

# Interview with Martino Stierli\* (MS)

Interviewers

**Amanda Saba Ruggiero (A), Luis Michal (L)**

**L: Since 2015 you are the Chief Curator of the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, today we want to talk with you about curating architecture. Could just briefly explain how you got in this position and what interested you in it?**

**MS:** I was teaching architecture history in the Institute of Art History department at the University of Zurich and I had curated a couple of exhibitions on the side, but I had never worked as a curator, not in an institution. One day I got a phone call from MoMA, which came as a big surprise. It was of course exhilarating to be considered for this position, but at the same time it was a tough decision because in principle I was very happy in my academic position. But of course this offer presented itself as a once-in-lifetime-opportunity. It was a big decision that cost a few sleepless nights but I thought it would be worth the risk at least to try it out, so I went for it. What interested me was that MoMA is one of the few museums that have an architecture department of size and significance. I also knew that it is very research-based institution, where exhibition projects are taken seriously as research projects that lead to state of the art publications and exhibitions. I felt that MoMA would be an amazing platform for my research and scholarly interests and that it would allow for my interests to have much more presence in the discourse of architecture. That was very tempting..

**L: The term “curating” has become increasingly popular in recent years, both in everyday culture as well as a profession for example with star-curators. What do you think are the reasons for this shift of importance? And what does “curating” mean to you?**

**MS:** Historically and etymologically speaking the term means to “take care of something” which is an important part of my job. In the end it means a responsibility for a collection and to make educated choices about what a collection of modern architecture should

\* Interview accomplished in november 30, 2016, MoMA-New York. **Martino Stierli** is The Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, since March 2015. As Professor at the University of Zurich’s Institute of Art History, focused his research on architecture and media. His project The Architecture of Hedonism: Three Villas in the Island of Capri was included in the 14th Architecture Biennale in Venice. He has organized and co-curated exhibitions on a variety of topics, including the international traveling exhibition Las Vegas Studio: Images from the Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (2008–14).

be and what it shouldn't be. How these choices are different today from even just 10 or 15 years ago and certainly really quite different from what they were 50 years ago is a very important aspect of what curation means to me. I don't like the word "canon", but in the end we try to form a relevant body of material culture relating to architecture and design that is indicative and representative of our condition of being in the world. And then of course curating could also mean taking care of the people whose work we represent, being an advocate for people who have ideas that become materially manifest through architecture and that hopefully have a positive impact on how we see the built world.

**A: What do you think are the main competencies as an architecture curator and as a chief of the department? Do you have any specific tools or methods for doing your work? And if so where did you learn those?**

**MS:** I could talk about management which is part of my job but I'm not sure that's interesting (laughs). Honestly, lot of it is learning by doing. As I said I have never worked in an institution like this before, so to do an exhibition here is not something that I naturally would know how to do. More so than perhaps in an academic environment curating a show at MoMA is very much about teamwork, and I have learned enormously from my colleagues in many different departments, not just curatorial, but also from the registrar to the frameshop and the exhibition architect. We form a team and we rely on each other, the curatorial assistants are extremely important, the colleagues, the conversation and of course the consultation of outside experts. Whatever knowledge is necessary to produce an exhibiton at a certain scale and with a curatorial ambition—I could never come up with all of this by myself. So delegating is very important and to be able to rely on people's expertise and trust in their work both from a management perspective but also on the level of designing and curating an exhibition.

**A: Are there any particular shows or persons that have influenced your work as a curator or scholar?**

**M:** In many ways I see my work in a certain logical sequence of my predecessor Barry Bergdoll who made some very important steps in order to reposition the department of architecture and design within the museum, but also for a contemporary audience. For example his Latin America show (A/N: Latin America in Construction, MoMA 2015) was important in re-examining an underappreciated chapter of architectural modernism on a global scale as opposed to a very western-centric view of the world that had been prevalent here until quite recently. Moreover, Barry was very successful in addressing social, political, economical issues and how they relate to architecture through exhibitions such as *Rising Currents* (A/N: MoMA 2010). My former Ph.D. advisor Stanislaus von Moos from the University of Zürich has been a very influential figure for me through his way of thinking visually and relating things through visual discourse. He curated quite a number of shows that I found very inspiring, for example a Louis Kahn exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum in 2013, as well as several shows on Le Corbusier. Also I should mention my collaboration with Hilar Stadler and Peter Fischli from the artist-duo Fischli Weiss when we curated the show on Las Vegas Studio (A/N: Museum im Bellpark, Kriens, Switzerland, 2010/11). This show that traveled around the globe was a very important apprenticeship for me as it taught me how to make sense of visual material in space and how to organize and structure something spatially.

**L: That leads us to our next question. What do you think are the challenges of curating and specifically curating architecture?**

**MS:** The big difference to and art exhibition is that architecture almost always relies on representation, so you don't present objects but represent objects. And that has enormous consequences because expect for special circumstances you are never able to actually show the space, which is so important for a modern architecture. To convey a sense of space through representation is the big challenge for curating architecture and it is only rarely successful in my eyes. At the same time architecture exhibitions have to speak to really different audiences. For one thing they have to speak to architects because you want an exhibition to be part of a disciplinary discourse. For this reason, you include plans and details so architects can understand how something is actually constructed, how a floor plan works and so on. However these media are usually illegible or unattractive for the general audience, which is also a very important audience for us. So for this segment you have to work with other mediums that convey a more experiential understanding of a space or a building or a city, in particular film and photographs. To mediate between these two poles is difficult and challenging. That said, I think with new media we have great advantages as opposed to earlier times. Enhanced and virtual reality will open up new ways of representing space that is interesting to both a professional as well as a general audience. And of course models continue to capture the imagination of everyone.

**L: The Museum of Modern Art is has been very important for the format of the architecture exhibition. In recent years there have been increasingly many new formats to exhibit architecture like biennals, triennals or small architecture galleries. How do you think MoMA can stay relevant in such a context and what is its specific role?**

**MS:** I feel that many of these events are a good device with which to frame architectural issues from an contemporary and thematic perspective. However these shows are not always equally successful in dealing with objects, and obviously none of them have a collection from which to draw that would allow them to consider current issues through a historical lens. Moreover, often I feel that some of these shows are too didactica and wonder whether it would make more sense to have a symposium or a book as opposed to an exhibition on a chosen topic. An exhibition is a medium in its own right with its very own set of requirements. But, again, I believe the collection is really the key distinctive element. Unlike very few other institutions, MoMA has consistently been collecting modern architecture for many decades, and we own the archives of Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright, the latter together with Columbia University. This is a huge obligation but also a fantastic opportunity to frame pressing current issues or contemporary concerns in architecture historically. In a way we have the opportunity to be the "historical conscience" of the discipline unlike almost anyone else in the world.

**A: Do you have any unrealized projects or dream project that you would like to realize one day?**

**MS:** I think it would be great for us to consider to have real buildings in the collection, which again is part of my understanding of being the repository of modern architecture

and considering that especially architecture of the post war period is rapidly being destroyed because there are many places in the world where these buildings are not appreciated or considered (yet) to have historical significance. Moreover, it would be great to be able to showcase buildings on site from time to time, as MoMA did in the late 1940s and 50s when there were several model houses built in the Sculpture Garden. And then there are obviously some archives that I think would be great to have in our permanent collection. By including them, we would continue to enhance MoMA's position as one of the centers of architectural research.

**A: One last question, which advice can you give young people interested in making exhibitions on architecture?**

**MS:** I never anticipated to become a curator, so I don't know if you're asking the right person (laughs). In general I think when you care about something and you're convinced that you're doing the right thing and enthusiastic about it then you're going to be successful. I think you have to listen to your heart and your stomach and not do what other people tell you, but what you think is important.

**A+L: Thank you very much for the interview!**