

# RECENT HISTORY

If articles, books, artefacts, buildings or even single issues of a journal necessarily – but sometimes reluctantly – impose themselves as an entity in their own right, several years of a journal rarely do. At issue is not the sheer volume of the material, the complexities of a journal's institutional position or the vastness of its horizon, but the very nature of the object itself. Over the course of their existence, journals very rarely coalesce into a coherent (if necessarily multifaceted) argument that could be attributed to the intentionality of an 'author', whether that author is a person, a board or an institution. In the particular case of the last ten years of *OASE*, moreover, there are no declarations of intent or position papers that reach beyond the single issue. The 'oeuvre' of *OASE* is shaped by the succession of the selected themes and their treatment by the editorial teams and the contributors. Since the choice of themes and authors largely depends upon the composition of its editorial board, and therefore at least indirectly on the institutional context of the publication, it would certainly make sense to examine this context to gauge what the journal attempts to say and why. Here, however, it will be attempted to take these themes and what they signify in *OASE* at face value in order to treat the last ten years of the journal as a body of work, and to ask what that body could be about.

One way to arrange the themes of the 30 most recent issues of *OASE* is to relate them to architectural design. In fact, it doesn't require excessive license with regard to the actual content of the journal to class every issue under at least one of five aspects of architectural design: the design process and its tools, important (yet hitherto partly neglected) architects and bodies of work, the qualities or properties of architecture and/or buildings, the tasks of the designer (generally an architect), and the conditions of their practise. Interest in the design process is apparent in discussions of dressing (*OASE* no. 47), the diagram (48), convention (49/50), ornament (65), invention (74), and – through the case of schools – typology (72). Important figures in the history of architectural design were commemorated with the celebration of the Smithsons (51), and the issue on the 1970s (57) introduced a neglected body of work and the concomitant preoccupations of the discipline. The qualities or properties of designs and buildings that have been identified are essence (45-46), (in)visibility (58), surface (59), autonomy (62), monumentality (71), or the relation of architecture to literature (70). As different tasks of the designer one thinks of the house (52), the garden (55, 56), the (semi-)public building (again schools), and the suburb and the city (53, 60). These task are shaped in a permanent negotiation with the conditions of architectural and urban design practise, building and use, and these conditions are examined under the headings of post-capitalist society (52, 54, 61), again the 1970s, the countryside (63), tourism (64), virtual reality (66), immigration (68), gentrification (73) or architectural culture itself, both in the issues 'After the party' (67) and 'Positions' (69).

To propose design as the centre of attention of an architectural journal might seem too self-evident. But in *OASE*, design figures under particular conditions. *OASE* is not associated with a professional organisation, nor does it explicitly address the profession of architects, like for instance *de Architect* in the Netherlands or *A+* in Belgium. In other words, in *OASE* the topic of architectural design does not serve to define a profession or a professional practice, and if the journal certainly seeks to address themes that might be of interest to professionals, its content is certainly not confined to that task. Nor does *OASE* see it as its prime mission to inform a wider public about what is going on in the profession, both in terms of recent production or the preoccupations of its practitioners. That is left to the aforementioned journals, or to *AIO* or *MARK*. At the same time, however, *OASE* is definitely not centred on the discursive environment in which architecture is said to exist. *Forum* (in its final incarnation) and *Archis*, now *Volume* and associated with among others AMO, have embodied the notion that architecture dissolves in a wide field of discourses, activities, practises and research programmes, and that it is therefore as much the task of the architectural journal to register this field as to reflect what architecture, understood rather as a form of 'intelligence', can contribute to it. Certain issues or essays of especially the last couple of years certainly veer into this direction, such as no. 68, on immigration. Immigration is an essentially political, economical and geographical phenomenon, and proposing this phenomenon as the theme of an architectural journal suggests its relevance for architecture even if its direct implications for architectural practise are not immediately clear. But generally *OASE* rarely loses sight of design or the designer. Even if it is not defined by the needs and questions of a professional practise, *OASE* believes in architecture as a design discipline with a specific, if not always clearly delineated field of action that has buildings and their context writ large at its centre.

As such, *OASE* is probably not unique; *AAFiles*, for instance, is sometimes a close counterpart. This parentage stems probably from both journals' close association with architecture schools and universities. Would it be too far fetched, then, to read *OASE* as a forum where different strains of a predominantly academic input coalesce into an undeclared (and certainly not homogeneous) theory of design? Does *OASE* produce architectural theory, not in the sense that it examines the discursive practises involving architecture, but in the more classic meaning of the word, that it defines what architecture is by describing how it is made and should be understood? And, if this were the case, is it possible to characterize this theory?

When the last 30 issues are arranged around architectural design, slight shifts in focus become visible. The design process and the 'properties' of architecture reoccur more or less regularly, while the tasks of the designer and the conditions

of their practise received more attention around 2000-2003. The distribution of the different themes over time suggests that the theoretical aspects of architectural design are the backbone of *OASE*, and that this backbone vertebrates into reflections upon the conditions of architecture in sync with the sometimes short-lived preoccupations of academics and designers (many of whom are affiliated with architecture departments as well). Probably the clearest example of actuality catching up with design is the issue 'After the Party', which attempted to examine what was left of Dutch architecture once the phenomenon of *Superdutch* had blown over, a question that seemed acute to a surprisingly large portion of the field. This issue also announced a move away from an examination of 'conditions' towards 'design' and 'architecture' proper, which chimes well with a more general trend in architectural culture that seeks to combine an investigation of the proper tools of architecture with an acute 'ideological awareness', to borrow Pier Vittorio Aureli's phrase from the same issue.

If architecture and its design are a permanent preoccupation, *OASE* contains remarkably few papers on the exact status of architectural theory and by extension, criticism, with regard to design. It has been noted above that position papers are confined to single issues; very few essays reflect on the kind of work that is being done in the journal itself. The mainly North-American involvement with 'theory', 'criticality' and its aftermath, the post-critical and projective, have left remarkably little traces in *OASE* (and it is hard not to feel a sense of gratitude about that). When John Macarthur and Naomi Stead invoke the North-American debate in *OASE* no. 69, the only issue entirely dedicated to the relative positions of design, design theory, criticism and history, it is to reassert the rights of criticism as 'the place where a concrete, disciplinary conception of architecture, such as that held by most practicing architects, meets the historical-aesthetic conception of the specialist critic'. This view very well describes the practice of *OASE* as a journal, yet now under the heading of criticism, not design theory as I proposed above. It is the slippage between criticism and design theory, I believe, that characterizes the 'historical-aesthetic conception' of the journal.

Following Macarthur and Stead, criticism positions buildings and projects in history, not only because the critic decides to address and thus to canonize them (an effect that is as unavoidable as it inspires resistance), but also because of the historicity of the critic's knowledge, judgement and even individuality. Design theory operates on an altogether different level. To borrow Andrew Leach's reading of Manfredo Tafuri in the same issue no. 69, architectural theory is a necessary corollary of architecture. Theory defines architecture's disciplinary, delimiting its proper goals, tools, field of action by means of a discourse that, while employing examples, models and tropes from the past, essentially stands outside of history.

In other words, if criticism constructs the pastness of the present, architectural theory – here still understood as design theory – implies the permanent and unchanging presentness of the past (to invoke Robert Venturi quoting T.S. Eliot).

In *OASE*, the past and its translation into history assume both roles, as a context for criticism and as a point of reference acting in the present, but not in equal parts. Discussions of the conditions of architectural design necessarily treat history in a critical mode, since these conditions are investigated when they are the subject of change or acquire new importance. Yet the other four ‘themes’ I distinguished at the outset, the design process and its tools, the properties of architecture, the tasks of the designer and important oeuvres and bodies of work, are often treated in terms that presuppose a disciplinary core that remains largely ‘present’ throughout time: historical precedents, (more or less) forgotten authors, and concepts with sometimes very long histories, such as invention, are ‘remembered’ as building stones of present architectural practice. In *OASE*, the past and its history serve as abstractions, not because history is made operative by describing models for contemporary practise or buildings are isolated from their historical and intellectual context (quite to the contrary), but in the sense that a quite homogeneous set of present preoccupations steers the interest in the past.

These preoccupations are the issues relevant to a community of architects, critics and academics whose basic frame of reference is modernism and its post-war mutations. As such, *OASE* closely mirrors the intellectual framework of many if not all architecture schools in and around the Netherlands, which are almost without exception tributary to modernism in their attitude towards history, theory and design. In fact, *OASE* has shown a predilection for the different challenges that modernism has faced, ranging for instance from the issue of decoration and ornament, addressed repeatedly and successfully, to the infiltration of the notion of the ‘everyday’ in architectural discourse (echoing a trend in the architectural discourse of the 1990s that picked up the threads of, among others, the *Forum*-group and Situationism) and the substitution of large-scale urban planning and publicly funded social housing by market mechanisms or ‘wild’ interventions. One effect of this predilection is the re-canonisation of the 1950s and 1960s, and figures or movements like Team 10, the Smithsons, and James Stirling.

*OASE*’s interest in these architects, buildings and issues is only historical in form, and less ‘critical’ than ‘theoretical’ (still in the classic sense). It has the aim to examine the internal dynamics and complexities of modernist design theory and the architectural discipline as it was construed by modernism. Symptomatic of this fact is that over the last ten years in *OASE* history starts with modernism, in 1890. If issues of *OASE* before the mid-1990s displayed a more extensive historical interest (if still very much predicated upon

the so-called ‘long history’ of modernism from the eighteenth century onwards), in more recent times only a few essays have reached back before that date. This has led to some missed opportunities and surprising choices. For instance, readers with a working knowledge of the history of architectural theory will be startled, yet also stimulated, to see a concept like convention (no. 49/50) treated through the prism of the everyday rather than classicism (the notion does surface in the contributions by Irénée Scalbert and François Claessens, however each time with regard to modernism).

Whether or not this focus on the twentieth century has impinged on the quality of the journal is not the issue. After all, *OASE* is nearly consistently worth reading. Rather, it is justified to ask to what extent *OASE*’s stance towards history is deliberate and premeditated. For, if my reading of the journal has any validity, it is this stance that has produced a body of ten years worth of *OASE* that can be read as 30 building blocks of a design theory imbued with the heritage of modernism. This is probably the most visible effect of *OASE*’s connection with the agendas of the writers, researchers and institutions constituting its editorial board and core team of authors, but it is unlikely that these agendas are the only rationale underlying these ten years of work. This is why a proper assessment of the place of history in *OASE* would, I believe, benefit the journal. Such a reconsideration would and should not transform the methods and approaches proposed in the journal as it exists today. Rather, it could induce a better awareness of *OASE*’s own historicity, the position it chooses to occupy with regard to twentieth and early twenty-first century architecture, and the very nature of its own theoretical endeavour.