

Triggering Theory: The case of OASE, Journal for Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Started as a project of self-education, as a critical act against mainstream journals, OASE explored in the past 35 years alternative approaches to architecture writing and thinking. In doing so, the editors invested the vast spectrum of instruments at their disposal: editorial policies, periodicity, slowness, writing and iconography. As such, the editors of OASE not only challenged the ways one thinks and talks about architecture but assimilated new abilities to approach the architectural object.

This text further elaborates some initial thoughts formulated during my lecture "Action and Reaction in Architecture", July 18th 2017, Columbia University New York.

From Durand's Précis des Leçons d'Architecture to Loos's Das Andere; from Banham's role in Architectural Design to Frampton's writings in Oppositions, architects and architectural historians have used the medium of print and, in particular, that of journals, as modes of communication

and theoretical expression. In this perspective it seems interesting to shed some light on the role of the journal as editorial device. What is the role of architecture journals in relation to architectural practice? Can they propose an alternative to the building site allowing the architect to experiment beyond the traditional boundaries of his profession? Are they proposing networks of exchange and debate enhancing architectural theory? And how can the editorial tools – the written word, the iconography, the graphic design and the printed matter –, contribute to the critical stance of the journal? By addressing some of these questions, through an observation of the journal OASE, I hope to offer some insights into the architectural journal as space or incubator for theoretical writing and thinking.

“O”

The journal OASE was founded in 1981 by a group of students at the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University of Technology. The journal was initially called O referring to its pedagogical objectives: ontwerp, onderzoek, onderwijs (design, research, education). A product of 'the critical 1970s', the journal originated out of discontent. The Dutch-speaking professional journals could hardly be seen as platforms for contemporary discussions about architecture and urban design and architectural education was largely disconnected from contemporary practice. The international debate on architecture and planning, until then

seemingly absent from their education, served as a point of departure. The O editors⁽¹⁾ emphasized this intellectual vacuum in their first editorial: “The possibilities educational institutions have at their disposal to contribute and invest in debate remain largely unused: instead of occupying a vanguard place, architectural education” (and especially the educational programs) is running behind (Redaktioneel, 1981, p. 2).

The general lack of platforms for critical practice and architectural thinking, led the Delft students to explore alternative sources as a way to keep pace with current developments. Aspiring to opening up the debate to other disciplinary and geographically contexts, the O editors proposed a network of like-minded individuals, critical of their education and willing to seek elsewhere. The founding editorial highlights this network explicitly:

“The intention is not to make an in-crowd school paper, but a publication that collaborates with Eindhoven University of Technology, the various architecture academies and the departments of art history in the Netherlands. It aspires to continue the engagement of the student movement that started in 1966, and to offer a platform with the ability to react to current subjects” (Redaktioneel, 1981, p. 2)

Indeed, the first issue discussed a wide range of topics relevant for the students at that time: going from Miel Karthuis's text on the importance of the

architectural plan and its analysis and legitimization, to Pannerai on typology, Prouvé's façade-system and Henk Döll's 'constructivism'. The first years of OASE can probably best be described as the endeavour of a generation to discover architects, architectures and ideas about architecture, which had no place in the curriculum of the institution where the editors found themselves by default, given the dominant position of Delft among the Dutch schools of architecture at the time.

As such, the origins of OASE can be situated in parallel to other publications that sprang from challenging didactic environments within a school of architecture such as *Perspecta*, AA Files, *Faces*, *Trans* (ETH) or the *Harvard Design Magazine*. Others with looser connections to academic institutions such as *Oppositions* and *Arch+* might equally be mentioned. Unlike most of these, however, OASE was not an initiative of academics but a heroic project of self-education by a generation of students who found the teaching offered to them lacking in rigor and breadth. The journal was considered an instrument, a device or dispositive⁽²⁾ – in the words of Michel Foucault – of self-reflection, self-education and self-empowerment.

The embryonic phase of OASE (1981-1985, issue 1 to 10) ended with the name change, forced upon by the 'Federatie O', the combined organ of professional organizations of various fields of design in the Netherlands. By the end of the 1980's, OASE opened up its editorial board to persons outside Delft University, found a publisher (the socialist publisher SUN) and a new graphic designer (Karel Martens). Maturing and becoming more professional, the journal

introduced a Marxist perspective into its contents, translated texts into Dutch⁽³⁾, and paid more attention to its printed matter. As from issue 45/46 onwards (1996), the journal becomes a bilingual platform for research, leading to the academic position it has today, as a blind peer-reviewed journal. But within this context, OASE decided not to follow the standards of academic journals and preserved a space for speculation and reflection. In fact, despite the development of the journal from a student magazine to a now peer-reviewed publication, the selection of themes and approaches is predominantly informed by the individual interests or fascinations of the editors. As such OASE frees itself from any conditional formats and offers a space where architecture can be fully discussed, reflected upon but also elaborated and produced: a space for theoretical thinking and writing about architecture. How then is OASE used and shaped as a space for theoretical production? What are the intrinsic qualities of an architectural journal and how are they triggering theoretical thinking?

EPHEMERALITY AND SERIAL THINKING

Periodicals are characterised by their ephemeral nature. While a book has a long lifetime, each issue of a periodical is quickly replaced by the next. As such, journals represent temporary spaces related to a particular moment in time. While periodicals do have constraints, they act as hypothetical spaces in which the architect is not confronted with the reality of the architectural project, the client, or the budget. As such, they provide spaces of exploration where new ideas can be tested and reality can be

questioned. Through its responsiveness to current events and its ability to intervene quickly, the architecture journal is a privileged witness of its time, covering achievements as well as ephemeral debates and minor events⁽⁴⁾. Complementary to the book, the exhibition and the colloquium, it enriches the history of architectural production, the history of its mediation but equally its criticism, its representation and its theory.

Another intrinsic characteristic of periodicals is the possibility of a sequence. Indeed, periodicals have the potential to expand beyond the singular occurrence of one issue; the 'announced periodicity' of the magazine gives it a status of 'sequenced thinking' (Pluet-Despatin, 1992, p. 135). It is the very idea of the repetition of the same approach throughout time or space that renders periodicals more active than other media. Periodicals can repeat a same theme within a series of consecutive issues, allowing them to react, to explore, to test and to reiterate. As such, they are not only privileged witnesses of their times but enable to actively shape debates, movements and projects.

Third, and not anecdotally, periodicals allow alternative roles for the architect. In fact, architects often take up the part of editor-in-chief, assessing the collection of elements assembled or created, and accompanying it by a (critical) statement. It is often in a periodical that architecture is experienced in a renewed way, through the specific proposal of the editor. Through the proposed content, the journal takes part in the debates, contributes actively to the production of thought and to the renewal of the models. What the literary

theoretician Paul Aron emphasizes for literary magazines, is reflected in the architectural field: the journal contributes "to the opening up of new avenues of reflection and forms of expression before they become fixed in the cultural frame" (Aron, 1998, p. 7).

Finally, periodicals are also often group endeavours. As such, the architect/editor creates a platform for debate and exchange, enabling cultural transfers as well as the construction and elaboration of an alternative discourse on architecture (Van Gerrewey, Vandeputte, & Patteeuw, 2012). In that sense, periodicals play a role that might extend beyond a specific place or time. The network created through and by these media might have repercussions on other, more extended spheres of the architecture profession⁵.

As such, the architecture journal can constitute much more than a platform of diffusion and information. It is also a space of production of knowledge, a space of self-education, of formation and self-reflection, a space of theoretical production. Through its very nature it offers the possibility to grasp the social, cultural and epistemological phenomena of a certain time and assimilating those to theoretical values; the journal becoming a space of production⁶. How is this put into practice in the OASE journal?

A POSITION OF NEITHER

If OASE sprang from the intense debates on what was called the 'democratization' of education in the 1970s, this is still tangible in the editorial stance and in the organization of OASE. Then, as now, the journal is made by volunteers and relies on the commitment of a large variety of authors, advisers and friends. The

early editors of OASE were certainly acquainted with *Oppositions*, the journal of the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (1973-1984). This 'Oppositions-like take on architecture' has been the guiding principle of OASE and remains so today. It is a journal made by a series of people, a collective without an editor in chief that consists both of researchers working in academia and practicing architects. OASE is situated at the interface between the academic world and professional practice. Within the current typology of architectural publications – professional magazines documenting current production and scholarly journals functioning as outlet for academic research – OASE occupies a "position of neither"⁷: it is a journal reflecting sensibilities rather than particular disciplines. It allows the editors to step outside the traditional boundaries of their disciplines (be it academia or practice) and use the journal as an open intellectual space for critical reflection. There are examinations of architecture history or historiography, yet it is not a journal of architecture history. Issues relating to architecture theory may be addressed, but the impulse is not that of an academic discourse confined to theory. Articles that could be described as exercises in architecture criticism take a form which would be impossible in most professional magazines dedicated to presenting projects to practicing architects.

A PLEA FOR AMATEURISM

One could easily criticize OASE's editorial line of being inconsistent, marginal, or irrelevant. In fact, the journal is used as a vehicle to pursue personal interests; following a certain amount of intuition, and focusing on

architecture as part of a larger culture. In this way, issues rediscovering the work of architects or historians such as Sigurd Lewerentz, James Stirling, the Smithsons or Alan Colquhoun were published in parallel to issues in search for resonances with other domains such as literature, art, cinema and music.

Topics that are discussed in OASE are most often not related to topics with a certain actuality – on the contrary, OASE deliberately chooses slowness. As an average issue of OASE requires one and a half year to prepare, most themed issues are out of date as soon they go to print or never were in the first place. Because they spring from the individual fascination of its editors, the themes have a certain timeless character. This gives OASE certain fragility. But it is precisely its fragility, in between firmly established positions and beyond established management models, this typical 'neither', that distinguishes OASE. This 'fragility' has consistently marked the position of the journal over time and its editors have been continuously engaged in protecting this characteristic against outside pressures, be it from publishers, academia, professionals, subsidizing bodies and even readership. Once the marginal become institutionalized, most often its critical stance vanishes.

32 years after its foundation, OASE has become a bilingual international peer-reviewed journal that is distributed internationally. But OASE's editors do not want to give up on amateurism altogether. The journal's openness towards various formats and types of argument aims at creating a space for critical reflection, allowing both editors and contributors to step outside the disciplinary confines of their particular milieus. This complies to a deliberate

choice of the editorial board to use the medium of the journal to invite authors for alternative modes of critical reflection, for which there are few platforms in the current conditions governing the field of architectural publications (Lagae & Grafe, 2011). In what follows I will highlight three such modes.

READERLY CRITICISM

Today the value frames from which architecture is addressed seem to be increasingly multiple or even exchangeable. As we do not agree on shared values or frames for judgment, we seem to accept that the only common denominator which exists is architecture as image production. Although the image is of historic significance within the architectural magazine – César Daly's *Revue générale de l'architecture*, 1840-1870 / 1872-1888 is only one of many interesting examples – the use of the image within architectural publishing has derived into a transcendental presence or into a transcendental absence. Within OASE we elaborate a different approach⁽⁸⁾.

In his seminal writings on criticism from the 1920s, T. S. Eliot proposed an alternative idea of critical interpretation, which is “only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts, which he would otherwise have missed” (1975, p. 75). Eliot's claim appears highly relevant with regard to current architectural periodicals that all too often lack factual information about the socio-economical conditions in which a building is conceived and realized as well as about the various parties involved. As an alternative to the critics that “supply opinion instead

of educating taste” (Eliot, 1975, p. 76), this idea of criticism provides the ground for a ‘readerly’ architectural criticism that endows the audience itself with a greater faculty of critical reflection. Our view on architectural theory and criticism is the idea of installing the conditions for a readerly criticism. The role of the critic is hence no longer defined as final evaluator, but rather as contributor to a field of knowledge on an architectural project – that is articulated and re-articulated throughout time. Isn't this not precisely also the role of the theorist?

Within OASE, we often return to the architectural object in order to construct the various perspectives from where a thorough and careful analysis of the building can be produced. As such, it is no coincidence that there is a large focus in our issues on critical practices that put the architectural object at the centre of attention. This focus is, in our opinion, always embedded in a context, be it social, economical, historical or political. It is criticism's task to relate the analysis of the building to its contextualisation. But rather than asking one critic to contribute an elaborate piece of criticism on one building, we tend to set different views on the same object in perspective.

One such strategy is the process of polarization. Offering factual information on the contexts and conditions in which a building is conceived, the parties involved, and the reality of the project, OASE tends to offer a pluri-perspectival reading. In doing so, it examines the relationship between the architectural object and its economical, political or historical context. In other words, it conceptualizes the object, and bridges the gap between discourse

and building. Against the background of the increasing acceptance of architecture as sheer image production, this ‘illumination’ of the semantic richness of the architectural object – its capacity to invite for multiple and even contradictory and ambiguous interpretations – becomes, according to us, one of the main goals of contemporary architectural theory and criticism. Architectural publishing then appears as a multifaceted practice, devoted to the architectural object and offering, if anything, food for thought.

PRINTED MATTER

Since 1990, OASE works with Dutch graphic designer Karel Martens. Martens' work includes projects for publishing houses, public authorities such as the Dutch post and the telephone company, but also graphic interventions on architecture. His practice as an artist is intimately related to his work as a designer. His free-lance work is motivated by a fascination for the materiality of paper, the logic of the grid, the beauty of error, industrial artifacts and geometric and kinetic structures. Martens started work on OASE in 1990 with issue 26 and has elaborated ever since a specific design for each issue, for a long time together with a student of the *Werkplaats Typography*, a two-year post-graduate school for graphic design he founded in 1998 with Wigger Bierma. Martens' design has offered on numerous occasions a new perspective on OASE, one where the container (le contenant) is equally important to its contents (le contenu). As such, OASE embodies Marshall McLuhan's 1964 famous citation: medium is the message.

Indeed, what are the sculptural and spatial qualities of paper, of a journal,

of OASE? How can these qualities be emphasized? Should an architectural magazine be more aware of its body than others?

A journal is not only a device to transport information; it is also a bundle of paper, a body in space. The format of OASE needs to be situated between a coffee-table magazine and a pocketbook. Maybe the perfect compromise for an equal relation of text and image. For magazine standards it is a literary and intimate format, unpretentious and economical since it uses the maximum size of the technique at hand⁽⁹⁾. In the OASE series the format is the most reoccurring element. While paper, typefaces and colors vary, the format stays⁽¹⁰⁾. At some points in OASE's design the object-like dimension is purposely empathized: issue 32 refers to the ZERO movement, the minimalist post-war art group. Dutch member Jan Schoonhoven created reliefs that exhibit the structures behind architecture. The issue has no cover, the open spine reveals the structure behind the book: it is divided into sections of 16 pages and connected by a thread. OASE #34, an issue on interior architecture, is published with a "mistake". The book block did not receive its final cut on top, right and bottom. Therefore, the reader is forced to tear the pages in order to get through to their "interior". A less obvious sculptural quality of the book is the choice and combinations of papers. In the OASE #58 entitled "The Visible and the Invisible" every section in the book is printed on paper with different tint and tactility.

DISCURSIVE EXPERIMENTS

As history has shown, independent publications engage proactively with the practice of editing and elaborating alternative, sometimes radical,

approaches to 'traditional' conceptions of editing and publishing. Instead of following and adapting its editorial line to current developments as most conventional journals strive for, OASE reinvents itself in each issue. The only fixed elements are the format of the journal and the number of words to be published.


Several of the OASE issues propose alternatives to the classical form of architectural writing.

The narrative is another interesting tool. OASE invites sometimes artists and writers to use fiction, storytelling, collage, poetry, en somme, literary approaches, to respond to the architectural object. OASE #70 explicitly challenged this by dedicating an entire issue to the theme "Architecture and Literature" and by including highly personal descriptions and narratives in the issue. OASE #69 explored the format of the 'interview', by juxtaposing two voices next to each other.

In reaction to the hegemony of the visual or the narrow-minded use of iconographic representations of architecture, OASE attempts to rethink the role of the illustration. While some theoretical journals have given up on images altogether, OASE explores the potential of iconography: addressing specific questions or rethinking its role as critical instrument. In OASE #77, an issue dedicated to the work of James Stirling, photographer Bas Princen captured a context invisible in the architect's own propaganda. In OASE #81, the artist Walter Warton was asked to elaborate a visual critique of the MAS, a newly built museum in Antwerp. With a series of sketches, drawn from memory, he excavated what remained in his mind of the

building after his visit. The drawings make explicit the artist's unconscious selection and show 'that which captivates'; hence they explore the potential of visual criticism. In OASE #90 the illustrator Eva Le Roi was asked to elaborate a visual essay, translating into black and white drawings the diverse approaches towards the central theme 'what is good architecture'. Her series of 10 drawings, always starting from the same graphic figure were distorted, enhanced or nuanced, depending on the contents. In OASE #91 dedicated to 'Building Atmosphere', specific photographs of details of buildings by Peter Zumthor illustrated the approach.

Could we relate the visual approach in OASE to the techniques of 'estrangement' or ostranenie, as first defined by the Russian critic, writer and pamphleteer Victor Shklovsky and later used in an adapted version by Bertolt Brecht in his epic theatre? In his 1917 "Art as Technique" article, Shklovsky argued for the need to turn something that has become over-familiar, like a cliché in the literary canon, into something revitalized (1965). Instead of explaining the building through plans, drawings and sections, OASE tends to make the building unfamiliar or strange, providing it with new energy, revitalizing its representation. As do the narrative written approaches, these drawing techniques or alternative photographic essays are instrumental in exploring the potential of visual criticism. In this way, OASE – such as other journals – draws upon some of the visual techniques elaborated in the radical magazines of the sixties and the seventies⁽¹¹⁾, magazines for which this generation affirms to have some kind of nostalgia.

If these approaches appear in diverse and various forms in a larger part of the journal, they demonstrate a general conviction: they de-emphasize the role of judgment in favour of other modes of critical and theoretical writing and thinking. In OASE the author is not defined as final evaluator, but rather as contributor to a field of knowledge. Architectural editing becomes then the practice of articulating and re-articulating the architectural project. 

NOTES

- (1) Editors of the first issue were Eric Hordijk, Ernest Israëls, Henk Döll, Janne Hobus, Karin Theunissen, Miel Karthaus, Peter Drijver and Roy Bijhouwer.
- (2) In 1975, during an interview for *Le Monde* following the publication of his book *Surveiller et punir*, Michel Foucault – questioned about his methodological approach – used the term ‘dispositif’ for the first time. He reused the term in 1976 in his introduction to *Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century* to emphasize the control and management of society, but defined the term barely. It was in 1977 that Foucault, obliged to answer the question “What is for you the meaning and the methodological function of this term: ‘device’?”, forged the concept.
- (3) From 1981 until 1996, the *OASE* journal was published in Dutch. From 1996 onwards, the journal became bilingual. *OASE* translated Baudrillard’s text “*L’effet Beaubourg*” (1977) into Dutch and published it as a cahier to issue N° 7 and did the same for Heidegger’s *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951), published in Dutch as a cahier to issue N° 12.
- (4) These elements that are not necessarily ‘archived’ or documented: competitions, the representation of the architecture of information institutions, trade unions, the economy of a building or ephemeral facilities.
- (5) These notions are further elaborated in the methodological essay and introductory text written with Léa-Catherine Szacka to the jointly edited volume *Mediating Messages*, Bloomsbury, 2018 (forthcoming).
- (6) According to a general definition, a device is “a set of parts composing a (technical) mechanism” or “a set of measures taken to achieve a goal”. The French philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the concept in the sociological field in the mid-1970s, envisaging the device firstly as a ‘network’ between the various elements of “a resolutely heterogeneous set, including speech, institutions, architectural arrangements,
- regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic proposals, in short: the spoken as well as the unspoken” (1994, p. 299). Second, joined and disjointed by a system of relations, the heterogeneous elements of the device respond to what Foucault (1994) calls a ‘dominant strategic function’.
- (7) This notion is at the core of the text of my *OASE* colleagues Johan Lagae and Christophe Grafe. See Lagae & Grafe, 2011.
- (8) See *OASE* 81 (Avermaete et al., 2010).
- (9) The format of *OASE* is based on the maximum format of the offset press. Sheets of 70 x 50 cm get folded 3 times, which brings them to a section of 16 pages of the format 24 x 17 cm.
- (10) Only 4 of 69 *OASE* differ from this given: *OASE* #40 on architecture and poetry is cut in half (17 x 12.5 cm), which leaves readers with a more intimate reading book. *OASE* #51, a homage to the Smithsons, is designed in almost square format of 23.8 x 22.8 cm, to give space to their architectural collages. *OASE* #64 is, although sticking to the same proportions of 17 x 24 cm, bound horizontally. The issue on Sci-Fi architecture (#66) is presented in a widescreen format.
- (11) I elaborated this idea in my unpublished research paper: “Architecture, écriture, critique (1960-1970): l’étrangeté à l’œuvre”, for the symposium “Autour de l’étrangeté”, June 3-4, 2010, Paris.

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