

# P N Y X

WEEKLY COMMENTARY, RESEARCH, AND REVIEW

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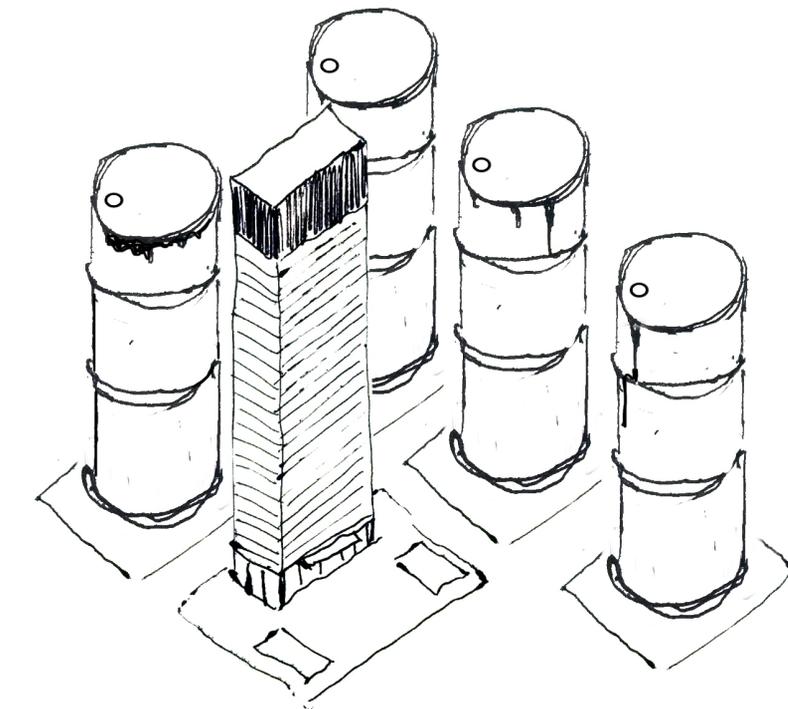
ISSUE 51

LAST WEEK PNYX attended the first of a series of three discussions at the AA organised by Critical Practices. There to discuss the subject of **RETHINKING CLIENTS** was Peter Swinnen (**CRIT**), Maarten Gielen (**ROTOR**), Yeoryia Manolopoulou (**AY Architects**, UCL), and Giles Smith (**Assemble**). Each speaker put forth their understanding of the dynamics and possibilities that can characterise an architect's relationship with a client, drawing on their diverse experiences to offer hybrid models, self-initiated projects, and the subtle codes of getting what you want (or what you think the public deserves). PNYX'S question kicked off the discussion afterwards (complemented by an interjection by AA Director Eva Franch i Gilabert), an extract of which we present below.—EDS.

**PNYX:** Notably there is no hard-nosed hyper-capitalistic client sitting on the panel, the kind of person who maybe isn't sympathetic to the pathologies of architecture. What do you think they would make of this discussion? Would they have sympathy for it?

**GILES SMITH:** I would hope that some of the clients that we've had—more traditional clients or 'hard-nosed clients' as you put it—might actually see hope in the conversation that we've had. In a way, 'client' is problematic term, right? Because the people who fund architecture [are] interested in the same conversations that we're having, about how you fund it, how you make that money travel further, how you bring different kinds of value into economies.

So I'd question the premise of your question, which is that there's a kind of duality; there's the 'Mr. Nice Guy' architect-developer, or an amateur architect, and then there's like the big bad client on the other end. Actually I think it's much more continuous [and] by embracing that [...]



*Above: Image by PNYX.*

we can better have a conversation with those people.

**MAARTEN GIELEN:** I agree with him.

**EVA FRANCH I GILABERT:** One of the last WhatsApp messages that I received had to do with a client, a client that actually we might find problematic in some way—[a source of] what we call problematic funding. One of the most important questions that we have right now within the [Architectural Association] is how we establish lines, ethical lines between the money that comes through the doors when we actually are in a very dear need of financial support. So I would like to ask, [...] where do we stand as architects? How many degrees of separation from sources of funding do we feel comfortable with? And

where do we draw the line, if we are to have the freedom to act as architects with our ideas?

**MAARTEN:** So I recently sent a message to someone about not accepting a commission for the Chicago Architecture Biennial on the basis that their main sponsor is British Petroleum. The insinuation was that there was a form of opportunism in turning down this commission. And I think this is a very valid point, so valid that we should maybe even embrace it as a sort of a strategy. Let me explain that.

If you are [an organic] yogurt producer, you cannot afford a to kill your market by having some form of GMO found in your yogurt. It would just kill your market. However, if you are the cheapest supermarket brand, people are kind of

expecting you to do things that they'd rather not know about.

I think as architects we can choose what sort of clientele we favour. [ROTOR'S] clientele would not appreciate us working with BP even if it passes through the hands of the Chicago Biennial. There is a form of opportunism in us turning down this commission. I also personally think that turning down commissions, as a form of process, [is something] you can only do when you scream about it. Otherwise it's not a form of protest. So it is not only [about] developing markets, alternative markets, that are in a way more ethical than [usual], but something you need to do for your own practice. It's also something you need to do very vocally to make it harder for others not to do it. That's the position we took on this particular case.

PETER SWINNEN: At the same time, I think there's a potential danger of some moralism sneaking into contemporary architecture, be it at school, or in the profession, or whatever. Nothing withholds you from screening your clients. So for instance, we—the former office (51N4E)—worked in Albania. The first thing we did was screen the client, and of course [even then you can't be completely sure], but still you have some kind of reassurance. Nothing is withholding you from doing this, I think it's also [the] ethical [thing to do]. But there is some kind of danger of pseudo-moralism. For example [Maarten], I find it a pity that you didn't accept the Chicago Biennial because, as an office, you're smart enough to find a crack in the system to be extremely critical. And saying no—it could be an option—but I think there are even much more interesting options [that now won't be] addressed. I mean it's not about either/or. [That] it's BP, yes, I understand. At the same time, I think it's a missed opportunity.

I showed at the beginning of the lecture the Seagram Building. I mean Mies van der Rohe could have said no to Seagram [the company] because it was actually not that ethical a company, but nevertheless, with this huge amount of money, they succeeded, I think to do something much bigger or much more important than the architectural project. They had an impact on the city [affecting the city's legislation and provision of public space].

There are good and bad examples so it's not a 'holy' principle, but still I find it interesting [that] you could use

certain critical losses, for instance of private budgets, to do something beyond the architectural project, and use the architecture project as a means to have an impact on civil society—if the designer at the table is smart enough. I think there's still a completely uncharted field to be discovered by the architecture discipline.

[But] it's not as black and white as it's projected. And again, vis-à-vis students, I think it's hugely dangerous, to say, 'well, if there's big money involved or whatever, we don't do it'. Please, nuance.

YEORYIA MANOLOPOULOU: I would agree that it's not black and white. I think there are two questions here. The first is on the hardcore client, the other on the hardcore potential funder.

For the client, I'll answer in relationship to my practice and give an example. Since we finished [a project redesigning and rebuilding] the Montpelier Community Nursery, we have repeatedly been approached by companies, coming from the US, who are interested in a new series of hundreds of nurseries that will take over the world. That will take over the UK, that will take over Europe. They are very focused on branding. The reality is that we say no to these kind of jobs, but I think they also say no to us. So it's becoming very clear after our first conversations [with them] that these clients would not like to work with AY Architects and we would not like to work with them. So in a way it's not black and white. We may need the projects and we know that they're not right, and actually we cannot even convince the client to change their minds. So it's both [that] they reject us, and we reject them. It's a two way process.

On the case of funding. My experience from UCL is quite interesting and maybe it's my personal interpretation. There have been very important cases of financial support from sources that could be called unethical. I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think I know that place quite well by now. I think UCL and the Bartlett's approach is quite interesting because I would say in many cases the Bartlett will accept the money, but it will make the issue of ethics and academic research a subject in its own right. It will both accept and scrutinise it. So maybe that replies to your point [Peter], of actually saying 'yes' and then scrutinizing the subject from many different points of view—intellectual, ethical, from the point of view of academic research. I know examples where colleagues

had strong disagreements about accepting money from certain sources and UCL's position was to fund these researchers to do further research on it.

MAARTEN: I think that in the end it's about estimating when you get into a commission, what sort of power relationship you're going to be in. Through the Chicago Architecture Biennial you cannot start a meaningful conversation with British Petroleum. There's no way you can be in a powerful [enough] position to change even the colour of one of their gas stations. There's no form of dialogue. So I would argue that actually we made a contribution to the Chicago Biennial.

It was quite funny because [our response] was a shared all over, and so all of a sudden you have, for example, small Hungarian officers sharing messages that said 'yeah, we will also not participate!' [even though] they were not invited and actually we were.

[Laughter]

PETER: That's a good move if they're not invited, saying that they won't participate.

MAARTEN: I think that's a very good move. But, I don't even think [the Biennial] would have been an important commission for us. So sometimes saying no in a very vocal way—that is the project.

PETER: Imagine, Maarten, what an extremely important commission for you would be. And you would say no.

MAARTEN: But we say no to almost everything.

PETER: Sure. But like a really extremely important one. What could it be?

MAARTEN: Like the Venice Biennale?

PETER: Pfff.

MAARTEN: [Laughs]. I don't know. I think, at least, just say no the first time.

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*Critical Practices is organised by Love di Marco, Tobias Hentzer Dausgaard and Arya Arabshahi. The second event on the subject of 'Forms of alliance' will take place on November 26 and the third and final event on the subject of 'Affording risk' will take place on December 10.*