

Pavilions - Ben van Berkel

- 1. Time is an inherent characteristic of the pavilion typology; the pavilion most often being a structure of either temporality or semi-permanence. How does this attribute affect the design approach to these constructions?**

One of the advantages of the pavilion typology is in fact that these structures *are* temporary, as they create opportunities for testing out ideas very quickly. In a sense perhaps the pavilion is akin to performing a piece of music, as music can only be experienced while you listen or play it at any given moment. The pavilion could in fact be said to behave in a similar way; perhaps because of their temporary nature pavilions provide an experience, and this is in fact the strength of the form.

- 2. Scale is also an essential quality of the pavilion. What opportunities does this characteristic offer the architect?**

One of the interesting things about the scale of pavilions is that they afford the possibility to experiment with human scale, with proportions directly connected to the human body, but in a structure that is not yet a building, but moreover a space. Here not only can you be directly concerned with routing and movement on a small scale but also with directional aspects, where spatial and physical qualities can be tested and explored. Scale can then become a sort of combining factor or crossing point between the various elements in the whole structure. But what is perhaps of more interest to me is that pavilion design offers the possibility to test the non-existence of a proper scale, or to create a kind of 'scalelessness', where numerous elements are combined in such a way as to experiment with the notion of scale. One example of this could be the pavilion we designed for the Venice Biennale in 2008, 'The Changing Room'. In this structure lines became surfaces, then transformed into a volume. This one fluid gesture carried the qualities of infrastructure and construction, defining how the visitor moved through the structure, whilst the projections on the inside also related to the idea of changing from an external physical space to an internal contemplative space. In this way the pavilion contained the notion that scale could be expanded upon or extruded, and this is for me perhaps the most interesting way to consider and experiment with scale.

- 3. In terms of experimentation and innovation, what advantages does pavilion design offer?**

Pavilions provide a kind of prototypical stepping stone or apparatus for ideas and solutions which can later be expanded upon in buildings. The pavilion can perhaps be seen as an aggregation, in the sense that it can form an accumulation of many different architectural ingredients which interact and influence each other, but may not as yet provide a perfect synthesis which could be applied to larger, more complex building project. But these elements can be tested and combined in the temporary structure and can later lead to concepts and practical solutions which would perhaps otherwise not have been possible to test in a building. Moreover, pavilions afford the opportunity not only to test new materials, or material combinations, but also to try out theoretical and conceptual ideas in combination with these more pragmatic elements, sometimes even after the fact. The pavilion we designed for the Venice Biennale in 2008 gave us the opportunity to further develop ideas we were unable to test in the VILLA NM project, which had been realized the year before. The Changing Room installation provided the means to expand on the concepts and ideas employed in the villa project and formed a kind of crossing point between that project and further ideas which can now be expanded upon in future buildings.

However the advantages of pavilion design became particularly apparent to us following the 'Holiday Home' installation which we made in 2006 for a show at the ICA in Philadelphia. This installation influenced a number of projects which we have since realised, on both a formal and conceptual level. The vertical foyer and pink ribbon in the Theatre Agora in Lelystad evolved largely from certain physical qualities and effects in the Holiday Home installation, whilst conceptually the idea of taking the 'retreat' concept home to daily life was an essential element in our recent design for 'MYchair'; a product for which the conceptual starting point was the notion of providing moments of light escapism in day to day life.

- 4. Pavilions, whilst affording a large degree of freedom for invention and conceptual considerations are at the same time functional structures with very specific programmes. How is the ideal balance reached between innovation, experimentation and invention, and the more pragmatic values which need to be addressed?**

The freedom afforded in pavilion design also varies considerably. It is not always the case that the structure needs to have a practical function, as often it will take the form of an installation in a museum or gallery. But at other times indeed, it will involve combining the conceptual and the theoretical with more pragmatic considerations. For instance the pavilion we are now building in Battery Park in New York is on the one hand a sculptural form, but on the other is designed to utilise its petal-like structure to spatially orientate itself to the site in order to provide directional services to the thousands of people who will visit the location on a daily basis. Here the flower-like structure is used to provide a variety of services, such as an information point and a coffee bar. Because we have experience of designing pavilions in the past, it became possible to combine functional requirements with interesting and experimental architecture. But in fact this is not so different to the approach required for buildings, so in a sense one is already experienced in finding this balance.

- 5. Pavilion projects need to capture people's attention in a short period of time. How does one approach this during the design phase?**

I have always believed that interest is not to be found in the first image or the first effect you create, that this is actually not the most interesting way for a building of any kind to communicate. It is more often what we call the 'after image', or the double readings you create; a certain layered effect or fascination that needs to be present in the design which functions as an attractor. You can create a form of crossing point, whereby the pavilion becomes an ideogram, where the visual elements of the pavilion are combined with the theoretical aspects of the design. This suggests a linguistic form, but in fact it is more a kind of merging of the formal and the linguistic, a kind of juxtaposition between the two. Perhaps not dissimilar to the ideogrammatic qualities inherent in Chinese characters, where the visual representation may show one thing, but where this in fact functions as a signifier for the meaning, or the word represented.

- 6. By their very nature, pavilions are usually very site specific, often forming an extension to an existing building or location. How do you approach this specificity in your designs and is this actually any different to a larger scale building project?**

In fact it is very similar to a building and is again related to the idea of non-existence of a proper scale, as the context can be read in many different ways and doesn't need to be reduced down to simply one scale. Pavilions, like buildings, need a formal contextual approach. Even a pavilion project for a museum needs to consider aspects such as where the light is coming from and how people will approach or enter the structure. Similarly a pavilion in a park also has a classical form of building context, but essentially the regulations of the context need to merge with the forces of the internal aspects of the structure, for instance the movement from the inside to outside or from the outside in.

- 7. Given contemporary concerns surrounding sustainability for the design industry as a whole, what solutions can be incorporated into the design of temporary pavilions to offset these concerns?**

Essentially the design for any temporary structure needs to incorporate the re-use of materials from the outset. This is also the case in the pavilion we are building in Chicago. It is a temporary structure to celebrate the centennial of the Burnham plan for Chicago. Our pavilion will be constructed from quite basic materials, but most essentially the contractor for the project - who describes himself as a 'deconstructivist contractor' - will extend the project by dismantling the structure and passing the

materials on to artists, who in turn will use this material to construct public art works in the city. This is then a solution which ensures not only that there is no material wastage, but also that the material is recycled in a way that expands upon its initial use.

8. How important is pavilion architecture to young, emerging firms?

Pavilions are very important as a testing ground for the ideas that as a young architect or firm you haven't as yet had the opportunity to carry out. They provide a projection for ambitions and an opportunity to build on ideas. What is in fact slightly surprising is the fact that more established firms don't seem to engage in these projects as much as one might expect. I have seen pavilion projects from Rem Koolhaas and Peter Eisenman, and a number by Herzog and de Meuron but I do find it a pity that pavilions are not used so much anymore as a theoretical testing ground.

9. What, if any, are the limitations of this form?

Sometimes perhaps you could think that the use of certain materials could create a limitation, in the sense that they would not be suitable, like concrete for instance. But in fact that's not essentially true. One of the first pavilion projects I did was an installation called 'Dream Transport', where I used a mix of many different materials, including concrete. I was fascinated at the time with cast materials and perhaps also influenced by Le Corbusier's La Tourette project and the early surrealists like De Chirico. But 'Dream Transport' was in fact made of cast concrete forms, in a gallery space and it was quite a challenge to get it built and installed. So I suppose it depends on how you limit yourself, or that the only limitations are in fact the ones you create for yourself.

10. In your opinion, what qualities/considerations are essential to good pavilion design?

I think a good pavilion contains a kind of attraction which draws you in and needs to work on many levels, in the same way as a building needs to work, or even a painting needs to work. They need to communicate on several levels. A good design will also be ground breaking on some level. I once saw a beautiful pavilion done by David Adjaye, where he worked with both the transparency and intensity of light and created a wonderful and intense visual experience which went beyond the notion of the space itself.

On the whole I believe that pavilions can be seen not just as models for experimenting with materials or construction techniques, but also as models for thinking; as intellectual constructs. Through the experience of working with the diagram or even design models, as apart from working in a linear process of moving from sketch to design, the pavilion can be seen as a kind of extension of an instrument for design; the pavilion can function as a possible apparatus for the process of design.

Interview by Karen Murphy