1

*Cement*'s editorial staff talk to Chris Poulissen, keynote speaker at the *fib* Symposium 2017

# 'Architecture is a misconception'

*Chris Poulissen, from the Flemish part of Belgium, has created a number of striking bridge designs together with his partner Laurent Ney, including in the Netherlands. Yet he prefers not to call himself an architect. "Forget that word. Architecture isn't important. There are so many more serious matters in the world, so many bigger challenges."*

1 De Oversteek, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
2 Ghatkopar Koparkhairne Bridge, Mumbai
*credits: Ney & Partners*

## Career

Chris Poulissen began his career at AWG (Bob van Reeth's Architect Work Group). He soon met Laurent Ney (during the renovation of the Koning Boudewijnstadium, for example), who was working as an engineer at engineering firm Bureau Greisch. In 1995 Poulissen launched his own firm: Architectenbureau C. Poulissen, which later became Poulissen & Partners. Poulissen and Ney have always cooperated closely. Increasingly, they have been focusing on designing bridges. When they received the assignment to design the Oosterweel Link in Antwerp, they founded the firm Ney-Poulissen Architects & Engineers, which was renamed NP-Bridging in 2011. They now work all over the world, including in the Netherlands, India and Japan. Well-known Dutch projects include De Oversteek and De Lentloper, both recently built in the city of Nijmegen.

Ask Poulissen where he gets his ideas for his designs and he will tell you he doesn't know. "The best designs evolve gradually, in a process with multiple people. You have to consider all of the interests at play. Things like ecology, flora, fauna, noise pollution, contamination. It's barely about the form. For example, when Laurent and I were working on the bridge project 'De Oversteek' in Nijmegen (photo 1), we didn't anticipate beforehand that those arches would be there. That idea materialised during the project, in part because of the limited budget. That forced us to find clever solutions. And the solution with the arches turned out to cost a lot less, and it doesn't require much maintenance. There are no joints, no bearings. The design for the bridge 'De Lentloper' (photos 3 and 6) didn't fall out of the sky either. We turned the reference design, which was based on prefab girders, completely inside out. In the end it resulted in a design that cost 30% less than the budget and also generated 25% more surface area (fig. 4)."

## Design competitions

The most important challenge in a design process is not what something will eventually look like, but what the real needs are. That's why architecture is a misconception according to Poulissen. "It's not about architecture, it's about the bigger picture, where you stand in life." Poulissen and Ney had to fight for two to three years to get a footpath onto their design for two mega-bridges in Mumbai (fig. 2). The overwhelming majority of the city's 20 million inhabitants doesn't have a car. "In my view they also had a right to move from one side of the river to the other. For me, that's the essence of bridges. De Oversteek was about a footpath too. It was supposed to be 1.5 km long, but according to the municipality that's why it would never be used. But as it turns out, it's a huge success, almost too huge if you look at how busy it is there sometimes."

That explains why Poulissen is not a fan of the design competition phenomenon. During a contest for Groenplaats, the historic square in Antwerp, Poulissen went so far that he barely even showed his design. "I did have a design on me, but I said beforehand that I didn't know if that would be it and that I didn't know what would be it either. I also said that if you want to get yourself into a huge mess, you should make a design and say 'this is it'. I advised them to talk to the people who live and work near the square to find out what their interests are. We had no choice in my opinion. We had to ask these people before putting even a single line onto paper."

2

## "I can't stand misery in the world"

Another major disadvantage of design competitions is the waste according to Poulissen. "We have to stop making each other miserable. Take De Oversteek.

3

Do you really think that if one of the other seven candidates had won it would be a much worse bridge? Our competitors put a lot of time and energy into a design that didn't win and therefor wasted valuable money. And money is probably not even the most important problem. What do you think happens to young people who miss out on a project, and miss out again, and again? That's how you destroy ambitions and dreams. Of course, I understand why these competitions are held. Clients have to be able to justify their decisions. But I think we can do better. And why shouldn't a losing team put their ideas at the disposal of the winner, so he can make his design even better? Now that knowledge is completely lost."

## Cooperation

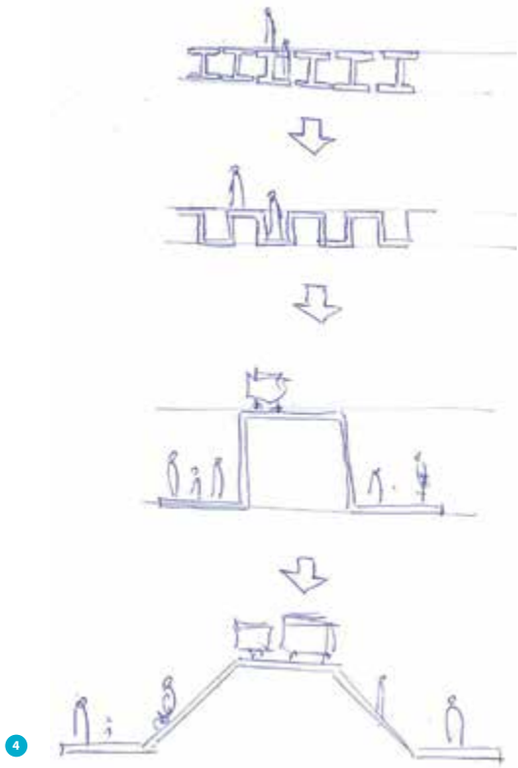
The process is still too scattered according to Poulissen. In practice, it often comes down to an architect conceiving of something based on form, and so he is creating a mechanical problem that an engineer will have to solve. The engineer will use all kinds of complex sums and complicated programs to show that the construction meets a standard. And once he has calculated everything, the contractor has to find a way to build it. But the contractor isn't always aware of where the design came from. Because we are not allowed to provide him with information during the tendering stage. Sure, sometimes there's this competitive dialogue, but that's in writing. That's not a dialogue! His lack of information will cause the contractor to do everything he can to reduce risk. So he will think of yet more ways to adapt the construction. That's not how it should be done. You have to develop things together. Determine together how a project should take shape, when and how. It's about the nature of the construction, the nature of the raw materials, the nature of the needs. You should be guided by the materials. That's what will tell you what form it should have, so to speak."

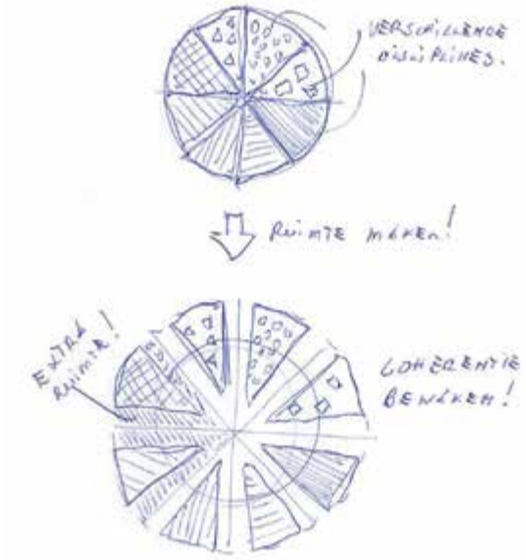
Indeed, cooperation is important to Poulissen. It's taken for granted in the Netherlands. "It's really part of your DNA. It's for good reason that you're pioneers in public-private partnerships. But in Belgium people don't trust you if you suggest working together. It makes them wonder, 'what does he want from me?'"

In practice, not much always comes out of an integrated approach. Architects design something that they think will please the client. "It makes it easy to determine what kind of a risk someone should take. That idea is out of date. Why not have a designer bear part of the financial risk of a project for once? I guarantee you that the world would look much different. Undoubtedly more exciting, interesting, intense, serious and responsible."

"So it's much more about what's important to people than it is about the form. We always try to discover what the individual interests are. In everything, in every project, in every conversation. For an investor, that means a return on your investment. The bridge or the building is not the point at all. He couldn't care less about that. Me either, for that matter. What I want is to make the world better. I can't stand all this misery. I really can't stand it. My body reacts to it. That's why I wanted to make a small contribution in India to reducing the enormous gap

"It's not about architecture but about the bigger picture, where you stand in life"









3 De Lentloper, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
*credits: Ney & Partners / Thea van den Heuvel*
4 The design of De Oversteek originated from a reference design based on prefab girders and the idea of making the best possible use of the pedestrian surface of the cross section
5 Making the pie bigger gives the players more space
6 De Lentloper
*credits: Ney & Partners / Thea van den Heuvel*

between the poor and the rich. The footpath that I mentioned earlier is an example of that. Believe me, what the bridge looks like doesn't interest me much."

## Developer

"People sometimes say that I have a lot of luck. That's true. But I did create situations that make it possible to have good luck. I bought that ticket to India. I took the risk 18 years ago of developing that old warehouse on the 'Eilandje' Island in Antwerp. I once said that I am a developer. Not in the conventional sense of the word. But I do feel like a developer. I have brought people together and instilled enthusiasm in them. I try to set processes into motion. My role in doing so is to let people put their heads together and come up with a design. I try to ask the right questions. For as long as it takes until I understand what people are saying. And then I grab a marker and draw it on a flip-over. By talking *and* drawing you're using two channels simultaneously. That's a great help in understanding what's meant. But take a look at a large engineering firm. There won't be a flip-over anywhere in sight! Just a TV screen hanging somewhere for presentations. But only one person out of ten probably dares to go near the screen. People don't participate nearly enough."

## Intelligent

"I try to be the oil in the machine. It's what gets everything running smoothly and effectively. I sometimes explain my role using a pie as an analogy, in which everyone involved in a project is a piece of that pie. What I do is try to make the pie bigger so that everyone has more space, more chance to be themselves and therefore function better (fig. 5). That makes people happy. In the end, I make sure that it's a coherent entity again, that the pieces of pie come together again. You need good people for that. I once heard that you can tell if someone's intelligent because they will surround themselves with more intelligent people. I firmly believe that. The people working in my office are all smarter than me. Otherwise they wouldn't be here, because we could do what they do ourselves. And luckily there's Laurent. He's seven times wiser as me." ☒

## "Why not have a designer bear part of the financial risk of a project? The world would look much different"

**Jacques Linssen and Dick Hordijk**