

[BRIGHT MUSIC]

GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace LA, professor of architecture and chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening. Joining me today is Dutch architect, Reinier de Graaf, architectural theorist, urbanist and writer. Reinier is OMA's longest serving non-founding partner, and he's led projects in Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. He is also a co-founder of OMA's think tank, AMO, and is the author of the book, *Four Walls and a*

Roof: The Complex Nature of a Simple Profession,

named Best Books of 2017 by both *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*.

Reinier is teaching a studio at the GSD this semester entitled, Phantom Urbanism. Welcome, Rainier.

REINIER DE GRAAF: Thank you.

GRACE LA: So I thought that we would start by just talking a little bit about yourself, about when and why you joined OMA, and what did you do before that? I'd like to give our audience just some sense of you.

REINIER DE GRAAF: OK. Well, that is so long ago that I struggle to remember. I think it's 22 years ago, in the mid '90s I joined, just basically looking for a job. I was unemployed. I think, at the time, I worked for numerous architects practices. Before the work had always interested me, I thought Rem was a very inspiring lecturer.

And so I applied, did an interview, got a temporary contract, thought I'd stay for about 2 and 1/2 years and moved on, and that became a bit longer.

GRACE LA: So how would you say that your role has shifted over this period of time, and maybe how has the practice shifted?

REINIER DE GRAAF: Well, those are two different things. I think my own role gradually shifted away from my professional training, in the sense that I started as an architect, working on projects and the subjects that I dealt with, first of all, on an ever larger scale, a scale which at a certain moment, I think even defined the word "urbanist," until they became so general that they became statements about the world at large, for which apparently there were clients willing to pay us.

And that I've done very happily ever since. I guess my own evolution in the practice is one of progressive abstraction, in which the relativity of my own profession has become also very, very apparent. OMA, on the other hand, I think is pretty much a bigger version of what it always was.

GRACE LA: That's interesting. And when you say that, can you describe a little bit the relationship between AMO and OMA, like more specifically. Because I think a lot of people wonder, how does that work? What is this method, and how do these things interrelate?

**REINIER DE
GRAAF:**

OMA is an architect's practice, and AMO is the vehicle in which we deal with all the questions that we get asked that don't necessarily have to lead to a building. It's quite funny how it started because we did competitions for new building typologies, and we always did a lot of research, even for those, even when people hadn't asked us.

When we were asked to do a library, we went to the bottom of what a library meant in the age of the virtual, for instance, and then did a lot of unsolicited research, mainly to satisfy our own curiosity and mainly to avoid giving a superficial answer to maybe a more complex question.

The more often we presented that type of work, the more we discovered a kind of authentic appetite on behalf of clients in that type of research, so that at a certain moment, we decided, we may as well package it as a separate activity and package it as projects. And those are the type of projects AMO does. It's the rediscovery of architecture as a purely conceptual vehicle.

GRACE LA:

So this conceptual vehicle, this abstract, in a sense, it pulls away, and it allows you to have, let's say, even a more planetary approach of you and which I think is actually not only refreshing, but it's very interesting. And so I'm just curious if you can be more specific on how it works and how it re-informs the work of the building portion of the--

**REINIER DE
GRAAF:**

Well, sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn't. And you also have to be very careful there, because a lot of people mistake it for a research vehicle that is meant to make us do better buildings. That's only very partially the case.

I think the annoying thing about being an architect and about architects in general, is that whenever somebody comes to them with a problem, they invariably tend to say, the answer to your problem is a building. It is, of course, not a big mystery why they would say that, because it reinforces their own necessity in a way.

But of course, that is, there enters a certain amount of subjectivity. In answering there enters an ulterior motive in the answer to any questions. And we in a way, also wanted a domain of our office to be liberated from that, to be dedicated to purely intellectual pursuits, and to simply live very healthily with the fact that the answer to some problems were not buildings and to be able to be candid about that to client and clients and nevertheless retain those clients. So it also means that AMO does certain projects which one would never traditionally expect architects to do.

GRACE LA:

How can it be self-sustaining in terms of if you're commissioned to do a study--

**REINIER DE
GRAAF:**

If you're commissioned to do it, people pay you for it, and you don't go overboard with your resources. Yes, and sure, it can be profitable.

GRACE LA:

Interesting.

**REINIER DE
GRAAF:**

But that's of course, doubly-edged because it tends to be the part of our work that we ourselves are very passionate about that we're very interested in. So if we want it to be profitable, we have to control ourselves most of all. But there is an interest.

And there is an authentic desire from the market to do that kind of work. For me, it's interesting that we as a creative organization get asked a lot of strategic questions, and I think it's an interesting product of our time that ultimately certain strategic questions end up on the desk of architects or end up on the desk of creative organizations. And I kind of wonder what that means.

GRACE LA: Not to digress too much, but in the lecture that you delivered last night, you showed a graphic of the different kinds of methods of political division in the world. But I also think that it must have something to do with the architect's ability to translate a lot of relevant, interesting material into strategy, which is also quite digestible and quite easily understood, maybe by virtue of its communicative power, which I think that is also something, let's say, is a hallmark or a trait of AMO. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

REINIER DE GRAAF: Yeah. I'm not sure whether it's our communicative power, because I think the communicative power, for instance, of journalists and writers and even marketing agencies is a lot bigger than ours. I think what we do is that we talk about issues when we ourselves are caught up in those issues.

As an architect, you are rarely independent. You are often in a strange position that you have to be critical of the hand that feeds you. So we don't have the liberty to take very instantaneously moral stances on a lot of things. And since we can't do that, you go in. You get your hands dirty.

So a lot of the advice we give is an advice with dirty hands, and that makes that advice probably all the more applicable than a kind of principle advice that either embraces or condemns things. And I think the architect is part of a curious web. And I've written this in my book of clients, politicians, architects, and other people in which it is perpetually unclear who calls the shots.

And I think that is particularly the value that in a way you accumulate knowledge from experience, and you don't accumulate knowledge from knowledge. So the knowledge is very, very firsthand. And we work, of course, in-- there's not a part of the world that we categorically dismiss.

We work in all the three political categories that I showed last night, and we also realize how different they are, but interestingly, we also realize how similar. That there is a certain amount of inefficiency, counter productivity embedded both in democratic and in non-democratic systems. It just presents itself in a different way at a different moment in time. But it's all there.

GRACE LA: So if I turn my attention a little to the practice of OMA, as many firms expand, it is often the case that the quality of the work is inversely proportional to the size of the firm. And so I'm just curious now, how has the structure of OMA and now is it nine partners? Can you share with us specific methods of the practice? And is this a concern?

REINIER DE GRAAF: Not really, because I think there is one fundamental difference between what people think and architects practice is and what we are. We are in a way-- and I don't like the word, but I don't know a better one-- a very bottom-up driven organization, in the sense that we don't have a signature style.

There is no master on the top floor that makes a kind of esoteric sketch, which then trickles to the underlings to elaborate in a building that looks like the sketch. The leadership in our office kind of harvests. We pose certain problems. Then, irrespective of hierarchy, people go at that problem.

A certain amount of production ensues, and we select interesting directions which are essentially generated by the floor, which means there was always-- even when we were small, there was always a very hybrid authorship of our products, which also means that if there was not a single style, the element of surprise was often a very interesting ingredient of the work.

Diversity was an ingredient of the word, which means that if you are like that, then you can expand fairly easily. If you have a coherent brand, then infinite expansion is always invariably at the expense of the brand. But I don't think we necessarily have a brand. We have a particular way of thinking.

I wouldn't even go as far as that. We have an ethos to think and a kind of culture in the obligation, where there is an ethos of exploring every possible intellectual ally. And as long as that ethos is observed, the products are almost natural byproducts of that ethos. And that is a far more expandable type of organization than the organization based on a signature style.

OMA originated from a book, also very interesting, an architecture practice that originated from a book. And I've always felt extremely comfortable with that. *Delirious New York* isn't my book. I think I was 14 years old when it was published, but I've always been able to identify with it enough without feeling that I had to sacrifice my own thinking, my own personality, my own take on things in order to do that. And I think once you become part of an office with a set architectural style, that's a whole different matter.

GRACE LA: So last night described this setup as a kind of ecology of minorities, partly because the office right now is comprised of individuals from just under 50 nations, and that there is no a priori agenda with which you might tackle a particular kind of problem.

So it was almost as if you described like the perception from the outside is that OMA is like this shiny Ferrari, but that when you open the hood, you see all these little monkeys inside running really fast to make the engine go. And I'm wondering if you can let us have a look under the hood.

REINIER DE GRAAF: People have said that to me before. Also when I wrote the book, is your candor really doing your firm any favors? Because the image of a shiny Ferrari ain't bad. It's quite good. And there's something to be said for keeping the hood closed and happily live with that perception. But I think that is also not us.

The perception is also about the Ferrari with the open hood and the rabbits jumping inside. So I don't think I've opened a Pandora's box by writing the book or saying that even last night. I think to some extent, candor is the best possible advertisement for anything and the most enduring form of advertising for anything.

And it's something also that spreads a message to other people or to future generations that might work in our office, that this is something that doesn't have a fixed identity. It's an identity you can become part of, and with you becoming part of that identity, that identity will change. And I think that is the essential message.

GRACE LA: So what is the working method? Let's say, for example, there is a new project on the boards. How many people are assigned to it? Do you ask the archetypal question and then everyone goes at it? Is there like a mini competition within the office? Describe this methodologically.

REINIER DE GRAAF: Well, a question comes in. The biggest thing, of course, is more questions come into the office than you're able to answer, or more projects come into the office than you're able to do. So we are still in a very fortunate position that in a way, the whole thing starts there.

What do you accept? What do you reject? And even there, there isn't any coherent method. There isn't a set list of criteria which make things either fall in or outside the door. There is a very fluid set of assessment which is a mix of economic, creative, intellectual kind of considerations, but ultimately, everyone is a judgment call.

And I think in that judgment call is already embedded a latent element of interest. I think that's what also always drives it. And you accept a project you're going to do it, and then you articulate why you accept it and why you were interested in it. And that is almost the first brief that then transpires to a team.

And you form the teams within the office, often based on that interest, often composed of people who share that interest. That's where it starts. And then people go at it for different reasons. And then a fairly fluid creative process starts with possible allies you explore, based on that interest.

And there is a very interactive back and forth always in groups with discussions why. It's a little bit like the bubble I showed of the kind of people with the collective brain with a lot of ideas. And from that kind of semi rationally, semi intuitively emerges a direction on the basis of a shared preference.

And this is not a vote either on the basis of almost a very Confucianist or Confucian kind of principles, which you explore, and then certain things are taken further and sometimes in the face of clients. To avoid architecture competitions in general, we offer clients, since that always invariably creates numerous options for every project.

And then sometimes we select one and decide to present it. In the case of an international competition, that's what you generally do. But also when we have a direct commission, we then tend to present multiple options to a client. So there is a kind of mini competition within our own, not between members, but within our own brain, which then even in a dialogue with a client, one is ultimately picked.

And I think that's a very important moment, because then a client doesn't become your boss. He in a way, becomes a partner in crime. The hybrid nature of architectural authorship, which is always in the profession been semi-denied-- there is enormous tendency to equate buildings as the product of individual very blessed geniuses.

And even in those cases, they're not. And we have simply explored that truth and made that underlying truth about which a large part of the world was in denial. We've made that truth kind of into an open and an obvious method, a manifest method.

I think what our office has done is it has made explicit what everybody implicitly already knew, namely that architecture by definition has a hybrid authorship. And you can choose to celebrate it, or you can choose to hide it. And we've chosen to celebrate it.

GRACE LA: And I think what's also very interesting about that kind of perspective is that it seems to recognize the kind of intuitive intelligence or other intelligences that inform--

REINIER DE And even the value of inexperience.

GRAAF:

GRACE LA: That's right. A naivete as a--

REINIER DE GRAAF: One Of the things I discovered-- and I remember this very clearly from the first years that I worked at OMA-- is that strangely, the hierarchy, in as much as it existed, that the hierarchy was almost inversely proportional to the level of experience. People in the office. And that was very nice, because practices that I'd worked before, it was always, well, we've done this for so long.

We know this is the way things ought to be done. And that's the way we've always done it, et cetera. And then there's a very natural thing that design work was left to the intern because they were simply no good for anything else, which also said something about the hierarchical position of design work in those offices.

And this aggressively turned that around, where in a way, not knowing became a qualification. And that offers, of course, to me as a relatively young guy entering the office that offers huge perspectives.

GRACE LA: And I think probably it is really at the heart of why the work continues to this day to have a certain kind of freshness. So I think that that's--

REINIER DE GRAAF: When you enter, you don't have to wait until it's your turn to make a valuable contribution. It invites you to aggressively jump the queue, which I think is healthy.

GRACE LA: That's a very interesting--

REINIER DE GRAAF: Which also in a civilized Western European country, that is quite something.

GRACE LA: So I'd like to turn attention to your book, which actually has generated a lot of interesting conversation, I think. And to begin, I was just curious, how did you decide on these chapters? And more critically, I'm curious, how long has this book been brewing for you? And why did you write it?

REINIER DE GRAAF: I had nothing to do with the decision to write it. It happened more or less by accident. I always wrote a lot. I wrote a lot of project explanations and stuff for the office, always in various publications. At a certain moment, I felt the need to start writing essays and articles largely on requests of magazines, internet journals, et cetera, et cetera.

So I did that for a while, and then I wrote, I think, one article in particular about Thomas Piketty and what I think the relevance of his economic theory is for architecture, which got published. And then apparently, it was read by the editor of Piketty of Harvard University Press. Then they wrote me an email, a very interesting essay.

Would you be interested in expanding the essay into a book? And I said, no, because I have a daytime job. I have no time. Pretty much everything I know is in that essay. Thank you very much. Then some guy in our PR department was copied in on the email, and he thought, yeah, behind my back--

GRACE LA: He said, yes.

REINIER DE GRAAF: No. He didn't say, yes. He started saying no, no, no. We're not quite that hierarchical. But on my back, he started to send other essays and links to the publisher. And then the publisher came back with the idea of a concept album.

GRACE LA: Links of your other writings?

REINIER DE GRAAF: Yeah.

GRACE LA: I see.

REINIER DE GRAAF: And then the publisher read more and more and more and said, hey, this is interesting. You could write a book about architecture in general. You could write a book about what it is like to work as an architect in this day and age. And we could bundle these essays.

So then the interesting thing was that they made a book offer, and they called it, I think, a concept album, very old fashioned. I notice you don't have them anymore. But the guy that dealt with it was of a similar generation as I was. So I knew what he was talking about. And about half the essays in the book were written prior. That's also credited in the back.

And then the other half was written without ever having the idea of a book in mind, without ever worrying about the coherence between them. And then the other half of the essays was written solely with the book in mind. So the obligation of one half of the chapters is to make the other incoherent half seem a little more coherent than they actually were in their original form.

So the main work on the book was, first of all, writing the remaining essays, but also to invent a structure in which the various heterogeneous parts became part of a larger whole. And that actually took a very, very, very long time. I think it was only shortly before delivering the manuscript that the idea of the seven myths came, also as a structure that allowed most essays to remain part of the book.

Since this was my first book, I wanted it to have a lot of pages. And so that's what happens. The book is halfway an accident, I guess.

GRACE LA: What I find so interesting about the book is that it offers a very clear picture of certain contemporary challenges, but it also reaches backward into historical and cultural contexts, other spheres that's actually researched in the method that you would imagine, for example, a PhD student working on something.

It has a rigorous quality at the same time that it's combined with a feeling of very, quite frankly, spontaneity, maybe like the way that maybe one would improvise in jazz, understanding certain things about certain kinds of riffs and yet expanding on those.

REINIER DE GRAAF: I never thought of it that way. I think it's an interesting analogy. I like writing. That's where it starts. And I don't like to preach. And I don't think preachers make very good writers in general. On the other hand, I don't like superficiality either.

So the book is a mix of somewhat heavy handed, seriously researched historical articles and quite frivolous articles, like for instance, the inevitable box, which talks about the box as the inevitable ideology of all architecture and which is meant to be funny. So I myself think it is that curious mix between heavy handedness and frivolousness. That's one of the nicer elements of the book.

GRACE LA: Yes. I think that is also what makes an excellent read. So interesting that you brought up the chapter about the inevitable box, because that's actually one of my favorites. And I'm just curious, you described the way in which in the name of creativity-- and this is quoting from your book-- you say architecture sides with the masterpiece against the cliché, with the unique against the common, with the specific against the generic.

Creativity prioritizes the exception over the rule and chooses the margins over the mainstream. In doing so, it leaves a vast territory unaddressed. I found that statement quite compelling, and I was hoping that maybe you could expand on what comprises this vast territory. What are its contours? Does it have typological roots? What are its subjects?

REINIER DE GRAAF: I think it's a tendency of architecture, as we've come to it recently. It's a desire for excellence, and therefore, almost by definition, a neglect of the mainstream, because excellence is a product of excellent conditions, and excellent conditions don't occur very much.

And what I think is an interesting contrast between architecture and particularly modernism today, and let's say modernism 3/4 of a century ago, is that the subjects that it addresses are very different. Modernism of the 20th century addressed mass housing. It addressed mass urbanism. It addressed problems that concerned everyone.

Contemporary modernism very often makes well, museums, art houses, far more marginal in itself, very beautiful buildings but buildings which by definition affect far fewer people than the grandiose visions of the modernists a long time ago. And I have a great sympathy for the mainstream.

I'm a product of the mainstream, and I think a neglect of the mainstream is simply something over time, architecture will not be able to afford, because it's a kind of self-chosen marginalization in order to shine. But then you shine more brightly for fewer people. So what is the choice?

Shine for very many people, or shine extremely brightly for very, very few people? And so hence the box. In another part, I write about the books, where I say it's the outcome of the most sublime architectural effort and the outcome of no effort at all. And I think the intriguing aspect of the 20th century was how eerily close these two are.

I have a lecture series in which I present pairs. I present the Church of Mies on the IIT campus and next to a car repair workshop in the Port of Rotterdam. And if you photograph them both in black and white, it's pretty--

GRACE LA: They're uncanny.

REINIER DE GRAAF: They're uncannily alike. And there's a whole series of this, and it's precisely that-- what do they say in France? Les extremes se touchent-- The extremes touch. It is precisely that aspect of architecture that fascinates me endlessly and of which the box-- the box is the most sublime and the most banal all in one. And that's what that essay tries to frame.

GRACE LA: I like that very much. I thought it was a really incredible trope to understand that particular spectrum. You also describe in another chapter-- the let me finish chapter. You describe a conference in which many prominent American academics are in attendance, but you reference presentation, in which one of the presenters goes long and categorizing a range of new waves in architecture, as indicated by analysis of the Guggenheim competition entries.

And then this academic then takes a bizarre turn to describing the Pritzker Pavilion by Gehry, in which he argues that this project is a deeply contextual response. This chapter in your book is hilarious, but on a more serious note, it is deeply revealing and critical of the ivory towers inability to comprehend that architecture might be shaped by a larger political, societal, or economic context.

And that context is clearly limited if you are simply defining it as its physical surroundings of the architectural object. I very much agree with this concern, but I'm curious. I do believe that there are those in the Academy who do not askew the political, social, or economic context, but I'm wondering if you have ideas on how this ought to be taught, or what are the research agendas that might formulate a particular direction?

**REINIER DE
GRAAF:**

The point of that article-- because I think the Pritzker Pavilion that is described probably is very contextual. I'm not denying that. But the question the article poses is, how important is that when the vast majority of people will never recognize that contextuality and which will simply equate that building as one of a long series of buildings of all Gary buildings that look the same?

And the question the article poses is, what matters more-- the architectural truth or the perception of architecture in general? Which seals which fate? And hence the article is a plea for architecture to become more aware of how it is perceived, more aware of its context, therefore perhaps then also better able to assess its own role, and it's the same margin versus the mainstream kind of argument that features in the box, which is applied here to academia.

And I don't have a standard. As little as we have, ultimately, I struggle to answer the question of what is the OMA method because I know very well how the method works, but I struggle to put it into words because maybe putting it into words very prescriptively might also equal the end of the method.

In the same way, I don't really have a prescribed way in which I think architecture ought to be taught. I think it's ultimately a question of disposition and mentality. I think curiousness is the prime ingredient for people who study architecture, aggressively practiced curiosity, which means a certain amount.

Corbusier wrote that creativity is a patient research, and I believe that very much. I think patience is a very important ingredient of studying architecture. And overall, what you see in a lot of universities is that there is a very premature drive towards a product, a very premature drive to demonstrate that actually, as a designer, you possess talent.

I remember that very clearly from starting to study architecture. The main existential question I had is, yes, I've chosen this study. Before of it I did high school, which wasn't very creative. I like this study, but am I creative? Am I a good designer? Because if I'm not, then I'm wasting my life on a subject for which I have no talent.

And talent is a very relative phenomenon. I find that after doing this job for 30 years, I don't ask myself that question anymore. It's entirely uninteresting. It's a product of a long enough genuinely felt interest of also dissociating your whole work from that question. Am I talented, or am I not? You simply have to leave that behind and look at the matters at hand.

So when working with groups generally in universities, this is what I try to tell people. But it's also something you can't really tell. You can repeat it 1,000 times, but people have to then, at a certain moment, feel it. For instance, the subject of the studio here at Harvard is very, very deliberate, because it simply makes all those questions irrelevant.

If you don't realize that that question, am I talented, is irrelevant of the many disasters, then nothing will. So I don't have a clearly prescribed method other than patience and a certain healthy distancing yourself from that question.

GRACE LA: Speaking of your studio phantom urbanism and all of these ghost towns that have erupted worldwide and you are studying in particular Angola, there was a brief interlude of questioning about what the role of the architect's agency is in the situation like that. And I think what you're describing here is the kind of essential idea being one of inquiry, but that even your assessment of the students might need to shift. But I'm curious, how are you starting this investigation, and what do you imagine are the outcomes?

REINIER DE GRAAF: The whole point of the studio is to answer that question. So therefore the whole point is also me not answering that question before I've given the studio the chance to answer it. And of course, inquiry is the point, but inquiry is an intermediate state towards an answer. Inquiry isn't a purpose in itself.

But in the studio is about massive ghost towns, towns that were never inhabited, built on a vast scale. Nobody lives there. Real estate mess ups. In the face of that, you can't resort to the traditional reflex of an architect, which is to propose a building, because you're looking at situations where there are many buildings. They're all empty. So proposing a building adds to the problem rather than solving anything.

So with the traditional reflex being cut off, the point automatically then becomes, what other possible reflexes might there be in the face of this problem? And this is what the studio has been tasked with to formulate.

GRACE LA: I was curious to know if you would be looking at examples or if the students might be investigating certain kinds of towns or communities, which have similarly been built from the ground up. For example, in the United States, these are company towns, like Kohler, Wisconsin or Pullman, Chicago, the Pullman Train Car Company, sort of recognizing the very direct relationship between economy and inhabitation.

And that was making me wonder, I guess another train of thought was, there are other institutional conditions, for example, the phalanstery that French philosopher, Charles Fourier, who put forth this ideas of this Utopian socialism within the context of planned communities.

And he envisioned, for example, that social and economic structures would directly address problems of poverty. Of course, with his condition, he was also talking a great deal about sets of issues that were quite sexual in nature. And what I was curious about is that there are these interesting points, maybe a constellation of other kinds of conditions that might be interesting to mine as a starting point.

REINIER DE GRAAF: Yeah, perhaps. I think there's a number of scenarios I could see. And somebody touched upon it last night-- the whole phenomena of squatting. What if the informal, in a way, claims the formal, and is that possible? Because I remember very clearly from the trip is that you see these informal settlements being built, and people buy building products from big building product retailers, even reinforcement bars, stone, concrete, et cetera, et cetera.

And people build their own homes. And then later you pass by a top-down settlement, and it's under construction. And you see that exactly the same building products are deployed there by institutions, as are deployed by people individually in these shanty towns. And you kind of then wonder to what extent are we looking at a difference, and is there a way to make ends meet?

And is there a form of civil disobedience that can be encouraged in some way for these things to be claimed? At which point, once, of course, you propose that as an architect, is also the very moment that as an architect you become political and critical of politics, which architecture was very political for a large part of the 20th century. Architecture is very unpolitical in this day and age, and I wouldn't be opposed to repoliticizing architecture, at least to a certain extent.

GRACE LA: I think the setup of the studio problem is not obvious, and it certainly does shy away from the object orientation that most studios would come at this problem.

REINIER DE GRAAF: I think that the subject of the studio is blatantly clear. It's only that the stereotypical answer is impossible. So therefore the potential answer is very uncertain. But the problem is like blatantly clear. And of course, the most interesting problems are the most difficult ones to solve.

GRACE LA: Agreed. So in returning a moment back to the book, towards the end of it, you share some very interesting thoughts on the enduring image of *The City of the Captive Globe*, which was, of course, published in 1972, in *Delirious, New York*.

And you describe it, on the one hand, as a dystopian foresight depicting these multifarious towers held together by an urban grid but without any collective consensus. But perhaps, on the other hand, as architecture's source of revenge-- I thought those words were actually very specifically chosen-- descent into chaotic volatility as a way to reclaim the globe from captivity. Can you expand on that, and what you mean by that?

REINIER DE GRAAF: Well, the article talks about that drawing. And I think it talks about the insight embedded in that drawing. And in the drawing, you see, a number of architectural products coexist in the context of what you can presume to be the New York grid. And they are competing and sometimes contrasting architectural ideologies, where we, up until that moment thought, they were all mutually exclusive, and they coexist like products in the supermarket.

And for me, that is the beginning of postmodernism, when ideology became not a matter of conviction, but of multiple choice of consumerism. And so that's an architecture from that moment onwards, agrees to disagree and exist each on its own plot. It can continue to exist within the confines of a plot.

I think then the essay expands on that notion because it brings in Dubai. So if New York in a way does that to buildings, Dubai does that to urbanism, in the sense that the texture of Dubai is a tapestry of different urban patterns, also all with their own associations, with their own idealism behind it. But their urban patterns, almost mini cities, coexists in this kind of ideological vacuum.

There the only coherent factor is, in a way, the political system that presides over them, almost like a choreographer. If you take that one step further and you make political systems a matter of multiple choice, then of course you arrive at a very interesting point where in a way, everything has agreed to disagree, and exchange value is the only consensus impossible in the world.

You can argue that that is the basis of globalization, but where everything has become a matter of opinion, everything has become a subjective product which can be valuable when we decide it's valuable or valueless when we decide it's without value. For me, it's very interesting that one of the best speculative investments you can make is in art.

And that's often the type of art that the average person says, oh, my little kid can do that too. That is extremely valuable, and it's extremely valueless. It's a matter of a mood swing almost. Whether it's sublime or banal, that's where the box comes in again. Is the box a Donald Judd masterpiece, or is the box like a car, et cetera, et cetera?

So it seems that in the ultimate prioritization of economic values, the economy has staked its fate on the most volatile thing of all. And that's where I think all of a sudden, architecture and artistic utterances can strangely conduct a form of revenge because they have the potential in their hand to completely derail the system once they realize they have that power. And that's, in short, what the essay tries to say. But it's the most difficult theoretical essay in the book. It's also an open question.

GRACE LA: You have done a very wide range of work. What you've accomplished is so diverse. What has been one of these most difficult moments along the journey thus far?

REINIER DE GRAAF: Well, 75% of everything you do doesn't end up in any physical form. And I'm very philosophical about it in the sense that I now think a lot of these experiences are the most instructive experiences I've gone through, but that is largely talking in hindsight.

The projects that get built, everybody has seen them. General architectural publications, they all talk about results. They all talk about buildings. And I for one think it is very interesting to talk not about the works of architecture, but about the work of an architect. And to some extent, something that doesn't get built is a more suitable vehicle than something that does get built because you don't have the product to distract you.

GRACE LA: That's right. Well, I wanted to thank you so much for spending the morning with us and sharing your insight not only into practice, but really on the state of our profession. And I'm just delighted to have this conversation with you this morning. Thank you.

REINIER DE GRAAF: Thank you very much.

[BRIGHT MUSIC]

GRACE LA: I'm Grace LA, and you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the Practice Platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Ronee Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik. Platform support was provided by Julia Roberts and thanks to Jeffrey Vallade, our multimedia engineer at the media production center at Harvard University.