

Harvard Graduate School of Design | Talking Practice Podcast: Shohei Shigematsu

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Today, we're really delighted to have Shohei Shigematsu with us. Shohei Shigematsu is a partner at OMA and the director of the New York Office. Shohei has completed a number of cultural projects, including Milstein Hall for Cornell University, extension for the Quebec National Art Museum, Faena Forum in Miami Beach, and the Costume Institute Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is currently designing an extension to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, a new campus for Facebook, and was recently commissioned for the new addition to the New Museum in New York City, which was just announced yesterday.

So congratulations on that very significant commission. So I have a series of questions to ask you, basically involving personal questions, because we would love to a little bit more about you. And it's something that is not readily available in terms of the different kinds of publications. So I would love to ask you those kinds of biographical questions, but then also to talk more specifically about the practice that you are developing at OMA.

**SHOHEI
SHIGEMATSU:** Sure.

GRACE LA: First of all, we would love to know what did you do before you joined OMA? How did you come to all of this?

**SHOHEI
SHIGEMATSU:** Yeah. Maybe I should go back really to my youth, because I grew up in a city called Kurume, which is not a big city in Fukuoka Prefecture, basically in the South of Japan. But luckily, my father had the exchange program to teach at MIT because he was a professor in Japan. So I actually grew up partially in Boston when I was like 10 years old for a year and a half or so, but it left a big impact to me, because in a very Japanese suburban environment to much more Western and also in MIT, as you know a lot of significant architecture.

And that was my first encounter to a real Western architecture. And I think it left a lot of inspiration on me. And then, I decided to go to architecture school in Japan for undergrad, where I met the teacher, Mr. Suehiro, who was one of the first graduate of Berlage Institute. That was a new post-graduate school.

GRACE LA: Right. The program was--

**SHOHEI
SHIGEMATSU:** Yeah.

GRACE LA: Yes.

**SHOHEI
SHIGEMATSU:** And he just came back from Holland after working at Herman Hertzberger office and then came back to my school to teach. And then I was very fascinated to do my thesis with him. And my thesis was about the Dutch social housing. So I went to Holland to do my research. And then I also visited Berlage Institute.

And I thought it was a interesting environment to study because I thought about going to us because, as I said, I grew up here partially or UK. But I thought at that moment I'm the second baby boomer, and a lot of people are going outside. And I thought it will become another competition if I go to usual suspects, not that I could have qualified to go to Harvard. I didn't even try. But I thought instinctively going to Holland is not--

GRACE LA: Very interesting, yeah, unusual.

SHOHEI Unusual, so I decided to go there. And after a year, I applied OMA. And I basically was hired. And luckily, at that
SHIGEMATSU: time, there was no Japanese person in the office. It was a transitional moment for OMA from--

GRACE LA: So what year was that?

SHOHEI That was '98.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: 1998, OK. So after, you were at the Brelage, then you joined OMA in 1998, and you were in the office there in the Netherlands for some years?

SHOHEI Yeah, for 10 years.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: OK.

SHOHEI Yeah. So that was a really interesting moment because ironically, that was the moment that Rem was very much
SHIGEMATSU: appreciated in the US market. So all the projects were more or less American projects. And my first project was DED phase of Universal Studio headquarters in LA.

GRACE LA: I see.

SHOHEI And at that time, he just won IIT, the Student Center, et cetera. So it was a interesting moment where I entered
SHIGEMATSU: the Dutch office, but more or less, all the projects were in the US.

GRACE LA: Now, at that time also, there was only the single office. So that predates the multiple offices that are existing now.

SHOHEI Yes, it was only about 40 people. Maybe it's also that time, but only one color printer, Inkjet printer. We had to
SHIGEMATSU: share one computer for internet for everyone. Can you-- it was kind of funny if you think of it now. But a lot of ambitious people in the office, as you know, now, they are actually competing or doing much better than we do. So it was a interesting moment. Also, there are a lot of GSD students because already Rem had taught--

GRACE LA: --here at the GSD. That's right. So thinking about that because in 1995 at the GSD, I graduated. And at that time, we had only mail lines on our desks. There were no computers. Actually, the following year, students were asked to bring computers. That's an interesting moment because it was really a very-- as you say, a transitional, very specific moment in time.

SHOHEI Yeah. Also Bilbao is about 96 and *S,M,L,XL* was about 96 or 5. It was interesting because maybe I forgot to

SHIGEMATSU: mention, but I interned at Toyo Ito's office before I left to Holland because I had some time before I left. And it was a really interesting moment that Ito was giving a speech in the morning to the staff saying, please, read *S,M,L,XL* very, very carefully, basically encouraging everyone to have it. So within a week, everyone had *S,M,L,XL*. Every staff of Toyo Ito's office had *S,M,L,XL* on their desk. And I was actually working on Sendai Mediatheque DED phase. I was building two models.

GRACE LA: The two models, yeah.

SHOHEI The two models. And it was very neurotic, typical Japanese. Every member has a different diameter. So I had to

SHIGEMATSU: start from a wooden stick and then roll the paper to become a perfect--

GRACE LA: --tube.

SHOHEI --tube diameter. But what's great about that building and what sucks for student who was building the model was

SHIGEMATSU: that every time you shift one tube or even change a little bit, the entire to of course changes because it's all structural. So I had to redo it over and over.

GRACE LA: You got very good at tube rolling.

SHOHEI Yeah, yeah, it was like I was a professional roller at the end. So that was the interesting moment, '96 to '98. And

SHIGEMATSU: yeah, I also got to know American project then.

GRACE LA: So when you were in Ito's office, you were thinking already.

SHOHEI No, no, no, I couldn't.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Or you didn't imagine that at that moment.

SHOHEI I knew I was going to Holland, but I didn't even think I could get into OMA. So it was very distant to me.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Sure, sure. That's very interesting. But you persisted with that idea. That's interesting.

SHOHEI Yeah. And strangely enough, I actually applied to like 10 Dutch offices, sent a letter, but only OMA replied. And I

SHIGEMATSU: think they had already international work environment. And also, Rem had a lot of good Japanese staff prior to me. So it was lucky that he liked someone from Japan, so yeah.

GRACE LA: That's very interesting. So then fast forward a bit, 1998, you started there. And one thinks about the practice of OMA, especially because you're producing so many really fascinating built and unbuilt works, maybe even some that are unbuilt that are perhaps most seminal in the recognition of the oeuvre of OMA. And tell us a little bit about how at that moment your working relationship with Rem and how was the office structured?

SHOHEI Yeah, it was structured in there was right hand. At that moment, it was Dan Wood, Rem, and then the project

SHIGEMATSU: leaders and so on. But I really wanted to learn quickly how the thinking works. So I basically told the management that I want to work on the competitions. And I knew that's also where you have most intense communication and relationship to Rem, although, of course, it's one of the hardest to do in the office. But I thought that was the fastest way, but first in Universal headquarters. But after that, I've done many competitions.

But even a couple of-- first couple of competitions, I don't think Rem even knew my name. So I had to really work hard, or I was just enjoying but to basically promote myself. And then after a while, I think he got used to dealing with me. So I think the first competition I was recognized by him was when I was doing the Casa da Musica competition, but not in the very beginning. Yeah, in Portugal. It's Fernando Romero now office in Mexico called FR-EE. He was leading the competition, but I was--

GRACE LA: --working closely on that. Yes. That's interesting. So at that time, how much of the work was competitions and how much it built work? Were you kind of--

SHOHEI I think they had a lot of built work. Like Universal headquarters were a built work, IIT. And then the Dutch project
SHIGEMATSU: like the De Rotterdam, it's just shifted box that was already there. So a lot of projects were supposed to be built, but somehow, a lot of projects ended up not being built, like universal headquarters after DED was canceled because it was bought by a French company and some other projects.

But if I remember now, what's great about Rem is that he really hates mediocre projects. So it's not about winning the competition. It's about really creating statement or polemics or some turbulence to architecture. Now that I'm in his position leading the office, it was such an amazing braveness in a way that he really pushed the schemes to be very radical, very interesting and very inspiring. So that was also a really good environment that I could be in to really learn how to push the ideas.

GRACE LA: So tell me a little bit about that because I think definitely when one thinks of the work of OMA, I like the word that you use, turbulence. I think that aptly describes the spirit of investigation, rigor of it, but in a certain intensity, but also an attempt to somehow reveal what is not always on the surface. So this idea of turbulence is quite interesting. And can you tell me a little bit more about how you developed that? In other words, are you working through those issues through research first and then the design emerges, or maybe describe some of the methodology for it.

SHOHEI Yeah, I think there is a fundamental belief that architecture still has a room to evolve. And I think there is a
SHIGEMATSU: fundamental, either through a skepticism, through a humor, or through true belief. I think there was a shared excitement and the shared understanding that architecture and a lot of typology can still evolve. And I think that was the premise of the atmosphere. And I think that's how the vehicle worked, I think. It was never about making it work. It was all about inventing something new. That was the premise. And a lot of people say OMA is all about research and more rational outcome of architecture.

But what's great about Rem is that even if the rationale or the narrative is great, if the outcome of the form is too boring or too predictable, we really had to redo it, even redo it to the level that you have to rethink the narrative or redo the research, because I think the aesthetical part of OMA is often misunderstood because we present very clearly in the lectures. So we come across as if that's the formal investigation is never so deep. But actually, that's the part that I enjoy the most, and also that's the part that we all care. And I think that's an interesting balance of the research. But also the last bit, the formal investigation is quite intense.

GRACE LA: That's very interesting because I remember in the early '90s, again, as a graduate student at the GSD, and Rem was quite present at that time in terms of his teaching relationships to the GSD. And I remember a lecture that he delivered at one time. And on the one hand, he was being funny, but on the other hand, it was-- I could see that there was actually some truth to it. He said, oh, that client didn't pay for details so that client doesn't get any details, which I thought was interesting because in a way, he was describing a particular project whereby the relationship of the fee to what could be produced at that moment, the project afforded the potential to do an incredibly interesting idea.

But in terms of let's say, the finesse of the detail or the material capacity of it, that wasn't the goal. And I feel like that has significantly changed over the last decade for sure. And one can see that the office overall seems to have much more technical command over the craft of the building in addition to the incredible sharpness that we come to expect from the party or the idea.

SHOHEI SHIGEMATSU: Yeah, I think it's a little bit of a give and take, though, because there is a lot of standard detail that we basically repeat. And now that ironically, more we built, there is some style that OMA unconsciously or maybe consciously bring into a lot of details. And I think the great thing about how Rem was doing before was because we delivered so little buildings, the attention to detail or the specificity of each project was so high.

But now, I think, yes, we're doing well and doing delivering many projects in the technical capabilities, probably higher, much higher. When I entered, though, I think the inspiration that we give to the architecture industry is maybe less. So this is something that I'm really trying to think through a New York office, where I regard us as a very young, disruptive arm of OMA, where we could maybe bring back some of that slightly naive but more exciting and inspiring take on architecture.

GRACE LA: So now let's move a little bit towards the New York office because now there are multiple partners and in multiple cities. So first of all, tell us a little bit about how that started and--

SHOHEI SHIGEMATSU: The partnership started I don't really know exactly when, but I joined to the partnership in 2008, so almost like 10 years. I was going to talk about this later, but OMA and Rem had been always spawning young talents outside OMA. So there are so many offices you know. But at some point, because of the caliber of projects or the duration or the interest of the office, we started to focus more on, I guess, talent retention within the office.

So not to spawn a star outside OMA but to create multiple heads within OMA, which I think is an interesting evolution because OMA, as you know, started as a collective from AA School and then somehow became Rem's office. But then I think it's going back a little bit to more collective. And that's the idea. And it wasn't maybe really working past 10 years so well. But now, I have the feeling also through running New York office, the uniqueness of each partner's work, but having some level of coherence because we share this style of thinking. Finally, the diversity and the singularity balance for me is getting to a very interesting point.

GRACE LA: That's a very interesting comment because it is very clear that there are some very successful offices that are byproducts of OMA. So there must have been a moment, very conscious moment when you all in the office noticed that, well, actually, we do have to focus somehow on the talent retention. Was that a very clear moment for Rem or how did that evolve? Because it does seem to be a very specific shift. Of course, we can name all of them. What's also interesting to me is that, again, in another conversation that Rem was recorded, he had actually rebuffed the idea that he was a mentor.

Somebody had asked him, oh, my gosh, you've mentored all of these incredible architects. Look at how many interesting Bjarke and Vinni and et cetera. And then, I don't exactly remember what Rem said, but it was something to the effect of well, I have nothing to do with that. I don't take responsibility. So I thought that was very interesting moment, because clearly, all of these people had sought him out, sought out the firm, sought out the idea of practicing in a certain way but then left. So why were they leaving? Did they feel it was a limited trajectory for them?

SHOHEI Also-- and it's a very intense environment, but also, of course, at that moment, at the height of Rem's popularity,
SHIGEMATSU: everyone who is probably most ambitious in the world wanted to work there. So of course, ambitious and good people always have a goal to have their own office at the end. So it was a natural cycle, I think.

But Rem sincerely is annoyed that he has to compete with his ex OMA people. And he pretends like he didn't give-- not mentoring them. But if you really ask individually, how was Vinni or how was this person? He sometimes describe how they were doing and how the collaboration was with him in a funny way. And someone has to document this.

GRACE LA: I think that is very interesting. So then, at that same moment, at some point, by 2008, how many partners had he taken on at that point was promoted to--

SHOHEI Yeah, it was maybe five, including Rem when I joined, including myself. Now, it's nine. So again, that retention
SHIGEMATSU: strategy, but also the market has expanded. Of course, we needed more people to cover the world. But that was also maybe a moment where we had certain optimism to global operation and having multiple offices in the world, which I think maybe we were a little bit too optimistic.

Now, you see a lot of markets fluctuating. So it's not so easy to actually create offices with the same rigor of design and same rigor of thinking. We are now a little bit reduced. So we closed the Dubai office, for example. It's only New York, Rotterdam, and Hong Kong, which makes sense, but yeah.

GRACE LA: Right. Yeah, that makes sense. So you running the New York office, how much autonomy do you have. I mean, there's always a question how collaboratively the work is occurring. On the other hand, how much independence the different offices have from the mothership in the Netherlands. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that.

SHOHEI We don't call it a mothership or headquarters anymore. There's a concentration of admin group in support group
SHIGEMATSU: in Rotterdam. So we still treat Rotterdam office as headquarters. But in essence, it's no longer. Basically, every office and every partner even is cultivating their own work, delivering their work. So the collaboration is not really happening between the partners, rarely.

So if I speak of New York office, there are two partners, me and Jason Long, who is from GSD. We both have our own projects, and we basically procure it and deliver completed. So there is no involvement of other partners, including Rem. Of course, the media wants to always say it's Rem, but the truth is that my projects are designed by myself and the team.

GRACE LA: Right. So you actually do have quite a fair amount of autonomy. In fact, really, you are basically on your own. Yeah, interesting.

SHOHEI And that shift happened when the market was quite bad. I had to really build the new image of OMA. And also,
SHIGEMATSU: because of the predecessors, New York office was run by Joshua. And because of the scandalous split at the end, I had to really reintroduce OMA to US market. So it took a long time.

But that also enabled me to really think how we can rebrand or rethink the notion of OMA, which was, in a way interesting effort because, as you know, Rem is one of the most influential architects in our age. But I wasn't going against Rem but really always trying to say we are younger part of OMA, and we can do things that maybe Rem can't. And those little by little efforts somehow started to work.

GRACE LA: So how would you characterize the distinction of this evolution because you are, in a sense, a new generation? And maybe, one could say that you're taking risks in different ways. So how would you articulate that? How is the office more consciously different than maybe what had begun?

SHOHEI Hard to say if I knew that maybe the office goes even better.
SHIGEMATSU:

[CHUCKLES]

But--

GRACE LA: I mean, it seems to me that you're in a very interesting moment because you're someone who had very extensive relationship with Rem for some time. In some ways, you have absorbed already so much of the culture of that-- the ethos of that work.

SHOHEI Too much of it.
SHIGEMATSU:

[CHUCKLES]

GRACE LA: Maybe, maybe not. But what's interesting is that now, as you are developing the New York office, you're bringing up on board, I'm assuming, people that may have never worked with Rem. So that does stretch the office in different ways, good and bad, and challenging it. Obviously, in every office when you bring somebody new on board, it's challenging, but it can also be very inspiring. And in my own office, when we bring someone, we notice change.

SHOHEI Good change, yeah.
SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Yeah. So I don't know. I mean, how are you thinking about--

SHOHEI Yeah, so I think because I took over the office in 2007 and right after, as you know, 2008, there was a crisis. So a
SHIGEMATSU: couple of years, I didn't even have any project other than Cornell or this kind of museum. And it was a very small office. And I really had to make the office work. So my focus was a little bit about making the office work in a way a little bit sad. But that was-- I think if I look back, that was coming too much to the forefront of the aim of the office.

And now, it started to work. Let's say, I have a room to really think what we can actually do in architecture like Rem was trying to do to inspire people, inspire ourselves. I guess we really have now started almost, which is a slow progress, but as you know, in US, it was very difficult after 2008. So now finally, after completing some project and now we're getting prestigious project, we really want to focus on doing things very well and really think of our identity within OMA but even outside OMA.

GRACE LA: You having had the very full spectrum of different kinds of experiences through OMA, as you imagined the New York office, five years, 10 years out, what do you imagine is the ideal size? And when you think about it moving forward, how do you--

SHOHEI SHIGEMATSU: We have about 85 people now. So it's quite big already. I think 80 to 100 is the ideal size for me. And I don't want to go beyond that. But you never know. I don't-- the great thing how Rem run the office was also not to make too many plans or limitations. So I don't know yet. But now, I'm only working on American project and Japanese project. But eventually, I would like to also work in Europe or if each partners can start to have their own geography, that's the ideal.

So that's how we are thinking. And also, a lot of maybe bookmaking or research cultivation, as I was doing at GSD about food, those kind of cultivation of our interest is also going to be very important, not just architecture. I think that was the great success of how Rem ran to create a lot of dichotomy within the office and dialectic relationship between physical and thinking.

GRACE LA: Yeah. In terms of the project type, I mean, simply because you brought up the GSD and the relationship to food, I'm curious about that because it seems like some of the work that you're pursuing, on the one hand, you have something like the New Museum, this paradigmatic, cultural icon eye condition. And then you're looking at, let's say, urban social issues, for example, Food Hub in Louisville. And so this question of the social agenda for the New York practice, is it conscious for you? Where do you think it's going?

SHOHEI SHIGEMATSU: I think we want to make it very conscious. So we are also doing a lot of public space design. So we're doing this Bridge Park in DC. We're doing the post-Sandy revitalization of Hoboken to create public spaces that is water-resistant. And even Facebook for me is a new campus. It's the first time a tech company is actually making a mixed-use district.

So that's also a lot of public spacemaking. So for me, what I felt during the recession was that a lot of landscape architects had grown very much during the recession, I felt, started to do masterplans, started to outdoor architects and because they were very tactical and good about improving things without building architecture, which I felt that was a very interesting shift.

I wanted to be in that position. Also socially, I think the public space again is with a lot of programming, a lot of reuse of infrastructure, a lot of shift of mobility, et cetera. I think it might transform into something very unexpected or interesting. So anyway, that dimension, we are also very much consciously focused on.

GRACE LA: I find that very astute and very interesting because of course, the tendency for architects always to be paired with this idea of an object-centric design goal is not necessarily that the design in spatial terms can be actually very lateral and literally lateral in the sense that it's about space and landscape and territory infrastructure and other ways of building the city that aren't about the object itself.

SHOHEI Well, we love the object too still.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Yeah, we all-- OK.

SHOHEI And we are doing a lot of interesting form too. But I felt also going through the Bilbao Guggenheim effect, I was
SHIGEMATSU: doing Whitney extension at the time, very iconic buildings. And somehow, that period ended. I thought, we have to diversify our tactics, not just always focusing on architectural statement but also looking at non-architectural statement as an architect. And I think of course, a little bit inspired by AMO work but also always thinking and challenging and questioning what the role of architect in our age is and also how the role of architect or architectural thinking can be applied to the social change.

GRACE LA: Yes. I think that is interesting, publications now really grappling with that challenge. And I think that architecture is also struggling with this question of whether we still maintain a disciplinary core. And if we do, what is that disciplinary core? If it's not the object building, if that's ultimately not the exclusive product of architecture, then what else is it? And then, of course, in the realm of education, one wonders, then what do we teach our students or how do we continue to stimulate the imagination through design, through architecture, but not necessarily always exclusively about the built object? So it's an interesting challenge.

SHOHEI Yeah. And what I'm always telling students also at GSD or in the office is that the education used to be basically
SHIGEMATSU: absorbing the knowledge and technical knowledge. But I noticed once I started to practice that in any way, we can never be a specialist of hospital or a museum. So each time you have to do profound research. So each time, basically architecture has to deal with new conditions.

That means it's better to spend your time on brushing up how you can actually absorb new conditions rather than trying to accumulate knowledge that might be outdated quite quickly. So I think that's a kind of also interesting mentality at OMA, where every project is, of course, different. And of course, we don't repeat the form. So it's always dealing with a new condition.

GRACE LA: Right. You mentioned very briefly AMO. Tell me how that relationship is working and what you see is the collaborative potential there.

SHOHEI I start to think that AMO is never going to be defined [CHUCKLES] and just diminishes, because that's the whole
SHIGEMATSU: point. It was almost like a ghost alter ego of Rem, who always had certain level of skepticism or worry about architectural profession because he came from different backgrounds.

It's applying architectural thinking to non-architectural environment, sometimes works, sometimes miserably fails. We thought of making AMO a part of the business, but now, we found difficult to make the business consistent. So it's really almost like a symbol of our mentality that we are always thinking that architectural thinking can be applied to many different conditions.

GRACE LA: That's fascinating. So AMO is functioning like a spirit animal.

SHOHEI Yeah, I think so.

SHIGEMATSU:

[LAUGHS]

Well, unfortunately, we wanted to make it into business, but at this moment, I think AMO is like that. So for me--

GRACE LA: Is there staff to know? Is it--

SHOHEI Yeah, there are a couple of research stuffs, but there are also trained as an architect. So it's in a way like a
SHIGEMATSU: vehicle to cultivate our own interest and not to forget that thinking should come first before designing. And I think that's a very important part of OMA's gene. And I think that's why there is no formal prescribed outcome or style.

That's why it's a great place to also learn. You can learn narrative-making and push the idea and create a lot of interesting research. And then you can apply that to your own outcome. So that's why people manage to use this system quite well and be successful in the market, I think.

GRACE LA: Yeah. So do you think, though, that ultimately one would continue to nourish AMO?

SHOHEI Well--

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: I mean, if you--

SHOHEI Some people tried.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Because you refer to it as a ghost, which is very interesting, so it can actually disappear. [GIGGLES] So I'm curious.

SHOHEI I have a feeling that something like this, if you start to formalize or what you say AMO's expertise, it becomes
SHIGEMATSU: suddenly very uninteresting, almost like, ad agency or a consulting firm. So at this moment, I feel that this is the right place for AMO.

GRACE LA: I think a lot of people are curious about that.

SHOHEI Yeah, but I welcome anyone who wants to redefine it and use AMO as a vehicle or starting point to push the
SHIGEMATSU: architecture profession or architectural thinking.

GRACE LA: That's interesting. So you almost-- in that invitation, it can be an open.

SHOHEI Yeah, and yes. And that's what-- I mean, I want to create an environment that people can use us as a vehicle to
SHIGEMATSU: push the ideas. And as a whole, I think it will leave a great effect if we come across very open office and then invite younger, ambitious people to the office.

GRACE LA: We had talked a little bit about five years out, 10 years out. What do you imagine is your dream project? What would you like to do? You have this essentially autonomous office, but of course, you can leverage the history that you've been building over years.

SHOHEI Yeah, I'm very optimistic and feel lucky where we are in the society because I think a lot of business, a lot of
SHIGEMATSU: environment is changing very rapidly. And a lot of people even say it could be compared to Renaissance, how every industry is challenged and evolving. And with that environment, I would love to create as many new architectural typology or push the typology forward with the evolution of the society.

And I want to really contribute to capture the change through architectural thinking or through architecture and to really be able to develop our own zeitgeist. And I'm trying and I think someone like Bjarke is doing much better, but really, observe the change and capture the change and express the change. And I think that's what I'm focused now. And that would be great if we can do that.

GRACE LA: Why do you think Bjarke is doing better? Why do you say that? Because in fact, actually, some would argue that that's--

SHOHEI --the opposite.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: It's opposite, yeah. So it'd be interesting to hear from your perspective. What makes you think that?

SHOHEI I think his certain level of optimism in him about the change and to be part of the change and to throw himself
SHIGEMATSU: into those changes. I think not that the outcome is necessarily expressing that, but the way he is acting within architecture circle but also outside. For me, it's a very interesting role that architecture or architect can play in society in creating more surface areas to deal with different industry or different domains.

GRACE LA: Yes, I think there's also still some concern about the notion in which the diagram becomes the built expression of the project. And somehow, that singular diagram is actually also highly reductive rather than being expansive, and that the reduction of that diagram is essentially a single narrative, and that ultimately, it's very anemic.

SHOHEI What I like about Bjarke is that he knows that he's doing that. And also for me, when MVRDV came in
SHIGEMATSU: acknowledgment, they also had very Utopian take on architecture and urban environment and took part of Rem's exploration and then push that idea forward. And I think Bjarke is doing similar in trying to distinguish themselves, but not distinguish themselves to OMA and Rem, but of course, preserving some what they learned in OMA. So it goes back to a little bit about the word turbulence. At least Bjarke is creating turbulence, whether good or bad. And I like that because it's also-- I get excited to see change.

GRACE LA: It's energizing. Yeah, it's energizing. How does the practice of OMA outlive its origin, its founder? Does it continue to expand? Does it contract? If one could develop new offices, would one do that? What do you think happens now at this point? If you're a representative of-- particularly, if you're a representative of this new generation, what happens next?

SHOHEI I think there are multiple scenarios that I can think of, for example, if Rem retires, maybe OMA splits into a
SHIGEMATSU: couple of offices or OMA remains with smaller partnership. I think number nine maybe too many, or I hope there will be some kind of rethinking about the organization, not just dry partnership. And we can almost make the organizational issue as a subject matter for us to really tackle.

GRACE LA: Right. So you haven't done that yet?

SHOHEI Well, for the record, we are trying. That's why the evolution of each partner doing their own cultivation is finally
SHIGEMATSU: starting to work now because we were pushed to really make it work. That's working. So let's see how that multifaceted entity will do. But I wouldn't say this is a perfect way of running a single architectural office either. And also, at some point, we have to think when Rem retires, what are we going to do?

GRACE LA: It's a very real question.

SHOHEI Yeah, it's a question, and that's a big one. But I think we are prepared, but we still have to think further.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Yeah. Like OMA, Pei's office is essentially almost like a New York Alumni Society because there are hundreds of architects that have gone through Pei's office.

SHOHEI That's true.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: And then many of them are well-known and started their own practices. So for example, Bill Peterson, we'll talk about that today, I.M.'s Sons as well in the Pei partnership. And of course, Pei Cobb Freed continues. So it's quite interesting.

SHOHEI Yeah, that's very interesting. And I think that's maybe where OMA is also going to. Multifaceted means maybe

SHIGEMATSU: some facet might again depart, but trying to create a multifaceted object as an identity is probably the future. And luckily, we have the name associated with a single person. So it's easier to do it than if the office had a name of an individual. Of course, the rebranding might be more difficult.

GRACE LA: Right. All right. And I think that's also an interesting thing because there's also a point at which I guess I would conjecture this. And I'm curious to see if it comes up in our conversation tonight. But at a point at which if there are so many partners, at what moment does that equilibrium create a flattening of the authorship or the voice of the practice? Because it can happen. It's very delicate balance to keep turbulence alive. And maybe that's actually not the desire of every partner ultimately. People's own desires will shape practices in different ways. So I think that's also an interesting question.

SHOHEI Yeah, well, I thought so too for some time that everyone, every partner has to reach to a certain level. But at this

SHIGEMATSU: point, design critique is one of the most difficult thing to do if you are in an equal position. And that's why I also looked into other ways of introducing critique system to the office. And--

GRACE LA: Explain that. Explain that.

SHOHEI A lot of offices do it but just bring external--

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: --critics.

SHOHEI --architect critics to the office.

SHIGEMATSU:

GRACE LA: Do you do that regularly?

SHOHEI Well, not really yet or create a journal within the Office so that everyone can see and even give an award within

SHIGEMATSU: the office. I'm just describing that type of effort that other offices are doing to keep the production level high. But there's a really interesting quote from David Childs that said, "Critiquing each other between the partners is very difficult, but critiquing the number is very easy."

So in the end, at the start of the corporate firm is that people start to measure the success of a partner's work through probably revenue, which we really want to avoid. So going back to the consistency of work, I started to actually feel that each partner should develop whatever they want to do and don't care about the consistency to the level that it almost becomes different offices. And I think that's maybe an interesting way of thinking the evolution, because the coordination is anyway very difficult. We all have a different talent. We all have different tastes.

GRACE LA: Yeah, I find that very fascinating because what that might produce is it accepts and encourages a certain asymmetry and angularity, which becomes actually not only acceptable but desirous and let's each arm become its own authentic voice. I think that could be very interesting when think about it.

SHOHEI But still, of course, it has to be right. But I have the feeling that we are doing OK right now on that end like
SHIGEMATSU: Reinier de Graaff, who just published a book. He's more focused on writing, but also his architecture is very deliberately generic, not so much formal moves, gimmicks. But I personally like a bit more expressive architecture and different style mixed. It starts to have almost inconsistency.

But I'm enjoying that inconsistency right now and want to see how it evolves. But we have a privilege to see each other's process and understand and share technical knowledge or share a contact or share client info, et cetera. So the intelligence is shared, but the outcome is vastly different. And I think that's an interesting model. But I'm just maybe taking it just optimistically. That's all.

GRACE LA: Yeah, yeah, well, we are all actually very optimistic about your practice. And we're just very delighted that you could join us today and talk about these things, which again, this is a format that's new to us, but I think that it will give us an opportunity to glimpse inside a certain box, which is always opaque, and even though we always hear at the GSD, there's so many lectures every semester, hundreds. And so I think it's--

SHOHEI No, this is a great initiative because one of the biggest concern, of course, of a student life is that this anxiety
SHIGEMATSU: that what you're learning, is it useful in actual practice? And I always battled personally with that anxiety. And it's true that many of the things directly don't contribute to your practice, but it ultimately does. But knowing is always a power. And I think this candid description of how each office practice is working, I'm sure it will take out a lot of boundaries between the student academic and practice.

GRACE LA: Yes, I think that's right. I think our goal is to demystify some of these issues. And I think there was a long time where there's a feeling that the gentleman architect, we don't talk about things like money, strategy, marketing, even our practical aspirations. And yet, at the same time, how much those very conditions support or deny the potential of certain kinds of projects. So it's a very vast area that we actually don't discuss because we are obsessed about thinking about whether it's form or geometry, et cetera, which are all extremely important. But there's this territory that really needs more attention.

SHOHEI Also, we should believe that even architectural office could evolve. I'm dealing with Facebook, all these people
SHIGEMATSU: who are more into innovation. And I think they're very good at using the data and reflect on their organization. And architecture, a little bit is always--

GRACE LA: --stubborn.

SHOHEI Yeah, stubborn, stagnating, too much belief on what happened in the past. I think we should use this
SHIGEMATSU: brainstorming to even push the idea of architecture office as a practice.

GRACE LA: Shoh, thank you so much for joining us, and we look forward to hearing your talk tonight with us on the panel.

SHOHEI Thank you so much.

SHIGEMATSU:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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 Ronnie Saroff and edited by Maggie Janik. Research was provided by Alexander Porter. To find out more about programs and events at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, visit us online at gsd.harvard.edu. Thanks for listening.