitimize something very unusual.

If you want to find legitimacy in the world today, buildings cannot be very expensive. I think that's very pragmatic. Of course, however, I do not think that a utilitarian box is the answer to the question of architecture. In the Drying Hall, the client wanted us to build with standardized solutions. If you built what he asked for, you would get a standard, self-supporting box. It's also true that since this is a space for drying potted plants, you have to add a ventilated façade and do not really need insulation. This escapes any obvious standardized solution.

Arbor Drying Hall in Herselt, Belgium, 2013. Photo: Bas Princen.

In the last fifty to a hundred years in the architecture industry, a certain kind of standardization has emerged that I would call the "one for all" solution. A solution might seem to promise a certain efficiency economically—by, for example, using minimum material for maximum effect. In the logic of the market, it may be more profitable to sell the same product to everybody, even though they do not exactly need it. But that is not efficient at all. The kind of pragmatism we are interested in steers away from this total standardized market solution. We try to work through all the necessary layers of functional questions, and build up possible answers fresh from the start. Then somehow, we come up with another answer. That answer is inspired by whatever you need to make it to "yes," but it is also inspired by something else....

It's a complex conversation. One could argue that we work according to principles of architecture. Our approach has less to do with the context of program or site, and more to do with the history of architecture. Abalos and Herreros, de la Sota and even Lacaton and Vassal argue that the right answers to complex questions are simple and efficient. They are supposed to be pragmatic. But if you look again at their work there is something else at play. Lacaton and Vassal have very specific compositions that with poetry lead somewhere else, beyond a simple answer to a question. Or with de la Sota, there is an interest in the history of architecture that is very much defined by an appropriation, assimilation or tweaking of Mies. The gang of the Independent Group and the Smithsons have been very influential for us. The result is a classicism like Mies' as well as an older version of classicism... [*Talks to a student who is leaving for dinner*]. Then again, it is still related to efficiency: an efficiency of perception and effect more than a simple efficiency of means.

EdB: In a lecture you said that architecture can be reduced to detailing, to a matter of structure and to the definition of a perimeter. Simplicity and ease is enough. There is no need for complexity. Can you expand on logics in your practice that "reduce architecture to its bareness and essence," as you state on OFFICE's website?

KG: In a way, this is about pragmatism of practice....

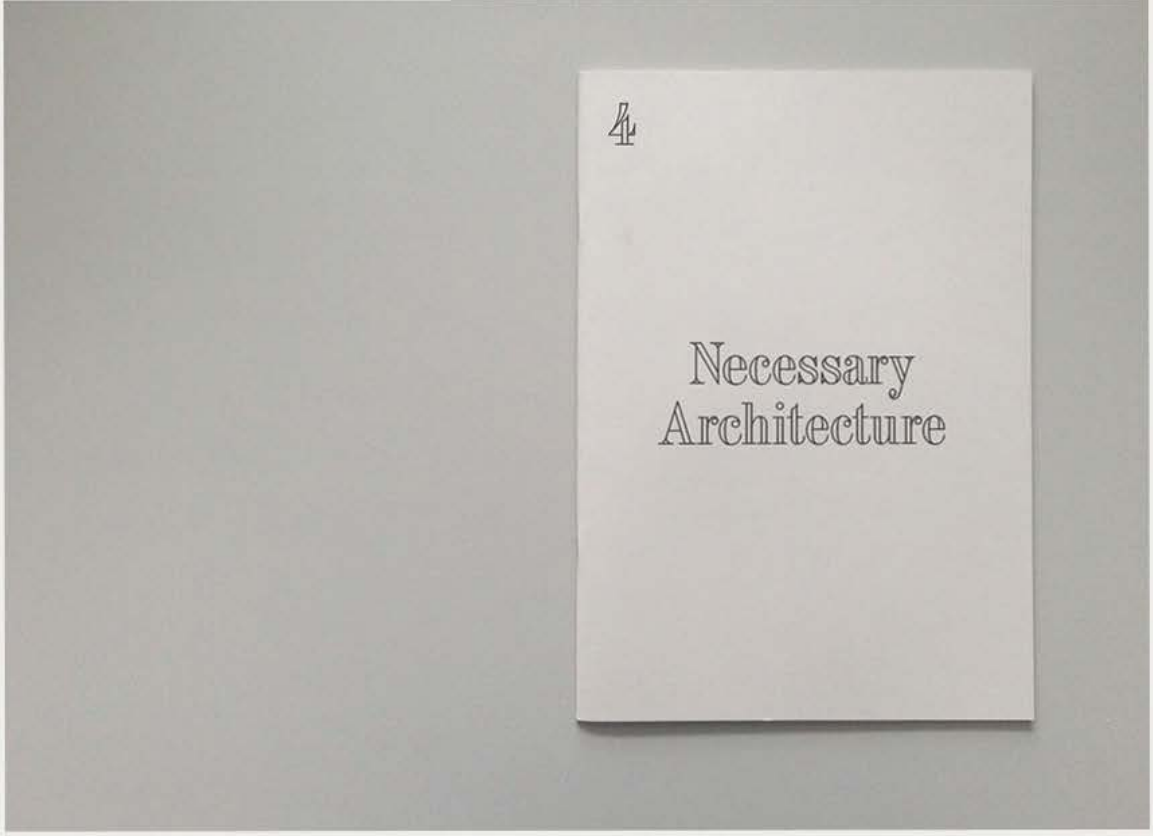
[A party starts in the GSD cafeteria. de Backer and Geers move to Geer's office.]

I advocate in certain situations for the simple, but at the same time I'm also very keen on the inherent complexity of unresolved issues in a project. I would say I advocate for simple projects in a very complex world, and for the impossibility of resolving different spatial narratives of a project. There may be different tracks you want to follow, but at a certain moment, you realize they conflict with each other. So, somehow in their simplicity these narratives are able to convey the complexity that a building contains.

ECONOMY OF MEANS

EdB: Let's shift to the idea of constraints. The three projects I mentioned respond to constraints both external (budget, program, and site) and internal (perception and material representation). We could describe efficiency as an internal constraint, or as a logic you impose upon yourself to operate. In this sense, constraints are means rather than ends in themselves. How do you apply what I would call the "emptiness" of constraints within a project? I'm interested in this question in opposition to its reverse condition, in which content and context are very charged.

KG: *Architecture Without Content* needs to be understood as rhetoric, and not as an actual situation. I encounter this problem in studio now and then. Students sometimes think they should make something without thinking about what happens inside, and that's not true. I would respond "no!" to the statement of de la Sota you read just now. We study every aspect and conflicting process of a program to have it stored so deeply at the back of the mind that we can come up with a spatial solution totally informed by that very program—even though it seems independent. Otherwise, one is unable to formulate an answer which is seemingly disconnected from program. It is not possible! That is, in a way, the confusing thing here.



Architecture without content, booklet 4. Image courtesy of OFFICE.

EdB: As you said before, architecture confronts different social, economic, and political scenarios. Most of the time, money is considered an external restriction posed upon architecture. Nevertheless, OFFICE insists on the necessity (and possibility) of working with an economy of means without producing banal architecture. Can you expand on this?

KG: If you say a term for too long, it becomes a bit obsolete. Yet I still like the term very much. If you have to build a school, for example, you might make an expensive decision to build the sports hall underground because it is spatially important to do so. Otherwise it would be far too big a volume. That's not an economy of means, but it is a decision that forces you to design the rest of the building super-cheap because there is no more money left. The façade might then be designed in standard brick, and painted white. Now, these are additional ambiguities, because if you paint it white, you'll need to repaint it in ten years. Is that so economical?

Economy has different time frames: today, tomorrow, ten years, and twenty-five years. Especially now, in the new ecological discourse (that has been developed, rightly so, but unfortunately in a rather simplistic way), things that are better to invest in long term are often not cheap today. If you design a geothermal project, for example, everybody is into the story. But when the clients realize they have to spend money they would otherwise spend over twenty years at once, they are not so happy about it.

EdB: I'm also interviewing the engineer Craig Schwitter, of Buro Happold. He talks about the need for a robust architecture that can adapt in the future. The program might change, but the structure will still be suitable.

KG: I'm fascinated by that.

INTENTION VS. INVENTION

KG: It is also true that you design something without knowing exactly why. You might design relatively undefined spaces and then gradually start to understand, with regards to this contemporary discourse about robustness, that this is not such a bizarre thing to do. In fact, spaces that are not so functionally defined could survive better in the future. They became relevant somehow.

In a similar way, teaching allows us to contemplate things, not because we sit down alone and write some seminal text about our ideas but because we can work through a topic. In

a studio we taught at EPFL, we came to an argument for architecture that survives for a long time. But the studio didn't start there. It started with a desire to make a more European architecture, whatever that means, with a study of Roman architecture. Ultimately, Roman structures have an economy of means not as the cheapest structures of their time, but because they are still here. This whole collection of projects—some designed by students, and some found and appropriated—make an argument about architecture on a territorial or shared civic scale [looks at the studio's "Roman Architecture" booklet]. They move from the gesture of the colonnade to the shared swimming pool, and from the gigantic building as one with endless possibilities to the landscape-defining object...

EdB: You rescue properties rather than presence or materiality.

KG: Yes, maybe so! That's an interesting reading of it. I don't think I ever saw it that way, but you are probably right. And then you can put structures together that you would not otherwise imagine: the fire station next to the cistern, and so on.

EdB: So, it has to do with your idea of doubles in which you pair up buildings that somehow enter in conversation through an unclear yet weirdly fruitful dialogue.

KG: Yes, this could be called a difficult double. Yesterday I had a conversation about design technique and design theory, in which I talked about "false friends." The idea is that there are things we know, and things we thought we knew. All of a sudden, you realize that false friends had always been there.

EdB: This is very present in your notion of intentions versus inventions.

KG: That comparison is not our invention, but it's true!

EdB: Who said that?

KG: I think it was in Iñaki Abalos' writings on Alejandro de la Sota. At least that's how I remember it, but it is also true that when you can't trace ideas back to their source, in a weird way they become yours. Do you know what I mean?

EdB: Yes, you appropriate things!

KG: You appropriate them even if they were even meant in another way!

EdB: We might argue that *intentions* are autonomous and *a priori*, and thus embody what we could call internal constraints. On the other hand, *inventions* are encountered along a process of discovery. A pragmatic way of thinking might enable things to be "*found* in translation." What was lost or found in the process of constructing the Drying Hall, or big box projects in general?

Collage of Arbor Drying Hall in Herselt, Belgium, 2011. Image courtesy of OFFICE.

KG: Discovery is somehow both irrelevant and huge. It's complex. I'm afraid to talk about it in this way because it could form some kind of opaque mantra. But at the same time, when our ideas about big box structures developed into *Architecture Without Content*, something weird happened that went beyond our original intention. At first, *Architecture Without Content* was just a provocative title. When we started to ask what it meant, before we knew it, we had a statement about a kind of architecture disconnected from what it contains. This discovery was more a process of *afinee*—as you say in French—or refining things over time.

MATERIALITY

EdB: I'm also interested in your approach to materiality. You talk about the idea of cheap materials, not for the sake of being cheap but because there is sometimes no need to use expensive materials.

KG: I don't think it's a religion for us. Yes, we've used cheap materials because we had no choice, to a certain extent. If our budgets were bigger or our situation were different, why not use a more expensive material? I'm not necessarily against it. To desperately want to be cheap—I'd find that a bit bizarre. If you look at the Swiss scene, I have no disrespect for, say, Roger Diener, because he makes a building that's well-built. Why not build a beautifully constructed house that will still be here in forty years? Sure, our context forces us to use cheap materials, so we have become very inventive. But it should not become something with symbolic importance.

EdB: There are other aspects of our conversation I hope to address, but I think we can do it later.

KG: If you don't mind.

EdB: Yes, that'd be fine.

Map of walking path during interview. Image courtesy of Esteban de Backer.

[In the rear book section of Strand (Broadway and Twelfth Street) bookstore in New York. We walk from there to Mast Books (Avenue A and Fifth Street).]

TOOLS

EdB: I'd like to talk about the way you represent projects. Your office uses a lot of perspectives, together with plans and sections. Was your production like that from the very beginning, or did you discover this approach at some point in your career?

KG: Our production in the office is conceived less on an ideological or a conceptual level. It has more to do with what we talked about before: an economy of means.

I'm involved in the magazine *San Rocco*, where my friends make enormous axonometric drawings. I find them very beautiful but will never do them because I find it such a waste of time, in a way, to do that kind of work. There are seldomly occasions in which you can legitimize this kind of production.

We don't make any sophisticated renders, because we don't have expensive rendering software. Of course, students learn to make fancy renderings on very complicated programs. But these programs are very expensive. We don't buy them in the office. Secondly, these kinds of programs always felt like a black hole to me. Even since the very early version of these programs came out when I was a student, the people who use them have become the boss of their universe. I find it very annoying.

EdB: That they're the experts?

KG: Yes. You cannot touch it. They say, "No, no, no. That's not possible."

We work instead with physical incarnations of the work. For example, we print out Photoshop collages and hang them on the wall. You can sketch on them. You can discuss. You can compose. The combination of plan and perspective makes a certain composition. This is very important for us, not just simply composition in the sense of, "this plus this... isn't it beautiful?" No. Instead, we compose things together and a certain narrative develops.

It's debatable, but the tools available to architects are clearly defined. You can find all kinds of incarnations of these tools, but in the end they're the same tools. What you have to figure out is how to develop a narrative with them. The narrative you develop on your own is private in the sense that David [van Severen] and I, and any office or set of people share an idea, a certain train of thought, or a certain way of looking.

EdB: It's not obvious...

KG: That's an interesting word to bring up, if I understood you correctly. There's no "audience." Is that what you said?

EdB: No, I said it's not obvious.

KG: That's true too, but I think it's also interesting to say there's no audience.

EdB: Yeah, yeah. It's true. You're telling the story to yourself, right?

KG: Yes and no. Sometimes there is no audience yet and you have to get an audience. The role you have as an architect is ambiguous. There are two jobs at the same time. On the one hand, you try to mediate with the forces that are there, in the program, and so on. The utilitarian side of your job is important. On the other, there is a very different context: a

context of other architects. Here you have a much more private conversation, to a certain extent.

EdB: I'm also interested in the dimensionality in your representations. You don't use models, and all your perspectives are drawn without shadows. They are flat.

KG: They're easy to make, right? [*Laughs*]

EdB: They're easy to make, but at the same time there is an argument behind that method.

Crematorium Polderbos, Ostend, Belgium, 2013. Image courtesy of OFFICE.

KG: Well, yes, an argument. But to a certain extent—and this is true for everybody who does cultural work—there is a set of influences and fascinations which clearly define the way you do things. This has so much to do with personal obsessions. Slightly underdeveloped three-dimensional perspectives... Yes, there are, of course, connections to Ed Ruscha and David Hockney; to Piero della Francesca. They're all there. This doesn't necessarily mean there's no real clear purpose, in a sense.

EdB: Matt Mullican.

KG: Mullican. Very true. These kinds of drawings are effective. They connect a little bit to conceptual art. But they're also simply beautiful. [*Laughs*]

EdB: Yeah, you're right.

KG: It's not as though you choose your weapon after a long debate.

EdB: Representation is often a process of addition, but what about the life of a project after it's built? What is the role of the photographer Bas Princen in your work?

KG: The role of Princen is almost the same story. We know Baz very well, and share a lot of fascinations: conceptual art, post-minimal art, photography, documentary photography, and so forth. So, we don't have to talk a lot about it. The pictures he looks for (or the ones he finds, because maybe that's what you have to say—he *finds* certain perspectives) are not exactly the ones we made. But of course they're related because we live in the same

world.

EdG: So, the production of the project doesn't stop when it's built, right? There's an afterlife to a project because of the way this guy takes pictures.

KG: Yeah, but I think there are two afterlives of a project. I would like to really emphasize that. On the one hand a project is represented by us. On the other, it stands in the world, and works. I'm very serious about that. Overall (despite some typical problems we inevitably encounter) we are quite happy that people like to work or live in our buildings.

This brings our conversation almost full circle, back to this notion of pragmatism. A building is what it is. If it doesn't work, if it does not have a desirable succession of spaces, if it does not negotiate these things, it makes no sense. That's very important, right?

The simple perspectives are very related to this idea. Hockney depicts happy people in pools (actually, just pools, not people). I think there's evidently darkness in whatever production you make, but there's also an attempt to make a quality of space.

LITERAL EXPERIENCE

EdB: This relates to the final topic: experience. When you describe projects like the Ghent bridge on your website, you say it's just a simple bridge that goes from point A to point B.

But at the same time there is a kind of perspective trick that makes the project urban somehow, that makes people engage with the project in a different way. These projects need to perform, right? But at the same time you are interested in perception.

Handelsbeurs bridge, Ghent, 2008. Photo: Bas Princen.

KG: Yes, of course. But that's what I call the cultural context in which we operate. I would dare to say, as a slight provocation, that the only context that interests me is a cultural one.

The question of what's architecture and what's a building is important for David and me.

It's a very silly question, I know, but it's a fundamental one. A building forces you to ask yourself the question, what is architecture? You have a box. What is it? You reduce it to its façade. What does that mean? What I like about it is that...

Where are we now?

EdB: This is Bowery, I think.

KG: This gives architecture a narrative, because architecture is about *being architecture*. It wants to negotiate that position. It's this and that. It doesn't know if it's good or bad. That's, I would say, a cultural asset. I admit that sometimes I think this is also very problematic, because it suggests that architecture could only function as a footnote to other architecture. In other words, it's not performing per se.

It's a bit of an issue. It's something I don't know the answer to. Is architecture to a certain extent totally irrelevant? Because it is not functional *a priori*? In times of crisis does it become irrelevant? Or necessary? This has been my argument until now, that especially in times of crisis—of extreme economic need—you have to create a certain added value, however hard to define. The answer is always that culture is the cornerstone of civilization, right? It's very heavy. Very serious. But I'm afraid it's true.

EdB: There's a perpetual question of the distinctions between high and low culture. What people describe as a "building" rather than "architecture" is a subproduct of an economy that is not thought of as artistic or as a cultural product.

KG: I think what you say is correct, but it's also true that there's a certain kind of inefficiency in any kind of production. It's impossible to avoid, because of the logics of economy and the limits of the human brain, among other things. But I would also argue that any kind of cultural production, even one which doesn't have the slightest intention to create added value, does just that. There's always a slight discrepancy between what something could be, at its most efficient, and what it is.

This discrepancy is a perfect tool for a hidden agenda. You can say, "Since that thing is there anyway..." A good example is the Drying Hall. That building was built for a small budget. Certain aspects of the building are totally unresolved but are accepted as logical. Because of this, you can then totally dismantle its agenda. You can reassemble it to produce another answer to the same question. And you can insert another agenda. It doesn't need to be more expensive. It doesn't need to be less performative. I think that's very interesting.

We are at the Bowery, right?

Map of walking path during interview. Image courtesy of Esteban de Backer.

EdB: No, I think we need to turn right.

KG: So, this is great news. This potential legitimizes your actions.

EdB: I was also interested in the role of phenomenology in your work.

KG: I'm very interested in it, but I'm not a specialist in it. I have this big book of phenomenology by Merleau-Ponty. I have it at home but I've never read it. Yet we are very interested in phenomenology from the perspective of how things are used.

You probably saw that in the books I buy. In the conceptual and abstract art world, we talk about phenomenology and the literalness of experience. That has influenced me a great deal. In that sense, it's even more ambiguous but it's also less complicated. It's very direct. When Dan Flavin puts a lamp over there in the corner, what does it mean?

Books purchased during this interview. Image courtesy of Kersten Geers.

I'm sorry we had to do this absurd activity of walking through New York talking about things.

EdB: It was kind of nice.