

Interview Alejandro Zaera-Polo

"Museum of Cultures" facade model (Herzog & de Meuron)

Mr. Zaera-Polo, first of all, thank you for taking the time for this interview at the opening of the "biennale architettura 2014" whose premise is "fundamentals". Within the framework of the "elements of architecture" theme you arranged the facade area in a prominent location (Central Pavilion). How did this come about?

I have always had a great interest in researching the issue of the facade or, to be more precise, the building envelope. As already expressed in my contribution to the Biennale documentation, building envelopes should not be understood as singular artefacts frozen in time and space. They are embedded in a historical fabric and context and include other architectural materials which ultimately form our understanding of the evolution of building envelope technologies and creations. This is very exciting and explains my interest in this particular area. Following this intention, building envelopes have always been part of my activities and research accompanied by corresponding publications and lectures. For example: My keynote speech during the Agrob Buchtal Symposium in summer 2013 was called "The (building) Envelope" because it is an essential part of my research. And it was on account of researches and publications such as this that Rem Koolhaas asked me to participate and to arrange this part of the "biennale architettura 2014".

Apart from the floor, ceiling, wall, stairs etc., the facade would appear to be just one of many building elements at first glance. On the other hand, however, facades are considered a "supreme discipline" of architecture. Taking this into account, does the facade play a special role here in Venice?

Yes, it plays a special role here as well as in general: the facade is probably the best-theorised architectural element of all. Some of the oldest forms of architectural theory revolve around the subject and the idea that it is anthropomorphic which regards the facade as the face of a building. It represents what the building is and to whom it belongs etc. But facades not only show a picture or should not be merely reduced to act as an interface between the inside and outside or between the building and the public. They embody political, technological, social and economic processes. Accordingly, we have tried to arrange this inspiring collection of 12 mock-ups representing 12 species of historical and contemporary facades depending on different technologies such as curtain walls, for example, which are on the rise in many regions of the world.

What distinguishes this façade exhibition from other ones?

We deliberately opted for a purist and minimalistic approach in accordance with the general motto of the biennale architettura 2014 which concerns "fundamentals". Following this preamble, we realised the exhibition reduced to basics and on very little means: the show is only one room that is about 9 by 10 metres, four and a half metres high, and with only a few "clouds of information" as a visual impact. There are no high-gloss pictures, no other building types and no frills with the aim of preventing observers from being sidetracked.

Why did you select the ceramic facade elements of the Museum of Cultures in Basel which were planned by Herzog & de Meuron, and how did you find out about them?

This exhibit was chosen as it represents a remarkable example of a screen-type facade constituting an internal layer where all the weatherproofing is resolved, and an external layer that is usually placed there primarily for visual or "communicative" reasons, but it also serves to ventilate the facade. Obviously, we could have selected many other alternatives but this one from Herzog & de Meuron stuck out on account of its particular technical and aesthetic characteristics. Thankfully, Agrob Buchtal as the supplier of the ceramic facade elements offered to install a corresponding mock-up in original scale here in Venice and we were lucky enough to have a company like that which was willing to contribute generously to the exhibition.

Would you please briefly explain how this ceramic facade is presented? Can visitors "experience" the forms and surfaces of the ceramic facade elements?

Each one of the 12 mock-ups represents a special "signature" and tells a story simply by virtue of its mere presence which is enriched by additional remarks in form of the mentioned "clouds of information" offering relevant aspects related to these particular facades. For example: events such as the end of the Second World War and the emergence of reconversion of the war industry into building technology are visualised by newspaper cuttings, book covers, films and all kinds of cultural material helping to understand the background against which

each one of these species evolved - primarily during the course of the 20th century which is when most of these technologies emerged.

What role do ceramic play as a building material in your creations and why is this ceramic facade an important exhibit?

Ceramic is one of the most exiting materials of all and I am very much interested in it even if the facade elements used at the Museum of Cultures could also have been made of copper or aluminium. Having said that, I like ceramic because it is a high-quality, durable, creative, ecological and authentically genuine material that is very efficient in nearly all climates. It can enormously improve the performance of a building. But I also love the aesthetic components of ceramic, for example textures, degree of gloss or the wide range of formats. Now this material offers many more possibilities than just a few decades ago in terms of expression. You can choose practically any colour which will remain colour-fast even under extreme solar radiation or you can achieve inspiring patterns, designs, shapes etc. So there is a wealth of ceramic options for facades and from my point of view, the project in Basel is a remarkable example of contemporary individual architecture.

These ceramic elements were supplied by Agrob Buchtal in close co-operation with Herzog & de Meuron especially for the Museum of Cultures. How do you consider such project-specific solutions?

What we see is that there is a number of companies such as Agrob Buchtal recovering the possibility of realising individual and exclusive products for certain buildings. However, I would refrain from saying that this is necessarily the only way to go. As an architect, I am interested in both: exploring the possibilities of working with a specific single product but I also think that generic products are important as long as they are well-designed. This is also reflected by the exhibits in our collection here in Venice: we like and present the one-offs and special developments of certain technologies but we are also incredibly interested in serial products which are well-done.

In the summer of 2013, you acted as a Keynote Speaker at the Symposium “standard versus custom-made” which was organised by Agrob Buchtal. What impressions of this company's thinking and working methods did you take home with you?

My impression was obviously that it is a company that is devoted to a very high level of product and service quality, investing a lot of effort in developing technology and exploring the specific possibilities of these technologies. This is underlined by the fact that the company is one of the rare suppliers of “ceramic tiles for professionals” since many decades – an attitude which indicates that Agrob Buchtal is exceedingly interested in architecture and architects. This aspect is extremely relevant for the following reasons: it goes without saying that the focus in the building industry is on serial production and quality also needs to be aspired towards for such products. But it is also essential to preserve some scope for special project-specific solutions as they represent the mainspring of progress and keep a company on track for success. One important key in this context is represented by close dialogue between the building material industry and architects from different cultural areas as innovations are very strongly driven by such a mutual input.