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Freedom and Constraint



When architecture meets cinema

'AGENDA: Can We Sustain Our Ability to Crisis?' is a new architecture book by JDS Architects that occupies the territory between a monograph, a diary, and a collection of essays, interviews, conversations and contributions by the likes of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Bruce Sterling and engagement with everyone & thing from Jay-Z to the Brussels landmark Manneken Pis. Documenting the work and thinking of JDS Architects over a specific year marked by crisis, beginning on 15 September 2008, the day that Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, one of the conversations that the architects had was with award-winning filmmaker Lars Von Trier. Here, edited extracts make the connection between the work of a director and architect, both grappling with issues of constraint and freedom.

Interview: Julien De Smet (JDS), Benedict Clouette (BC), Jesse Seegers (JS) and Lars Von Trier (LVT)
Images: JDS

BC: In JDS's work, every project is a process of iteration and combination. It seems very similar to how a director works, using the best moments from one take and splicing them together with the best from another version of the same scene.

LVT: Yes, but I don't think that many directors work that way. It's how I work, but I'm not sure it's that common. The idea was just that rather than having a smooth, gradual progression within a scene, you might create this more immediate, faster movement by trying very different versions and then cutting between the takes.

JDS: In our practice, we're also constantly producing more versions of an idea and using repeated variations in order to evolve a design. In your films, you use similar thematic material again and again, almost like you tell the same story, but tell it differently each time.

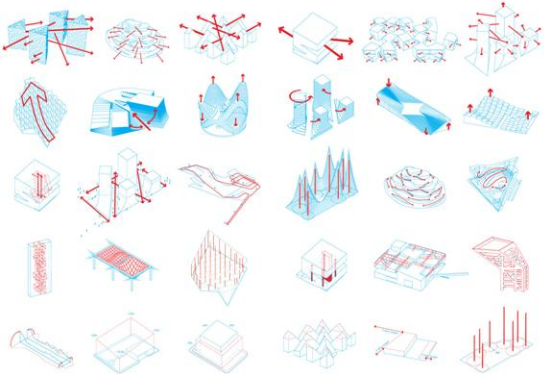
LVT: Yes, it's clear that in some sense it's always the same story. I think of a film as a series of layers, which are almost like givens. You might change something or do something different in one of them, but if you

change all of them, it's very difficult for people to enter into. I prefer to work with just one or two variables, not changing everything at once. It's like entering a forest: you need something familiar, some friend to guide you through the forest. Making the same story over and over is a bit like that. And also, I'm very interested in the technical side of filmmaking and taking those aspects as givens. If I were an architect, I think I would like to just work with one kind of brick, and see what I could make with it.

JDS: In many ways, that's what all architects do: they don't actually make a building themselves, but rather specify options from an existing catalogue of possibilities. We tried to make a film using that idea. In 2001, Bjarke Ingels, now of BIG) and I started collaborating under the label PLOT and our first project and the reason for our moving to Copenhagen was a movie. It was an idea of making a no-production movie, a movie that's only created in post-production. A sample movie. We observed that 100 years of moving images had produced so much material that you could actually dive in and create your story out of existing footage. You could even star Jack Nicholson, because he had

The book 'AGENDA' by JDS

Julien De Smet and Lars Von Trier at the Zevringa offices in Copenhagen, Denmark. (Image: JDS)



Diagrams showing architectural responses to various constraints - views, sun angles, circulation, gravity, etc. - in a selection of projects by JDS Architects

made so many films already that you could just re-cut them into something else. Back then we discussed to produce this project with no other company than your own, Zentropa.

IVT: We also got a little bit into that. My company was called Element Film, because the idea was that you had these standard elements that you could recombine. But your idea is probably pretty hard to sell.

JDS: It's not like your films are super easy to sell either!

BC: You mentioned that when you were making 'Anti-Christ', you watched and admired Japanese horror films.

IVT: For the first time, I decided to watch some films, horror films, which is something I normally don't do. I saw 15 or something. I liked 'The Ring' [the original by Hideo Nakata from 1998] very much, mostly because you had a feeling that it was just from a different culture, the images were not from Western ideas. I have a theory that when I was young and started studying films, I saw a lot of films, three or four a day, and then I made a library in my head and started from there. The

problem is that if you go over stuff that has been made previously, you somehow lose concentration, because you have a tendency to say, 'that's very good, I want to make something like that.' Whereas, I have this idea that I am on an unknown island and I have chosen to go south. Then it's important for me to stay going south, even if south is difficult to define in this sense, because if I saw a lot of things that were suddenly interesting, then I might go east, or I might go west if that seemed like more fun. So I have this feeling that I should keep on going south and keep trying to stay on the course.

JDS: But at the same time, the course is totally undefined.

IVT: Yes, it's just a feeling that I'm going south, though at the moment, I have no idea where south is!

JDS: No, but you're definitely exploring. Every movie has a new perspective.

BC: But that sense of newness often comes from how you manipulate the givens. The voluntary use of givens, constraints, rules, and obstructions is a vital part of your filmmaking, whether the various techniques for-



Julien De Smet and Benedikt Ouwens discuss the work of JDS Architects with Lars Von Trier

bidden by the Dogme code or the rules that you set for Jørgen Leth in 'The Five Obstructions'. Architects often work under external constraints - a client's preferences, building codes, budgets. Filmmakers do as well, but the constraints you employ are often voluntary. Is it important that constraints are self-imposed, or can external constraints be used as effectively? Do constraints require a certain context against which they are working (for instance, the normative conventions of filmmaking), or can arbitrary constraints be equally effective?

IVT: Arbitrary is a difficult word. But, no, I don't think the rules need to be self-imposed or determined in relation to a specific context. They could really be anything. Albert Speer, an architect whom I find very interesting, once designed a room for Hitler that was dimensioned to the size of the largest rug that could be produced at the time. I find it fascinating. I don't know if it's an arbitrary constraint or not.

BC: In architecture, the expectation is that you justify every move. You're expected to have an explanation for how a project develops. But often there are leaps that can't be explained. Is that another form of constraint, when you can say, I know it has to be that, but how do I get there?

IVT: It's difficult to say. There are very often things that can't be explained, and that's accepted. With 'Anti-Christ', we did it so quickly that we didn't question every decision or idea. If I had a year, I might have gone back and forth, like, maybe the fox should talk, maybe he shouldn't.

JDS: We all thought the fox should talk more.

IVT: I had a phone call with Udo Kier, the German actor. He said, why couldn't I do the fox? I said, that might have been a little too much with a German accent!

BC: With regard to the rules that you make for yourself when you're making a film, what appeals to me about Japanese horror films is that they don't have these rules like in American horror. In American horror, there are always formulas by which the evil can be undone, so that it is always contained within a rationalist universe. Vampires are killed by the sun, or with a stake through their heart, or repelled by a cross or garlic. Japanese horror doesn't use rules in that way, which is what makes it more terrifying.

IVT: It is of course really a joy to see something mystical, something inexplicable. You've seen so many American



Cover of **AGENDA**
Bringing together diverse forms
of content, **AGENDA** is a product
of observation, introspection,
and engagement with outside
thinkers and collaborators -
artists, curators, politicians,
authors, economists, journalists,
designers, educators, and
architects.

films that are so flat. You know that this scene came before this scene and explains it so that you understand everything. I'm also fighting against that logic and rationality. I have a struggle with the guy who's making the rules. One part of me is the guy that's making the rules; the other part wants to throw them away.

I often think about these rules in an almost religious way. I've seen television programmes about cathedral domes, and this idea that there should be some fine illustration or beautiful painting in the areas where there was no light. I find that very powerful, and I actually think about that when I film, something that is mystical but very poetic, that you do where it can't be seen.

JDS: In our work, we often attempt (and probably rarely succeed) in doing something new. Do you think that doing something new has to be retroactively justified, or somehow violent?

BC: Like with Jørgen Leth in 'The Five Obstructions', there's a kind of aggressiveness in the rules that you set up to break his film. Is it necessary to break something to have something new?

JDS: I think that's a really important point. One of the things that is compelling in your work is the relationship that you've set up between constraints and freedoms. What you're saying is that constraints are the basis of another kind of freedom that you establish for yourself, but that there is also an obligation in that freedom.

LYT: Yes, I would say I take it very seriously. I feel I have to try something because I'm in a situation where I can try something. I feel that that's a responsibility, maybe not to society, but to other people.

JDS: But is it part of the idea that the challenge you are making is to make people reflect on things, that you don't just give your cards out and say, this is the point.

LYT: Yes, actually, I do something that might be inspiring to you, which is that I take a point of view that is not my own and I defend it in a film. When I look back, that's a technique that I use very much, for instance, revenge or melodrama. To take something that I would never touch before and say that this is an area that we have to investigate, like the use of melodrama in 'Breaking the Waves'. All my childhood, I thought that melodrama was terrible and worthless, and so I said, let's try to move around it and see what you can do if you just try to protect it, instead of just condemning it. I've done that in several films, and I'm sure you could do that in buildings also.

JDS: Yes, you have to.

LYT: You could take a specific form of a building that you really dislike and say, okay, but what are the good things about this? What could be the qualities that I can't see because I have a lot of predetermined emotions about it, because I really hate it, and try to see it from another perspective, to turn it around so that it suddenly becomes fantastic.

"AGENDA: Can We Sustain Our Ability to Create?" by JDS/Julien De Smelt Architects and edited by Jesse Seegers, Benedict Couvotte, Ryan Heister, and Julien De Smelt is published by Actar & available worldwide from the beginning of December 09.
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www.jdsarchitects.com