

## Shaping the future of European architecture

September 2006. Gian Luca Amadei (GLA), European Correspondent at Blueprint magazine in the UK interviews Mathias Lehner of lehner en gunther architecten (LEGU).

*GLA: I have been asked by my Editor Vicky Richardson to write a piece about the traveling exhibition Wonderland which LEGU is part of to be published on the November issue of Blueprint (out at the beginning of October). I would like to ask you some questions about your impressions about Wonderland. This is also an occasion for Blueprint to establish contact with your practices and find out what you are up to, and which projects you have in the pipeline.*

*Did the network between the teams from different country developed in connection with any aesthetic or theoretical vision or any other architectural interpretation they have in common between them?*

LEGU: There is no aesthetic or (architecturally) theoretical vision behind Wonderland. There is no Wonderland-School, or Design Movement. However, we believe that the architectural practice changes rapidly, and that national borders are of decreasing importance. An informal network as Wonderland can be as base for cross-national collaborations. Also, it is a network for reflection about different national practices. As a partner team for the Dutch edition it is not without reason in this context that we chose the Amsterdam Airport Schiphol as exhibition set.

*GLA: Which type of benefit did the architects had or have in being part Of Wonderland?*

LEGU: Wonderland is a network. Until now these contacts resulted for us in content related discussion, insight information of other countries and collaborations for architectural completions.

*GLA: How did they found the format for the exhibition? Was too small to show their work?*

LEGU: The concept was a given for us, as architects and co-organizers. It has its charm and flexibility as the different settings in Berlin, Paris, etc show; but the exhibition format decreases the possibility for (later) participants to give a proper impression of their work. The content, the architectural work portrayed, definitely becomes a formal background in the later exhibitions. As a second item, the work of a young office proceeds quicker than the lifetime of the pixels; in our case a major project in model-phase has been realized while the exhibition was still traveling. In Vienna, as the closing event, the challenge for the organizers, in our humble opinion, was to make that step from project presentation to the network itself with the lectures.

*GLA: Did any of the practice have an increase in the commissions by being part Of Wonderland?*

LEGU: No. There was an increase in (requests for) publications.

GLA: Wonderland seems to promote a sense of community and belonging for the European practices, what is your view on a possible body/organization which could possibly look after European architects as a whole? Which one could be the positive and negative points of it?

LEGU: We think that today's organizations that try to represent architects on a European or national level are from a previous, left behind generation. The European Council of Architects seems to be a pure representational paper-like organization. The Dutch BNA (board of architects) since years has often been portrayed a grey haired assembly of architects (with mainly the retired architects being able to attend the meetings). So there is an urge, a void to be filled by today's generation. Wonderland, but also Young European Architects, whom we collaborated with for the Dutch edition of Wonderland, are an alternative that can be promising. I think in principle the exchange about the different national practices; the inspiration and knowledge transfer are

the base for a successful generation of a cupola-organization for architects. Flexibility has to be present. Project-like approaches are the most familiar to the architectural practices. A series of short, high profile and pressure cooker events/meetings/... could reflect the interests of today's (and tomorrows) architectural practitioners. It would be interesting to explore this more. Also more, than a question in an email.

*GLA: How it is like to be an architect in your own country? Do you feel there is a sense of identity and belonging there?*

LEGU: Like above, but different, this is a question that can have a long answer, depending on whom you ask. In our opinion there is of course two sides to an architect; the person, as a character, and the professional. A person can, depending on its character feel to belong to a certain place through e.g. a social network and rituals. Though I'm from Austria I might feel more and more Dutch with the years or an Amsterdammer (person belonging in or to a certain city). The same applies to the professional. In our opinion there is a spatial, cultural, etc. context that requires, or let's say: evokes, a certain architectural thinking and solution. Think of the site, the building techniques, but also the communicative aspect of a building process. If you build abroad you should familiarize with those aspects if you want to realize a building that is appreciated over a longer period of time; for us, as Lehner en Gunther architecten that process does work out fine in Holland. The nice thing about the architectural practice is, however, that it is not bound to national borders. An architect can learn to practice in virtually any country or place.

*GLA: Do you think Wonderland has been successful in its aims? Any downsides?*

LEGU: I am not completely sure about all aims of Wonderland. As a promotional, social and knowledge wise network I consider it a success. There is no real downside, but as any network also Wonderland needs to be maintained. Imagine you do not have sufficient contacts with your friends: Exceptions are on this, but the contact will be less intensive, less inspiring and eventually stop. There is a challenge for the Wonderland organizers to be leading in this role.