I recently visited Anne Holtrop in Bahrain, prior to a press conference. The conference would later turn-out to announce him as the architect of Bahrain’s pavilion at the World EXPO2015 in Milan. Having the feeling that his work comes from a curious place of imagination, I had some questions on my mind I wanted to ask him. This conversation took place one morning, on a farm, not too far from the city of Manama.

Christian Vennerstrøm: In OASE (issue #90 What Is Good Architecture) you claim that whenever you work, you start with something that comes from outside of architecture. I am wondering what this “outside” is. When does something become architecture?

Anne Holtrop: Yes, I wrote that, and I still believe in this. It does not necessarily need to come from outside of architecture. But it is more that... you know for me architecture is not an answer to a question. You could describe a question as a programmatic functional thing, and you can answer it in that way, but for me the architecture is more like the discovery of possibilities in form and space, and how these things relate to each other. To explore how a building relates to its environment and to not be preoccupied by what you know, but instead discover it as if you do not know yet. I work with materials that has no relation yet with architecture because they are found in natural forms or generated forms like the ink blots (Rorschack ink blots. referred to in OASE #90) or similar things. I like
these things because they are very really specific: they are specific in form, and they are specific because they are made in a certain material, and to me this is the beginning. I like to try many things to find out where my interests are. I cannot explain why I select one drawing over another. I cannot explain why I think one would work or not work. You have to test it. You test drawings, and then you realise see ‘oh no this doesn’t work’ so we need to go back to these drawings and take a second look again. In the same article as you referred to earlier, I describe how Richter (ed. Gerhard Richter) explains to Buchloch (ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloch) how he works and how they discuss this. The first step is a kind of intuition and experienced based step. You put something on the canvas, and this intuition is of course impossible to describe in words. You know that you have a certain hunch for things that is combined with experience. You need to do the same thing many times to do make better work and to improve the beginning of things. But then the something is quite intuitively there, on the canvas, and then you are confronted with this. The situation is not zero anymore. It is not a blank sheet of paper, but there is something on it, and this something you want to stick to. To illustrate how I work, I start with an inkblot and this is what I want to stick to; to me this is fixed. So what is the next step from there? For instance I could read it as a possible plan, and if it is a plan, then what is the size of the plan? If we have some kind of splatter on the paper, what is the width of the splatter then? Is it a meter so you can walk in it as in a corridor, or is it 50 cm? Or are we talking about 5 meters?

In this way I can discover the potential that, for example, the inkblot or splatter, has as a plan, and begin exploring how it would function. I say that the forms I choose come from outside of architecture. I choose them because it is unknown what they can bring to architecture. In this way I discover something I do not know yet.

CV: So through combining intuition with logic, you bring what is yet unknown into architecture? Is it just asking logical questions to something that might be a plan? Or where do you go from there?

AH: There might be a misunderstanding, and perhaps I explained it wrong in the past. It seems as a trick or as if magic happens when I make an inkblot and call it architecture. Which is not the case. With any approach in architecture you need a lot of knowledge on architecture to make something work. But in my case I am confronted with something, which is non-logical, and if I stick to that and keep this present during the process, then for me there is an interesting balance. During the process you can turn things upside down. It is still basically a form and a material that could be interpreted differently. That is why I like the Rorschach reference; you can always turn it around again. One day it is a butterfly, and then the next day you think: “No, no! It is a horse”

CV: Why is that important to you? If you look at early architectural visions or intentions like for instance Le Corbusiers city planning (Ville Contemporaine, Ville Radieuse etc.) it is more explicitly a solution to a problem.

AH: Yes and an ideology.
CV: Yes, and your work seems more like a suggestion.

AH: I find it to be a quality that the work is open. That my interpretation and the process of how I make and do things is still open to interpretation to a user, so that he or she can develop a sense of what it is about. I like that things become sort of referential, or that it becomes specific. That it begins with hinting at things, without becoming explicitly only one thing. For instance at the moment, I am working on the Suq (ed. old shopping area with workshops and crafts) here in Bahrain, and I see a shift. I do not work with the drawing anymore, I do not work with the material so much, but I do something that, in its form, starts being referential in a way. It is a collage of things. You have not seen it in this form yet, because it is kind of upside down, but somehow you still recognise it. You might recognise an Arab or an Asian architecture in it, but it is there together with Venetian windows. Of course a lot has been shared in the history of architecture and a lot continues to be passed on and exchanged. Maybe I am more busy working on the forms of the things I use as material. To me, it is always a bit in retrospect, that I understand what I do.

Anne laughs

CV: You might look at each of your projects as a singular Richter painting, but you could also look at your work as a process with different steps, which first starts with an intuition based step, followed by steps based on experience and knowledge. At the moment, you are working on a museum in Utrecht and the EXPO pavilion for Bahrain, both of which has more demanding programmes. In this context, how do you keep things abstract and open to interpretation? And, how do you keep the red thread from earlier works? I mean the steps become increasingly difficult, like a Richter painting.

AH: Richter makes 40 paintings at the same time, and all of them are hung in the studio Buchloch and Richter then select the painting, which they find the most interesting. One of the paintings appears to be sticking out, because it is unknown to them. They cannot really position it, because they never saw anything like it. The remaining 39 pictures are familiar, in a sense. The rest of them they know. For me it is the same. I do not know yet. It is an important aspect of the architecture process that you need to produce a lot of things, and then on each of these you equally work with a lot of energy and tension, to find out which ones stands out. And because of this experimental nature 90 % is wrong. In that situation, it is like the thing is about to fail and it seems more likely that it will fail, than that you can built something with it. At the same time, I believe if you continue, you will find something at some point. You know there is one of the works that can bring you a step further, not in the work itself, but in the sense of where you are, where you stand, what you have experienced, and what you know so far.

But you asked me about something else?
CV: Yes, I am still wondering, if the natures of the projects you are involved in now are more challenging to you than the earlier projects. For example, if the museum project represents a more advanced architecture? And if it is important for you as an architect to continue to develop through each project becoming more and more challenging?

AH: No, not really. I would say The EXPO was easier to do because I understood what concrete is and how to make a window, you know? In relation to the museum I had never done anything like that before, so I really did not know. At the point where I started the EXPO project, I had gained a lot of knowledge, including what it is like to make a concrete building and the different aspects of that. In the work it is important to do buildings, and at the same time do temporary projects: the 1:1 buildings that are temporary, or working with models that are more objects. Both of which are really important because they are tests. They are experiments on a different level, where you can be more extreme or more experimental in a way, compared to when you work on a building, and that influences my work. When I did the museum, I got in contact with the concrete and I began to understand what it is to “pour” a building. This led to the Batara project.

So it is not only going from something small to something big, but the big influences the small again.

CV: So in what sense do you consider the buildings to be open to interpretation in comparison to the models and the temporary projects?

AH: You could say the function is clear; you know it is a museum, there is a café inside, but why it is in this form, and in such a material, and so on, are still uncertain. I really like to materialize the project in a way that is not too abstract, and to make it very clear. I like to make them as mono material buildings. Then they have this maquette kind of feeling, even if they are full size. They are big and have high walls, yet they still feel a bit like a model.

CV: Why is that a good thing? I sense that it is an obsession somehow.

AH: I find it interesting because it stays a reduced version of things in a way. In a model you cannot make everything. You need to reduce. A model is also an object, and if you want to make a good object of a certain size, you cannot start representing everything that would be in the scale of 1:1, like the door handles or the window glass. No, some parts are not important, so you just leave them out to get the essence of things. I think it is interesting to do the same thing in a building, to reduce and to make it very clear what matters. Because it is reduced, I do not believe it is minimal. I do not want my work to be minimalistic in the sense that it is made with a minimum amount of means, because to reduce sometimes means you need to do more things to make it look like that.

Anne laughs and continues.
I think because it is reduced it is still possible to project ideas onto it. The opposite approach would be that you add things. You have an idea, and you develop it, but you constantly add things. We need to add doors, maybe we make the doors in wood, then we add wood to it, we need to make seats, maybe we make the seats in leather, then we add leather seats. And we also need to have a roof, then let us do a tiled roof. You constantly add one thing to another until it becomes a collage of continuously adding things. I think that is the most common thing in architecture. In contrast to this, I like the reduced version because it tries to stick to the idea of what it is. So the idea is a drawing for instance, and to let this drawing generate spaces. I want to know that when the building is finished, this is clear. You could worry that because it is quite empty, people need something to do, so they do not get bored. But I think it is the other way around. You would get completely bored if too much was there. I find it more interesting to be in the middle of the ocean, or to walk in the mountains, and get overwhelmed by basically the same thing constantly.

CV: You mentioned Batara earlier. As far as I know, you travelled to Petra in Jordan with Bas Princen as a part of that project. In Petra you can find a very reduced, yet very advanced, architecture. Could you tell me more about Batara?

AH: Yes, Bas had been in in Petra before; a year before and he showed me some photos. Of course I know the famous things: You walk through the cliff, and then you enter the Petra temple. However, Bas showed me photos that focused more on parts of it, for instance cut-out spaces that has eroded to a more natural form again. I was really fascinated by this. We got a residency in Copenhagen by Lett & Gori and received funding, which made it possible to run a project, so first we went to Petra to see the site, and so that Bas could make new photos there. We found it interesting that you have the natural form of the mountains with cut-out forms in the soft stone to make all the tombs, which after 2000 years of weathering is becoming a bit natural again. So you have this old and slow transition from natural to artificial and to natural again, and with all the possibilities in between. The other thing is that it is an architecture that is made by taking away material, rather than constructing because most of the time you construct: you make a floor, you put up columns, and make another floor etc. and here it is the other way around. You already have the material, and then you start removing material to make spaces. Bas took a photo in Petra where you see the wall as a part of the mountain, and you see a beautiful kind of arch and within this arch, a half of a meter further back, the stone is re-appears. It looks like a door, but it is not a door; it is naturally there. This is the thing about Petra: Your imagination starts to work, and things that are completely natural start to become architecture.

When we came back, we made this big sandbox in the studio to find a way to make something based on taking away material constantly. We started digging and making cavities in the sandbox, and these we poured with pigmented gypsum. So the form is basically the result of digging in the sand. The pouring side is flat, and on the sand side is the dug-out form, and in these forms we started cutting out doors, cutting them straight, and cutting out windows. The way Petra appears on a large scale, we did in smaller elements. Then we
assembled them, first to make a model, and then a year later, we made a pavilion out of it. And this is all done without a drawing; it is directly working with material that first worked as a model, and then as a full size pavilion. We directly started digging, we poured in the concrete, and we pulled it out. The only drawings that exist of Batara were made afterwards, as a kind of taking note of what happened.

CV: I remember you saying that Batara is still an on going project. Being a reduced architecture with only indications of windows and doors in a natural form. How do you see the architectural potential in such a minimal situation?

AH: That I do not really know. After Batara I wrote a text, which is called ‘Material Gesture’, about following the gestures in a material. To me Batara is the project that is all about this. So far this is the closest I could get to it, and how it will continue, I do not really know yet. When there is a new project, this is one way to approach it, as a way of working. That is why I call Batara an on-going project. It is not finished yet.

CV: How do you decide between a good type of material and a bad type of material? Here in Bahrain, we see all this aluminium cladding; is something wrong with aluminium cladding?

AH: Well, no. There is not something wrong with cladding, but to me the Waterline Museum could not have been made in steel and clad because the project is about a form, and I wished to make it in a mono material. To me, that could basically only work in concrete. Then I made the concrete brownish, not explicit brown, but a kind of grey-brownish colour. And because the form is so sculptural, I thought the light would always hit it differently and let you see different colours in the material, and luckily that turned out to be the case. So sometimes it is pinkish, and sometimes it is blue, and it can become yellow or very grey. It shows all kinds of shades of colours. To me it is important that there is richness in the material. If you look at a sheet of marble you see so many things. It is almost a bit too overwhelming, and it is difficult to imagine a building completely out of marble. That is fascinating to me. And as a matter of fact I like aluminium as a material. When you start to cast it, it gets really interesting. It has this beautiful shine when it is just poured.

CV: In OASE you refer to the lecture by Philip K. Dick on ‘How to Build a World That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later’, and you have told me that your work is becoming self-referential, and that you continue to explore your own work. Do you feel that you have established a world in which you can practice architecture?

AH: Yes. Well, that makes it a bit scary too because it narrows it down, and it blocks things out. But yes, there is a certain kind of confidence in how I think an approach could work. I have worked with most sizes; there is a model, there is something temporary and now there is a building, and it feels really good to be able to work on these different levels. But it feels so enormous to work in this way. I think I can go on with this for a long time. As if you bought an airplane
ticket and landed in Mumbai thinking: “Oh my god, now the whole of India is here for me to discover”. This feels enormous, and the way of working does not feel restricted. It does not feel like I have to obey myself, or that I have to answer to things immediately. I can explore this on different levels.

CV: What kind of responsibilities do you feel that you have as an architect within this world?

AH: I do not feel any. I do not feel any responsibilities besides from all the moral aspects you take notice of as a human being living in this world, but not specifically in my work. I think I can bring a certain beauty or certain interesting things to the world, which is not only interesting to me. Things, which I can share and that I want to share. I do not want to keep it to myself. This is what I can do. I do not think I am the one that is going to provide an answer on the level of world problems, on the level of sustainability and resources or these things. No, I think my contribution is about something else. A contribution that I do not think is unimportant. It contributes in a different way you might say.

CV: When you make a house you have a responsibility to the people who are going to live in it. How did you consider that when you worked on the Trail House (2009)?

AH: The Trail House for me was the first thing. It was a big experiment to see if it would be possible to live in such a house. It was an art project, so you could easily say if it fails, it fails and maybe think ‘it is really impossible to live in such a house’, but it turned out to be quite possible. This gave me the confidence that an idea is not easily too crazy. If you are consistent, and you really want to know if it could work and understand how to make it work, an idea is not too crazy. This gives you new insight. I was happily surprised when it was built, and we stayed in the house for a day, while Bas was there to make photos. Since it was very narrow, it connected very well with the landscape. We always felt it as openness. It was a nice house actually.