

## Wiel Arets

On the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2019, at his Amsterdam office, DJ (Ana Tostões, editor, and Michel Melenhorst, guest editor) interviewed Wiel Arets, an internationally renowned architect, and the founder of Wiel Arets Architects (1983). He has since taught at several universities worldwide, having also been Dean of the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam (1995–2001) and Dean of the College of Architecture (CoA) at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago (2012–2017).

**DJ** In **docomomo** we are concerned with how to use existing buildings, sites, and neighborhoods, but we also believe that the Modern Movement's ideals remain inspiring for our future. In this perspective, we much admire your work. In your career there are several times when you touch, redo and even demolish a building, and every time there seems to be a different approach. Would you agree with that, or would you say you had the same attitude towards the Antwerp Tower (2017–) and the Glaspaleis (1998–2004), both refurbishment projects that are quite different from one another. So, perhaps you can take us on a tour from the late-1980s, like the Beltgens Fashion Shop in Maastricht you intervened on, to the projects you are working on now, and how you have changed in your own attitude, approach, and design strategies.

**WA** I'll start with when I was born; my background. I was born in Heerlen. It was a miner's town. So, what I've learned from the Heerlen mining was that as they started to explore for coal, the city grew, in 25 years, into one of the most important cities in the Netherlands. Heerlen became a very entrepreneurial city where they were focused on how to mine and take advantage of the latest technologies in order to develop a new society at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Heerlen, there were three different countries represented in the mines. You could see mines built by Dutch engineers, some by French engineers, and some by German engineers. They were built in concrete, steel, brick, and you could see the landscape they created, above ground. By now the city had neighborhoods with 7-, 8-, 9,000 people, but below them, the miners and engineers had created a network underground, which is incredible. For me, this has to do with building a society, bringing people with a certain attitude to the same place — a multicultural society. There were people from Poland, from Morocco, from Turkey, and from Amsterdam.

When I was younger, I wanted to study physics, not architecture. I wanted to become a physicist and I very much enjoyed topics concerning the mind as well as sports. There was this Dutch magazine called *Kijk*, which means to “look”, that had all the newest and latest scientific developments and debates, which I was very interested in. So, once in *Kijk*, there was an article about a mountain, and someone wrote,

“Here is a human being and, as a human being, you can walk through that mountain without there being any hole in it”. He believed we all are in a certain frequency; “There's a frequency A, a frequency B... And the only thing you need to do is to sync into the right frequency, and you would be able to walk through the mountain without making a hole”, and that certainly caught my attention.

For me there were two main aspects of my life, which start here. There is the *ziel* (soul), and the mind; body, and soul. And *ziel* is something you can't define. For me this is extremely important. When we talk about periods such as the Renaissance, the Baroque, Gothic, until the Modern Movement, and today; I still believe that we, intrinsically, talk about these two ideas, of body and soul. For example, before the machine age, there's the mind and the body; god and soul. There's the idea that we won't die, the soul will always be alive, only the body dies. Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we get the machine. The machine makes the statement “god is dead”, now the machine doesn't die, the machine can repeat, and “live” on.

Now to answer your question, about my start in architecture... In 1977 I started to study, graduating in 1983. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June I got my diploma from the Technical University of Eindhoven and on the 24<sup>th</sup> I went to Japan. Every year I undertook an intense trip which I always prepared months in advance, with a lot of literature and much writing. I traveled to Italy, to Paris to study Le Corbusier (1887–1965), and as a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student, in 1979, I traveled to Russia to see all the Konstantin Melnikov (1890–1974) projects. Before I visited Japan, I prepared for the trip. I wanted to go to Japan to understand who Kazuo Shinohara (1925–2006) was; who Tadao Ando (1941–) was, who Fumihiko Maki (1928–) was. These three were extremely important for me and also three completely different architects. So, I went to Japan and spent about five weeks there. There were two more important trips for me in this period. One was Mexico, which was important for Luis Barragán (1902–1988) and the local 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, as well as for the cultures of the Aztecs, Toltecs, and Olmecs.

The other extremely important moment is when I first discovered Malaparte (1898–1957), the man and the villa. I discovered Malaparte's writings, *Casa come me*, the house as

the story of his life; the Jean-Luc Godard's film "Le Mépris" (1963). I stayed at Villa Malaparte a bit after I started to teach at the Architectural Association School (AA) in 1987. I stayed 10 days there with students from a Masters Unit I was teaching, we were the first ones to visit the house after Jean-Luc Godard (1930–).

Italy for me marked the beginning of all the Classics, such as Cesare Cattaneo's *Giovanni e Giuseppe dialoghi di Architettura* which is similar to Plato's *Politeia*. It is a conversation between the layman and the architects. These are extremely important to me as they are the basis of all the projects that we do; the establishment of a dialogue with the client, with people in the streets, with students, with philosophers; I always want this debate, this dialogue.

But back to the work... It's always difficult to say which was my first project as there is always some project I never remember. I wanted to create and make, but making for me has to do with creating stories; creating something new; trying to let people go into a different frequency; to pass through *that* mountain I mentioned. Now back to the first project; let's talk about that shop.

**DJ** The Beltgens Fashion Shop, in Maastricht (1987), which is a re-use project...

**WA** We built the shop for 18,000 guilders at that time (Dutch guilder, which currently corresponds to 8,168.05 euro), which was an incredibly little amount of money. I never start a project thinking about the money. If we can build it for a certain amount, we do it with that amount. What is important is that I went there and met the owner of the shop and in that meeting we sketched a drawing. I told the client to buy a big piece of Corten Steel and to make the façade with that. There was not enough space for everything in the ground floor so we put the storage area on the floor above, connected to the shopping area by a staircase, giving them a big shop and making the act of getting the clothes from upstairs an event. Since they added the shop-front their sales suddenly tripled.

**DJ** The spiral staircase of the shop is like a mineshaft. What is interesting here, is that you do something that is not expected. For example, the shop window is very low and the door is elegantly rewarding us with a view between the street and the courtyard.

**WA** This was an existing building into which we inserted the façade, thus making a new structure. We deliberately lowered the height of the window in the façade to 1,60 m. I went outside the shop with the owner, and we marked it with tape.

So, what I'm trying to say is; Malaparte made his fireplace with glass. He did things because he believed in them. What I learned from him is that, as architects, we have to rewrite the program for our client.

When IIT asked me to consider being Dean, I thought, "I do not want this responsibility", you know. I'd been

Dean of the Berlage Institute; that was for me an extremely successful moment in my life. Being part of the AA, the Berlage, Columbia, and Cooper Union was great. I also taught for a year with John Hedjuk (1929–2000), so why should I go do this in Chicago? My ambition was quite simple: Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) made S. R. Crown Hall and Lake Shore Drive and he was extremely important for Chicago. Much the same as Frits Peutz (1896–1974) was for my hometown Heerlen. He was an architect who was, during the mining era, able to help Heerlen become something new. I wanted to be part of that legacy, of both, by combining my own experiences in Heerlen, with Chicago.

**DJ** Returning to the issue of body and soul, I think you use it differently from how it is commonly used in heritage – how one relates to a building – there's a completely different notion of what is important; what is essence; what is substance; what is body and what is soul.

**WA** Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934), as an architect, was responsible for this whole area of Amsterdam where we are now having this conversation, but he was also the one who elevated the soul in architecture. Soul is something Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) talks about as being *energeai* — the energy something has. Buildings change and always have a body but sometimes their soul becomes decreased with time. We see this in the work of Adolf Loos (1870–1933); no one is talking about him and his work anymore. So, it's lost a bit of its soul in recent years. Adolf Loos' work, many years ago, was an important body of art, which became loaded over the years with energy; which one could also call *soul*. And who is now talking about that? This is something we should understand when talking about the Modern Movement or the initial development of the Modern Movement, when Hendrik Berlage and so on were talking about Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), Karl Hugo Schmölz (1917–1986), Sigfried Gideon (1888–1968), etc., who were more than art historians as they were philosophers; aesthetic philosophers. All the good architects understand this, or at least used to understand, because they were all reading.

As a first year student, I went into the office of Frits Peutz and found in his archive, not only material from his 560 projects, but I also found a library with a lot of architecture, a lot of literature, a lot of philosophy, and a lot about Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

Actually, I am working on a new book about Frits Peutz and I talk about these issues in it. *Ordenen* (order); because it is something you can't describe. It's the same with my concept of the *Un-Conscious-City* (Actar, 2019). You cannot walk into a city and say, "Ok here's the plan of a city and that's how you perceive the city". No, you perceive the city every single second, in a different way. And a good building, like a good piece of art, a good book, or a good movie, has the quality of something you can't describe. I would call it *the soul*. And, in my opinion, we have to be very careful with this concept. Because people nowadays just believe, they believe in the machine, they believe in the virtual, and they

believe in technology. Every moment that one believes in technology, one becomes lost. You have to make the technology; you have to develop the technology to understand it. It is one of our tools, but it can never replace what we call *the soul*. That's why, at least in my own opinion, we are, at this moment, in a time of a crisis.

**DJ** A soul crisis?

**WA** I think it is dangerous to talk about *the soul*, people easily confuse it with the Catholic use of the word. I wrote several articles while studying. One of my earlier articles, "Architecture Freedom" (1989), for example, is in a way saying, "rules and freedom go together; they need one another". I always believe in this. You know, that's why I believe in the idea of the dialogue; I believe in Cesare Cattaneo's *Giovanni e Giuseppe*, which is a dialogue. For me, Cesare Cattaneo's house in Cernobbio, is one of his best projects.

I believe in the first, but also the second and third, life of a building. A good building has the potential and possibility for a second life. Compare it to the concept for the Porsche 911; it was a sports car concept so successful that it still is the basis for all 911's and 75% of the Porsches ever made still roll. Whenever we do a new building in the office, we test for its afterlives during the design process. That way the work is open, yet flexible to future change. That's what sustainability means for me. Could a building that's an office become housing? Could housing become an office? Or a restaurant. Yesterday I had a long talk with my client in Antwerp, about the tower we are currently building there; it's called the Antwerp Tower, it is a reuse project, and we are extending it, vertically and horizontally. We are basically constructing a new tower around the existing one. It will be the third tallest building in the city when it's completed next year. The client told me that after they started to make a few decisions themselves during the construction, they again wanted to have the office's opinion and listen to us. That means very much to me that they trust me with my total design opinion for the tower, down to the smallest detail. They were curious about renting the tower to someone, and they wanted my opinion about what to do, and what to allow a renter to do to the building, if they chose to rent it. I asked them why they asked me and they replied that the idea of a renter didn't fit into the narrative I had created for them about the building. That's exactly what I appreciate about them. When we were designing the Utrecht University Library at De Uithof, we were told that the building could have no windows because of daylight, temperature and humidity. We said, we'll go ahead and make windows, because there are people inside. We told them that we could design it so that the humidity and temperature inside stays within a very small range, but we also told them that the building will change from day one. I hope that three times as many people that study there now, will study there in five years, well after the opening of the building. By making the emergency staircases 20 cm wider, which we did, we were allowed to have the building house three times as many people than it was originally supposed to shelter at any

given moment. There are 4.2 million books in that library. The building has nine storeys in total, and there is one main staircase. People walk into the building and actually use the monumental staircase, instead of using the adjacent elevators. And they do so for the same reason that people climb stairs in cities; the views from them are interesting.

Such concepts are also present in a book about my life and work, titled *Wiel Arets: Autobiographical References*.<sup>2</sup> It was about the new map of the world, as I saw it. The actual title was, "A Wonderful World: A New Map of the World", but Irma Boom, the designer who created the book's fantastic design, thought that it was better titled as it is now. The book emanated from a studio that I had taught at Washington University in St. Louis, together with Robert McCarter (1955–). In a way, she was probably right, because the book is very personal, and deals with a lot of people, places, and things I reference very often. So, the new map of the world relates to the idea that travel is only comfortable for about 72-minutes. I've found through research that 72-minutes is the sort of the point of no return, when, for instance, commuting to school or to work. That's the extent of efficiency of movement. So, there's also a new map of the world, in the idea that travel will soon be so quick that the world's continents will be accessible in 72-minutes, and then the whole idea of the world shrinks, because getting anywhere is, almost always possible in 72-minutes. One day; at least. So, there is travel by foot, water, car, plane, and train; each 72-minutes is different for everyone, based on their own mode of travel. So, for instance, in the program of the 72,000m<sup>2</sup> Allianz Headquarters we designed in Zürich, there is a staircase similar to that of the library we designed in Utrecht. When I sketch the map of the world, the one introduced in the book I just mentioned; the concept is basically the same as the organization of the library, as well as that of the Allianz Headquarters. The building is really its own world with its own map, and everything is organized around the 72-minute principle, but on a smaller scale. The concept of the new map of the world has to do with the body and the mind, and with the body and the soul. It all has to do with respect.

**DJ** How do you transfer your ideas when working with existing buildings? One always encounters loose ends and things that don't fit, namely the program seems to never be able to fit 100% into a building, making one realize a completely different result than was first anticipated.

**WA** When doing refurbishments or renovations, I always go back to the original drawings of the architect. I don't try to make the building perfect, because the imperfection is better than the perfect. Perfection can kill. In my opinion, it's about the identity and the soul, and the soul of someone can often be seen in their face. The moment you try to change anything, one is imbalanced. It's a very dangerous step to attempt to change one's face. In Japan, one is not allowed to show their tattoos in public. It's forbidden. In Japan, they think it's for the better. Tattoos are a kind of marketing. I don't think architecture is marketing.

Architecture has something to do with this body and soul; it has to do with body and mind. The Greeks understood this; the Egyptians understood; the Romans understood; and in the Renaissance they understood. One cannot force a soul; it has layers. It should have layers. For instance, when we designed De Nieuwe Liefde (2007–2011), a cultural center in Amsterdam, we set out to give the building a new life. We changed the interior but the exterior is the same. When first looking at the interior, I found a piece of marble inside, and this particular type of marble was in nearly all houses that were built in Amsterdam in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No one ever talks about marble in Amsterdam.

**DJ** It is very interesting how you managed to bring your architecture soul, I mean aspects you can find in many of your new constructions, to this project, combining it with the existing building.

**WA** If you go to the Borzo Gallery, the Borzo building has been there for ages. I met the architect of the 1932 intervention in the building, Alexander Bodon (1906–1993). He might have been 80 years old when I met him and we had a jury for a new museum extension in Haarlem. I said to our client that I wanted to look at the building through the eyes of what it was before, with the eyes of Alexander Bodon and with what you want I mind. I don't want someone to say, "That's a building by Wiel Arets". I want them to say that it is a building by Alexander Bodon and me. It is the same when we do a new building. It's the same with the B' Tower building we did in Rotterdam, directly adjacent to the Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) building, he had even made sketches for a tower next to his own building. So, it's not only about giving a building new life; one sets out to create a positive virus; an intervention into the skin of the city.

**DJ** But there is something interesting between this comparison between the Borzo Gallery and the De Nieuwe Liefde. With the Borzo Gallery you can see the original interior again, for the most part. But De Nieuwe Liefde has your own handwriting on its interior.

**WA** Anything one does, their signature will of course be on it. Bodon left his imprint on the space, and then, so did my office. We are now one of these layers in the building's soul. I didn't want to destroy everything and do something new. No, we stripped the building as much as we could back to its original state, and then looked for how we can put a new layer on top of it, to give the building a new life. Because, the building was, simply, not meant to be a gallery. If I had completely demolished the interior, the building would have been completely different. But I think I should have respect for all the different layers, and now there's the Borzo Gallery. We made some changes, we made a new life, but it is still essentially the same building, which is 500 years old.

**DJ** But you gave it a new life. You put energy into its own soul.

**WA** I gave it a new life, yes. But the soul is the energy. When one looks at a Rembrandt (1606–1669) painting

there's energy to it. A lot of people think it's beautiful. But maybe it's not and it's just in a museum. Make sure to read Duchamp's discussion about the *energeia* of a work of art. For instance, with his snow shovel — *Prelude to a Broken Arm* (1915); the question is: why is it art? The object through its location becomes loaded with energy. You can always go out and buy a snow shovel, with the same materials, but the same energy is not there. The moment one sees a Rembrandt painting, people will experience it as having different amounts of energy. For some just seeing a picture of a painting on a postcard is enough to get them excited; for others it's the actual painting; for others, none of it matters. No difference. They just look and say, "it's beautiful", since they think that they're supposed to like it. That's the effect of marketing.

**DJ** Is that the theory of the *objet trouvé*?

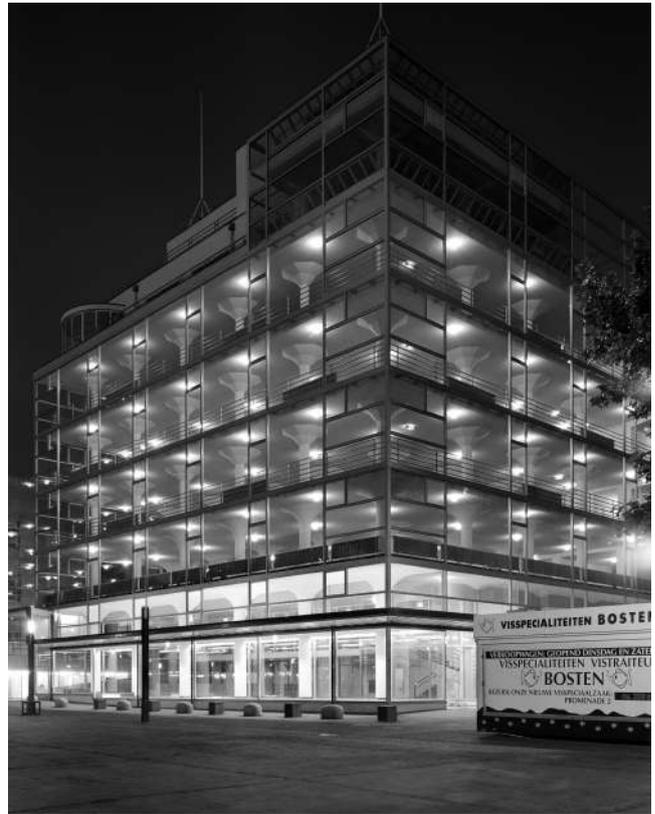
**WA** Oh, yes. At the moment we are building two huge towers in Bahrain. They want a sort of icon, with glass around it, with air conditioning and everything. On the site we did something completely different. Bahrain has all this westernization at the moment. Big, big buildings that are all cooled with air conditioning. But it's not really possible for us to do there what is done for instance in America with buildings like skyscrapers, due to their climate. They have a culture that is thousands of years old. They're sophisticated. These cultures like Bahrain can't just be thought of as a *tabula rasa*. So, we first read their history; three months a year it's very warm, but during the others it's possible to be outside, and people lived outside during these months. So, after looking at their history, we made a proposal for a tower with *loggias* in each unit. And on top, there is an outdoor pool for men and women, one on each roof. The façade of each unit has adjustable louvers that can be individually moved, by each owner, depending on the time of the year, to regulate the heat. It's similar to how people in Bahrain used to live. So, it is important to always do research and get to know where one builds, and for whom one is building.

It's the same with the Jellyfish House, in Marbella. What is interesting about the Jellyfish House is that its design is based on an existing building, but one that is not on the site. This whole area has green hedges so that you pass by streets with hedges, two meters high, on both sides of the street, which shield the houses for privacy. It's a very hermetic neighborhood. So, the client wanted to buy a plot that had a house, which looked like a traditional building, and he wanted to be able to see the sea from the house because it was going to be his family's holiday house. However, from the existing house, it wasn't possible to see the sea. You didn't hear the sea, either. So, we found a ladder and put it against the house and climbed onto its roof. And then the neighbor saw us on the roof and, just asked what we were doing up there, and I said, "We're building a pool on top of the house"! The neighbors absolutely loved the idea. Then I told the clients to buy the property, and that we would build for them, a house with a pool on the roof so that

01 Wiel Arets Architects, Belgens Fashion shop, Maastricht, the Netherlands, façade, 1986-1987. © Hélène Binet.



02 Frits Peutz, Glaspaleis, Heerlen, the Netherlands, 1935; restoration by Wiel Arets Architects, 1998-2004. © Jan Bitter.



03 Wiel Arets Architects, Borzo Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, façade, 2004-2006. © Jan Bitter.



04 Wiel Arets Architects, Borzo Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, interior of the gallery, 2004-2006. © Jan Bitter.

when vacationing with their family they could see and hear the sea from the rooftop. We understood that when there's an existing building, it gives us more inspiration and ideas, and because of that existing house, we had the idea for the new house.

When I'm sometimes critical of America, it's not that I'm negative about the country. It's very much interested in the new, and rebuilding. The character of its people is that they easily go from A to B and move from city to city. It's like a nomadic condition. They leave everything behind. While people in Spain or Italy have been there for millennia, and sometimes when one builds in these countries, there is evidence that emerges from thousands of years ago. Both are valid, there is no good or bad. The world, with all its citizens, has millions of species we call people, animals, plants. Just as Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) said: "We have to understand our ecosystem". We are part of it. Alexander von Humboldt had inklings that there was something to the idea of the thickness of the world, inside the Earth. What I like about him, is that he was trying to take sections of the world in his book, *Cosmos*,<sup>3</sup> and say whether it's Lima, or Tokyo, or Oslo; he wanted, and I want, to know what that ecosystem and each layer is. There is a balance, an equilibrium, when I change it, the ecosystem, it will change in other parts as well. I recently learned that there are anchovies in the North Sea from May to June, but then they swim to the Atlantic Ocean. I never knew that we had them here; it's the same with eels. They're migrating the whole year. What I'm saying; is that we think we know everything that there is to know these days, but we actually don't. Whether it's a building, or a room, or the world... we know so little.

**DJ** So, taking this idea of ecosystems, Amsterdam is nowadays a UNESCO heritage site, meaning that things that would naturally happen in its ecosystem, no longer do. Tourists are everywhere, coming to visit the UNESCO site of Amsterdam. If we think about it, Alexander Bodon would not have been able to build his shop today. How do you look at this, or do you consider it just another change to the system?

**WA** It's quite dangerous to talk about these types of topics in such interviews, due to the chance of misinterpretation. However, let me give it a try...

We have to respect people who are fighting for their beliefs, even if they differ from our own. What I understand is... In the long run, all of this will solve itself. We have tourists in Amsterdam, and tourists in Venice. So, we can be irritated about the idea that there are so few Venetians in Venice, and a disproportionate number of people who are tourists in the city. Some say that they're destroying the city, but you could also say that their presence is part of the deal of tourism. What's very dangerous; is to freeze cities. Freezing something means that it is dead. The moment that people say that they want to protect a city; great! But what are people protecting? Maybe we should protect the fact that there are changes. Life is always in motion... you can't

freeze it nor protect it. I was once just a year old, then 25 and 40; and at all these moments in life, I reset my agenda every day; a fresh perspective. That's what a building, a room, an office and people should always do. So, if we freeze a city, it becomes the most boring place on Earth. It's like a museum that's not alive. For instance, we could go to the Dutch village of Volendam just outside of Amsterdam and see women sitting around in clothes that are 'traditional' in that they resemble 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch clothing. We only believe that they look like women dressed from that time period, but these women have a different perception because they live in a different time.

This debate is a very difficult debate. They wanted to change Frits Peutz's Town Hall in Heerlen. As soon as I heard about it I went to the city council and I said "don't touch it, leave it". People want to change it because of new legislations and fire regulations. This building was built at a certain time, for a certain use, so perhaps you should reconsider the use and leave the building untouched. I've had this debate with the Borzo Gallery, with the Glaspaleis, and the S. R. Crown Hall in Chicago. At the Glaspaleis, the size of the original windows is bigger than the maximum size produced nowadays. Back then, the glass sheets were fixed in the window frames with a specific technique, called *stopverf* in Dutch. People used this method in the Netherlands until about 30 or 40 years ago. They wanted to change all of that, also because of regulations. I was the first one that said, "Let's keep this original glass in the Glaspaleis". This required using *stopverf* to rebuild them and it also makes it necessary for the windows to be checked every five years or so, but had we not used that material, the building would have surely been damaged.

But back to this debate about UNESCO. I think they are doing a great job. Perhaps, I don't have enough knowledge about what the organization is doing... But it's never just good or bad. The museum is great, as long as it's alive. In museums there are artifacts of previous generations; we keep them as they are. But the moment the artifacts are not connected to the young people, they die. They disappear.

**DJ** Turning now to the education that is being given to architecture students.

**WA** I don't believe in education. I believe in story telling. For 3,000 years we had no university. Before that one had to learn by doing and maybe there were better architects than ever at that time. Today the education system is divided into academic and vocational streams and we try to solve this division with the art and technical schools by bringing them into a new system. But we are actually more and more destroying the education system by trying to tell people that when they send their child to a school, and pay 25,000 euros or dollars, that that child will be a good architect. But that's of course not the case. It's simply not a ticket to heaven. Tadao Ando, Kazuo Shinohara, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier were not educated as architects. I've always tried to fight the education system of which I was a part of from within, but in some schools,

like the AA, the students need to fight from within because the school was made for them to explore. Self-education is the only way; the moment you believe that you go and buy a diploma and your professor puts some marks on your work — no. People who make the world interesting are all self-educated people.

Please read *Nowness 1*, and *Nowness Files* (IITAC Press/Actar, 2013/2019), which were produced during my time at the Illinois Institute of Technology's College of Architecture when I was Dean. The latter spells out the changes that were made under my leadership at the school. On one of my first days I thought, "I might quit", because, when I started, I understood just how big a responsibility the school was; where people believed in Mies van der Rohe, like a saint! The challenge of taking the deanship was to get everyone on board with the changes I wanted to make... Like the city having a biennale, starting a publishing department, making a larger campus plan. I think I was perhaps a bit too ambitious. But with the former Provost and now president Alan Cramb, and John Rowe; we were able to institute many changes. Steven Crown was also very helpful and clever. And the mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, was always supporting us. People literally told me that students of architecture no longer read; and so, we started to publish books as part of the activities I implemented in the school. And we invited so many people to give lectures and to participate in what we called "Cloud Studios". We innovated the curriculum and brought in new degree programs and an end of year exhibition. Failure was part of all this too. The moment one talks about failure, people start getting nervous. Without failure as a philosophical strategy, there is no success. Education systems are, for me, more about the freedom to explore one's own interests within the educational framework; a sort of self-training.

When I taught in Denmark, I told the students there that what we'll do is to go out into the world and come back to the studio in one hour with a book. Some asked which book and I said, whatever you want to bring back. They came back proud of their books. After a week, there was a presentation of the main assignment. Some built models very high and very heavy. I said that each of their models should come to a certain height, but that the models were, also, not allowed to touch the room. Then I said, "see you tomorrow at the opening!". They weren't shocked because they'd been working with me for a week. One student quit after a week because he didn't know what to do. His was the best project at the end. He made a series of hinges, which then became a bridge, and each had a camera lens in it... What was it? The assignment was to make a positive virus for Manhattan... but he still quit, because he expected to come to the school to fill a design brief. I like to make people be aware of what they are doing. Of course, I asked them about the books they chose, and all that. But I wanted them to be conscious of the subconscious choices that they had made, unconsciously.

**DJ** It seems that you take each student seriously upon their arrival in a school; you just tend to show a different technique

than most of the other professors to get them to understand that they are already equipped. It's a sort of self-education but also creating the right circumstances for students: by inviting guests, producing books, encouraging them to explore... Often the students are not taken seriously.

**WA** People are so quick to label people and situations. You're an architect or an engineer; or you are *this*, or you're *that*. The moment one is able to understand UNESCO, education institutions, etc.; they are all, porous, and they breathe. If a client wants a building from you, they think that they come to you with the statement that they don't know what to do. So, you have to ask them questions and find out what they want to do. I also have to believe that I am willing to learn from the situation, if I choose to work with them. That's why I very much like Paul Valéry's *Cabiers*.<sup>4</sup> They are evidence of the permanent exercise that he did every day, which was to just wake up and begin writing—a sort of free writing. Every day he reset his agenda and started with a blank slate. I live my own life, much in the same way. As I've told my children from day one; every day for me is a reset. I wake up and I see a new day and I have to do something. It could be designing a spoon, or it could be to build a kettle, or build a school — one must continually strive to develop something.

#### Notes

- 1 C. Cattaneo, *Giovanni e Giuseppe. Dialoghi d'Architettura*, Milano, Libreria Artistica Salto, 1941 [New edition Milano, Jaca Book, 1993].
- 2 Wiel Arets in Robert McCarter (Ed.), *Wiel Arets: Autobiographical References*, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2012.
- 3 COSMOS: *A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, Vol. 1, Translated by E. C. Otte on Project Gutenberg.
- 4 Paul Valéry, *Cabiers (1894-1914)*, Edition published under the direction of Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri and Judith Robinson-Valéry, Vol. I-IX, Collection blanche, Gallimard, 1987.

#### Wiel Arets

(b. Heerlen, the Netherlands, 1955) Architect and Educator. Arets affirms his critical thinking and intense interest in physics, philosophy, cinema, literature, and the human condition; they inform every level of his life and work. He established Wiel Arets Architects (WAA) in 1983. During his studies at the Technical University of Eindhoven, his MSc thesis explored the idea of "The Architecture of Freedom"; while teaching as the Diplom Unit One Master at the AA London, "Void" was the focus of the research; thereafter, at Columbia University and the Cooper Union New York, his research centered on the theme "Virological Architecture". From 1995–2002, he was Dean of the Berlage Institute, in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. During 2004–2012, as Professor of Building Planning and Design at the Berlin University of the Arts, he focused "Studio Arets" on "A Wonderful World: A New Map of the World" (in Robert McCarter (Editor), *Wiel Arets: Autobiographical References*, 2012). From 2012–2017, as Dean of the College of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago — where his approach was "Nowness"; the school was structured around the idea of "Rethinking Metropolis" — and where he remains a tenured architecture professor. Wiel Arets Architects is organized around the core principle of making; with its globally renowned built oeuvre, which is widely published, it has, from its onset, concentrated on the making of architecture, urbanism, research, books, and industrial design.