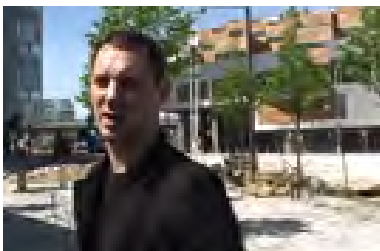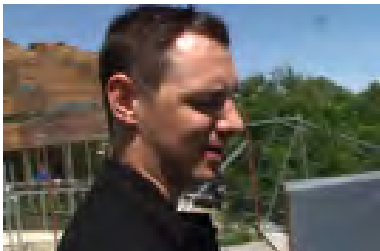# Mismanagement

Julien De Smedt interviewed by
Jesse Seegers and Jeffrey Inaba

Julien De Smedt is wise beyond his years. As one half of the firm PLOT, he and partner Bjarke Ingels were building half of Copenhagen (or so it seemed) before his thirtieth birthday. After dissolving PLOT in 2006, he founded JDS Architects, now based in Copenhagen and Brussels. De Smedt discusses with Volume the benefits of superfluous production, disorganized working conditions and postponed decision-making, techniques that most architects take many years to appreciate but which De Smedt has honed through a series of projects that, despite his claims, could hardly be called mismanaged.

Jesse Seegers **One idea about content management we've been exploring is the way in which architects, when presenting to architects and non-architects alike, manage the way they frame a project. They might present different information in different ways so it's specific to the audience. Every architect does this in some way or another, whether it's for a political or an aesthetic goal. Recently you've been competing for projects against bigger firms with proven histories of accomplishment. They can explain a project to a client in a very romantic and lofty way without feeling compelled to prove they can execute it. You're at an early stage in your career and people are paying a lot of attention to your work and scrutinizing each project that comes out of your office.**

Julien De Smedt We allow people to see our mess or let's say our mismanagement. We don't hide behind closed doors. One thing that's been noted in our work is that we can be quite transparent in our methods, even opening up the whole process of how we work on a project and what we achieve, or sometimes don't achieve. But it's true, you do end up controlling what you say or how you explain a project in order to reach a certain political goal. Right now I have the feeling that we're mismanaging more than we are managing, because we're doing too many different things at the same time. It's something that worries me a little bit actually, that we're trying too many things. It's also super-exciting, but I'm not sure we're really as focused as we could be.

JS **We're at a point in contemporary architectural practice where post-OMA offices are proliferating, where the concept is a driving design tool and the concept is almost always something that can be articulated in a single icon or three or four letters. That obviously helps in many ways: clarity with a client, with the public and within the office as well. Yet in a way you also allow projects to be open-ended, to see all the options generated for a single concept. Sometimes you have a dozen schemes sitting in front of you waiting to be chosen.**

JDS Yes, that's true, and all too often. It's very inefficient, but it does happen and it can actually lead to success. Recently we submitted two proposals to a competition because we were really in doubt as to which was best. Actually, it was really two variants of a single idea. Some aspects of the two were related, but there were major differences. We ended up winning the competition! It's like saying, 'let the client choose', because at the end of the day you still have a few years before you actually make the project.

Jeffrey Inaba **Could mismanagement be a way for an office to consider new approaches to their own way of working? Could it be a way to incorporate into the work process some of the things the office might tend to do but that are thought of as uncorrectable mistakes or inefficiencies? Could the inefficiencies and unfocused activity result in ideas that open up a new line of inquiry?**

JDS I think sometimes, not choosing is the way to choose. It provides a lot more time to reflect, a lot more time to manage decisions and concept. As an impatient person, I tend not to do that too often, but it's increasingly becoming a tool for us to postpone the decision. I think it's unhealthy to be decisive and say, 'it's going to be like this'.

That's also why overproducing is useful, because when you overproduce you have stuff around you. Most of it is useless – or so it seems at the time – but eventually some of it resurfaces with new potential. There are so many things we make that have promise but are not right for the given problem. Then eventually they pop up in something else.

JS **Or sometimes an old scheme gets resuscitated later in the same project. You mentioned that happened with the villa in Ordos, China.**

JDS Yeah, that happens a lot. You go through an entire reflection process, one that goes in many directions before you arrive at a decision. Sometimes when you get a good idea at the beginning, you question it and go in all sorts of directions and then after testing those directions you come back to it. I think that's why even when an idea comes early and seems great we don't feel comfortable about it. It's good to test it over and over and it's also really enjoyable to explore.

JI **Forcing the office to experiment without having a clear agenda beforehand in order to see what will happen seems like an important part of the way your office operates.**

JDS It's true that there's no preconceived take. There is another office for example that is doing quite a few libraries right now. I'm not saying it should create a recipe – but there's a danger that it could. We're trying to get involved with totally new subjects right now. We're trying to reduce the number of housing projects we take on so that we're not involved with something we've already done quite a few times in the past.

Still, the recycling of concepts is something that occurs. I think it can create opportunities. When you were saying you can identify a lot of our projects by one diagram, that's because they have a clear concept. Sometimes you can merge concepts together, create new species and other times you can just reuse a concept that has found a new location – and sometimes it's even better. It happened to us once: we had a concert hall project in Stavanger. Then we had the same brief in another city, with even the same type of site. We tried to squeeze it in and it fit perfectly.

If you look at the body of work we've done so far, built and unbuilt, it's very diverse. Currently we have a huge project going on in Montreal, an even bigger one in Shenzhen, smaller allotments in Taiwan and this crazy house in Mongolia.

JS **If you had a project with no programmatic requirements, shading requirements or client opinions what would be the process for arriving at the form or concept?**

JDS We'd be fucked! (laughter) And it's happened before. We just submitted a project for which the requirements were vague. It was a pavilion for an exhibition and the exhibition content was unspecified. It's a temporary pavilion that's going to move to different places, but we don't really know which places it's going to go. We know it's going to be in New York, Qatar and Paris, but we don't know where in these cities. When you're put into this kind of situation you end up doing something completely random that doesn't really matter, at least at the moment. So the answer to nothing is almost nothing.

JS **You've been selected by Herzog & de Meuron to design one of the 100 villas in Ordos. It is a project in which the context, the client, the program and the site are fairly simple and unproblematic. But**

your work is always about problem solving and in fact many of your concepts evolve out of that approach. The Ordos project seems difficult to manage or mismanage, to produce a well-defined concept without the benefit of being able to respond to a problem.

JDS That project is going to awaken a lot of management issues. They kind of dumped three hundred architects in a hotel for five days. It felt almost like a social experiment, putting three, four hundred architects in the same place because they really locked us up. There's nothing to do – you're in the middle of the desert and after a few days you get pretty bored.

JS **Do they have alcohol there?**

JDS Sure, absolutely.

Villa in Ordos, PRC

Office view, Copenhagen, DK

Rimini waterfront, Italy
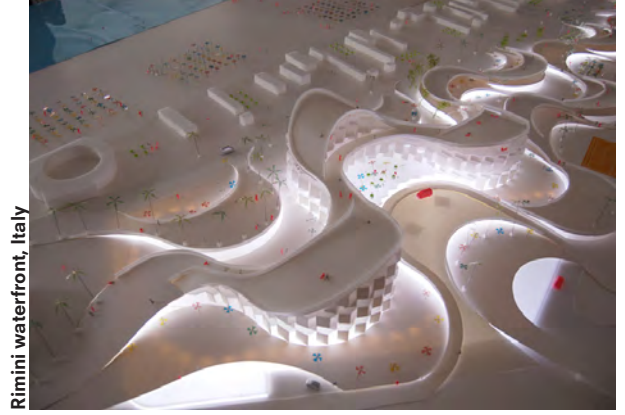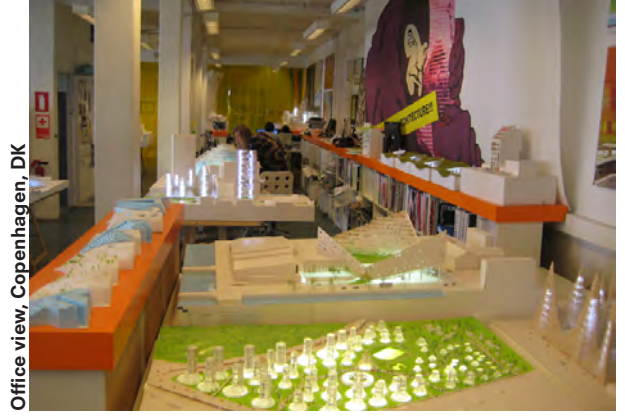

Shenzhen Logistic City, PRC

Rimini waterfront, Italy

Shenzhen Logistic City, PRC

Office view, Copenhagen, DK

Office view, Copenhagen, DK

Office view, Copenhagen, DK