



# ohraniti kritično distanco

intervju z Aaronom Tanom, arhitektom in ustanoviteljem RAD, Hong Kong, Kitajska

Robert MacLeod

# preserving critical distance

interview with Aaron Tan, Architect and founding partner of RAD, Hong Kong, SAR

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## Lahko opišete delo RAD glede na temo konference v Piranu?

Konferenca je bila zame osebno čisto posebna izkušnja, zdela se mi je zelo kvalitetna in osvežujoča. V svojem predavanju sem skušal delo RAD predstaviti ne ozirajoč se na trenutno ekonomsko krizo in se bolj osredotočiti na izzive, s katerimi se v Hong Kongu vsakodnevno soočamo. Odpira se nam le omejeno število priložnosti, ki jih moramo takoj pograbit. Kar pomeni, da jih vedno dodobra izkoristimo. Na tako razvpito Obzidano mesto Kowloon (Kowloon Walled City – KWC) se pogosto sklicujem kot na metaforo načina dela v Hong Kongu. Kowloon, ki sicer ne obstaja več, je bil skoraj nepredstavljivo zgoščena, kaotična urbana struktura. Skozi začetni nered, se je v njem vzpostavil svojevrsten nov red. Obzidano mesto Kowloon je delovalo izven dosega konvencionalnega vladnega sistema. V resnici se mu ni dalo vladati, vsaj ne na tradicionalno strukturiran način. Pravila in dogovore so prebivalci drug z drugim sklepali sproti in sproti reševali probleme, ki so se pojavljali.

## Kaj novega in uporabnega za vaše delo ste se naučili tekom konference in kakšen je po koncu konference vaš vtis o sodobnih pogojih dela v arhitekturi?

Zanimivo je bilo poslušati Milтона Brago, arhitekta, ki se spopada s težavami mesta, kakršno je São Paulo, in v njem neprestano odkriva različne nove priložnosti. Skozi probleme, ki pestijo mesto, išče, najde in določi nove javne prostore v mestu. Wang Shu je eden najboljših mladih kitajskih arhitektov, ki je zaljubljen v kitajsko kulturo, umetnost, kaligrafijo. Njegova arhitektura raste iz strasti in iz ljubezni do mesta in kulture.

## Kakšna bi bila vaša primerjava razlik med arhitekturnim delom v Sloveniji, torej v Vzhodni Evropi, in v Hong Kongu, torej v Aziji, oziroma komentar odnosa med njima?

Slovenija in Hong Kong se med seboj zelo razlikujeta. V Sloveniji je po celotni državi razporejenih dva milijona prebivalcev. V Hong Kongu pa je več kot trikrat toliko ljudi nagnetenih na mnogo manjšem in bolj zgoščenem prizorišču. Obema prizoriščema pa je skupno gonilo arhitekture, torej poudarjanje programa kot ideje. V premalo izrabljene prostore se na primer pogosto namesti institucionalne programe, torej šole, cerkve in hotele. Arhitekti skušajo arhitekturo izkoristiti za to, da mestu sprožijo razvoj.

## Can you situate the work of RAD relative to the themes of the conference in Piran?

*It was an excellent conference, a very special experience for me, and very refreshing. In my presentation, I tried to situate the work of RAD beyond the current financial crisis and focused instead on the everyday challenges we face in Hong Kong. We receive limited opportunities and must make full use of the opportunity. That is, fully exploit them. I like to use the infamous Kowloon Walled City (KWC) as a metaphor for describing how we work in Hong Kong. Although no longer in existence, the KWC was a chaotic urban development with a density almost beyond comprehension. It created a new kind of order through disorder. Kowloon Walled City operated outside conventional government. In fact, it was basically ungovernable, at least not in a traditionally structured manner. Rules and agreements emerge from the residents in an ad hoc manner, solving problems as they arise.*

## What did you take away from the conference relative to your own work and your overall impression of the condition of contemporary practice?

*It was encouraging to see an architect such as Milton Braga, working through the problems in São Paulo, who is able to consistently find opportunities. Through problems he finds and defines public spaces in the city. Wang Shu, one of the top young architects in China, is in love with Chinese culture, art, calligraphy. Architecture emerges through this passion, his love of the city and love of culture.*

## Can you compare/comment on the relationship between professional practice in Slovenia/Eastern Europe and Hong Kong/Asia?

*For me, Slovenia and Hong Kong are so different. There are 2 million people spread throughout the country in Slovenia. In Hong Kong we have over three times as many people in a much smaller, much more dense setting. Still, in both settings we see an intensified idea of program as the driver of architecture. We see institutional programs – schools, churches, hotels – emerging from underutilized spaces. We see architects using architecture to trigger development in the city.*

## Can you give us a brief history of RAD. How has RAD changes/evolved since its original inception as OMA Asia?

*The history of RAD cannot be separated from the OMAA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture Asia). In 1994 we founded OMAA as a franchise, financially*

### Zanima me kratka zgodovina biroja RAD. Na kakšen način se je RAD razvijal oziroma spreminjal od svojih začetkov kot del OMA Azija?

Zgodovine biroja RAD ni mogoče ločiti od OMAA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture Asia). Leta 1994 smo OMAA ustanovili kot franšizo, ki je bila finančno neodvisna od OMA v Rotterdamu. Rem Koolhaas nas je podpiral in nam pomagal poiskati projekte, pri katerih smo lahko razvijali sodelovanje med našo, hongkonško, in rotterdamsko pisarno OMA. Sodelovali smo na primer pri urbanističnih načrtih za področje ceste Orchard Road v Singapurju in 4000 hektarov velike industrijske cone, prav tako v Singapurju. Sodelovanje z njim je oblikovalo tudi duha, v katerem še zdaj delamo v RAD. Ko smo ustanovili RAD me je Rem prosil, naj mu obljubim, da »bom ostal intelektualec«. Pri komercialnem delu v Hong Kongu se odpirajo zelo zapeljive priložnosti, finančne nagrade pa so prav tako privlačne. V svojem delu in razmišljanju moramo ohraniti kritično distanco ter vztrajati kot intelektualci.

### Ime biroja, RAD pomeni Raziskovanje arhitekturnega dizajna (Research Architecture Design). Ime sem vedno bral kot neke vrste povzetek vaše »misije«. Ali se lahko pogovoriva, kakšno vlogo pri RAD igra raziskovanje in na kakšen način raziskovanje oblikuje vaše arhitekturno delo?

Raziskovanje nam služi kot opomin tistega, za kar smo se izučili. Ne želimo, da bi nas čisto brez kritične distance potegnili v svet komerciale. Svojo pozicijo moramo torej vzpostaviti zelo pazljivo. Po zidovih imamo vedno nekaj obešeno: ocene, razprave o našem delu in mnenja drugih, vse zato, da bi se izognili, da nas preveč povleče v komercialni svet.

Raziskovanje je lahko čudno, zabavno, odvisno od situacije. V Hong Kongu raziskujemo na primer »manjkajoče številke«. Zgradbe skoraj nikoli nimajo četrtega nadstropja, pogosto pa nimajo niti štirinajstega, štiriindvajsetega in tako dalje. Številko štiri prinaša nesrečo, tako, da se mu vsi skušajo čimbolj izogniti. Ta števila se preskočijo tudi v dvigalu, še posebej pri komercialnih projektih, predvsem zaradi boljšega marketinga. Zgradba lahko trdi, da ima 88 nadstropij, kar je na Kitajskem zelo srečna številka, vendar pa ima v resnici precej manj etaž. Prestavljajte si vse težave, ki jih to povzroči uradnikom in na primer gasilcem. Razmišljali smo, da bi morda lahko zahtevali, da sem nam vse ta manjkajoča nadstropja vrne v obliki javnega prostora!

### Ali je trenutna globalna upočasnitev zadela tudi RAD?

Globalna upočasnitev se je seveda dotaknila tudi našega biroja. Vsi dobivamo manj naročil. Še posebej se je to poznalo prejšnjo jesen. Kot odgovor na nastali položaj smo se osredotočili na ljudi, zaposlene v našem biroju. Skušali smo jim sporočiti, da smo na istem bregu in nikogar nismo odpustili. Naša najpomembnejša naloga je, da svojo delovno ekipo obdržimo skupaj. Skozi timsko delo in sodelovanje delamo na tem, da bi zgradili timsko kulturo RAD.

### RAD je v svojem bistvu globalni biro, ki se v prvi vrsti prisoten v več Azijskih državah, z različnimi družbenimi in kulturnimi pogoji. Kakšna je pri vašem delu vloga konteksta?

Sam prihajam iz Singapurja. Naši zaposleni prihajajo iz Italije, Poljske, ZDA in tako dalje. Vsakdo od nas je na neki način »izven konteksta«, poleg tega pa tudi pogosto delamo na projektih, ki sploh niso v Hong Kongu, tako da smo »izven konteksta« celo dvakrat.

V projekt, ki ga na primer delamo v Singapurju, prenesemo izkušnje iz Kitajske, Indije in Hong Konga. Ker smo stalno izpostavljeni različnim projektom, krajem in kulturam, si lahko zastavimo cilje in ugotovimo, kaj si zares želimo doseči, kaj je zares pomembno in tako dalje. V Hong Kongu je običajno, da arhitekturni biroji v lokalno situacijo vnašajo globalno znanje.

### Na kakšen način se v delu RAD odraža odnos do obrti in do materialnosti?

To pa je težko vprašanje. V Indiji smo na primer imeli možnost izbrati lokalne proizvode, prelepe ročno izdelane predmete in lokalne materiale, torej preproge in tekstilne izdelke. Materiali, ki jih uporabljamo, pogosto izhajajo iz množične industrijske proizvodnje, saj je težko priti do ljudi, ki se z obrtjo lokalno ukvarjajo. Z veseljem bi tesneje povezali naše projekte z izdelki, toda pri tem bi se srečali s preveč praktičnimi preprekami.

*independent from OMA in Rotterdam. We had the support of Rem Koolhaas and a commitment to find suitable projects to collaborate with him in both the Hong Kong and Rotterdam offices. Our collaborations include the Orchard Road master plan in Singapore and a 4000-hectare industrial site, also in Singapore. Our collaborations influenced the spirit of RAD. When we founded RAD, Rem's charge to me was to "promise to remain an intellectual". The demands and opportunities in pursuing commercial work here in Hong Kong can be very seductive and financially rewarding. We have to continue to be critical in our thinking and work to remain intellectual.*

### **The firm name, RAD, stands for Research Architecture Design. I have always thought the name is, in effect, the firm's "mission statement". Can you talk about the role of research at RAD and how such research informs your practice of architecture.**

*Research serves as a reminder of what we are trained to be. We do not wish to be drawn into the commercial world in an uncritical manner. Therefore, we position ourselves carefully. We constantly have pin-ups, reviews, discussions about our work and what other people are thinking—all this to avoid being dragged into the commercial world.*

*Research can be strange, fun, and situational. In Hong Kong we are researching "missing numbers". Buildings will never have a #4 floor, or a 14 or a 24 and do forth. The number 4 is considered bad luck, so it is avoided. These numbers are typically skipped in an elevator, especially in commercial projects. Developers skip these numbers for marketing purposes. A building might claim to have 88 floors, a very lucky number in China, but will actually have many fewer floors. Imagine how problematic this is for building officials and fire marshals. We have speculated that we must ask if we can have the floors back and use them as public spaces!*

### **How has the current global slowdown affected RAD?**

*The global slowdown has affected our office. There are fewer jobs for everyone. We especially felt the impact last fall. In response to the situation, we focused on the people in our office. We said, you know, we are all in the same boat. We did not let anyone go. Keeping our team together, our most important resource, is critical. At RAD, through teamwork and collective contributions, we work to build a team culture.*

### **RAD is essentially a global practice with a primary presence in several Asian countries and a range of socio-cultural conditions. Can you talk about the role of context in your work?**

*I am from Singapore. Our staff is from Italy, Poland, the US and so on. Everyone is, in a sense, "out of context" and we work on projects located out of Hong Kong, so, in effect, we have a double "out of context" situation.*

*For us it means we bring experience from China, India and Hong Kong to a project in Singapore, for instance. Since we have exposure to different projects, places and cultures we can set an agenda to determine what we wish to achieve, what is meaningful and so on. In Hong Kong it is common for offices to bring global knowledge to a local situation.*

### **Can you comment upon the relationship between craft and materiality in the work of RAD?**

*This is difficult subject. In India we have been able to specify local products, beautiful handmade items and local materials, often in carpets and fabrics. So many of our materials are mass-produced, it can be difficult to access local craft-people. We would like to be able to more readily link sources between projects, but there are many pragmatic obstacles.*

### **What influences the work of RAD?**

*Culture and context influences us. As I have said, fundamental to the idea of RAD is the Kowloon Walled City; it addresses the controllable and the non-controllable; it mutates and transforms. We frequently learn from the experience of the KWC. Naturally, we learn from one another in the office. As has been said, "one knife sharpens another". Research makes us sharper. People make people smarter. We surround ourselves with smart people. And, of course, our past teachers and mentors continue to influence us.*



### **Kaj vpliva na delo RAD?**

Na nas vplivata kultura in kontekst. Kot sem že omenil je izhodiščna ideja RAD Obzidano mesto Kowloon, saj se z njim lahko približamo tako neobvladljivemu, znotraj katerega vznikneta notranji red in smiselna pravila, čeprav izhaja iz moči kaosa. Pogosto se še zdaj česa naučimo iz naših izkušenj, pridobljenih v Obzidanem mestu Kowloon.

V sklopu biroja se seveda učimo tudi drug od drugega. »Roka roko umije«, kakor pravi pregovor. Z raziskovanjem postajamo vedno bolj prodorni. Ljudje v stiku drug z drugim postajajo pametnejši. Obkrožamo se s pametnimi ljudmi. Seveda pa na nas še vedno vplivajo tudi naši mentorji in učitelji iz preteklosti.

### **Katere zgradbe oziroma kraji so za vas pomembni?**

Zaradi vseh vzrokov, ki sem jih že omenjal, je, kot ste verjetno že uganili, na prvem mestu Obzidano mesto Kowloon. Mesto je sicer neurejeno, zaradi svojih prebivalcev, pa kljub temu zbujajo občutek reda in pravilnosti, čeprav je v resnici je zgrajeno na moči kaosa.

Na drugem mestu je paviljon Barcelona, ki je izrazito toga zgradba. O paviljonu sem poslušal predavanje Robina Evansa. Prerez paviljona je od vrha do tal simetričen, tloris pa je odprt in na videz neskončen. Spodbuja razpravo o redu in neredu. Stebri so v obliki križa, ki zame pomeni neskončnost, na enak način kot neskončnost pomenita tudi točka ali ena sama pika. Paviljon v Barceloni je zgradba, ki jo vodijo politični motivi. Mnogo bolj so mi zanimive politične zgradbe. Red vidim kot reprezentacijo represivnih pogojev političnega nadzora, nered pa se mi zdi veliko bolj demokratičen.

Navdihuje pa me tudi svetopisemska ideja Noetove barke, saj predstavlja upanje. V Bibliji sta omenjeni le dve zgradbi, Noetova barka in Babilonski stolp. Stolp vodi v uničenje, ladja pa vodi v rešitev. Noetova barka nas opominja, kašna je v družbi vloga arhitektov.

### **What buildings and/or places are important to you?**

*First, as you can probably guess, is the Kowloon Walled City for all the reasons I have mentioned. It is chaotic, a sense of rule and order emerges from within, from the residents, and it is built upon the strength of chaos.*

*Second, is the Barcelona Pavilion. It is a building of great rigor. I remember Robin Evans' lecture about the building. It is symmetrical in section from ceiling to floor. The plan is open and seemingly infinite. It engages in a discussion of order and disorder. The columns are a cross shape which, to me, is like a dot or single point, meaning infinity.*

*The Barcelona Pavilion is a politically driven building. Things that are politically charged are more interesting to me. I see order as representative of a repressive, controlling political condition. I view disorder as a more democratic condition.*

*Finally, I am inspired by the Ark, from the Bible, because it represents hope. There are only two buildings in the Bible, the Ark and the Tower of Babel. The Tower leads to destruction, whereas the Ark leads to salvation. This reminds us of what we need to do as architects in society.*