

# A Conversation With Odile Decq

*Confluence, the Institute for Innovation and Creative Strategies in Architecture, greeted its first students on September 29 this year, kicking off the academic year with a week at La Tourette. Founded and led by Paris architect and educator Odile Decq and architect Matteo Cainer, the new school, based in Lyon, claims to be “the one and only international school of architecture in France.” In June, Decq had lunch with Log editor Cynthia Davidson in Venice to talk about alternatives in architectural education and practice.*

CYNTHIA DAVIDSON: Why are you starting a new school of architecture in France today? How many architecture graduates can the profession gainfully employ?

ODILE DECQ: Two main reasons. First, schools of architecture are currently only educating students to become professional architects, and I don't believe that will help them face today's world. The study of architecture is more about learning about the discipline than being a professional. Second, there is a lot of unemployment among young architects, and that's because they don't know how to use their studies. I firmly believe that after studying architecture we should be able to see, think, and analyze the world in ways that allow architecture to offer different and innovative solutions to many different fields. Young architects can work in many different professions and find their own ways of being and acting in the world. And I really mean *being* in the world – not necessarily being professional architects as we know them today. I don't want this school of architecture to be limited to professional training, because that closes the door to other possibilities and confines education only to what is practical. Architecture is a way of thinking, a way of approaching the world. It is a way of analyzing the world, of searching for and even finding solutions at multiple scales. Just think about how we are educated. We are trained to find our way through and manage some of the most complex situations in the world. Medicine is quite complex, but architecture, I think, is more so, because you have to be able to synthesize many different fields. You have to be able to understand why people want

what they want, as well as the context, the geography, the economy, the regulations, the construction system – literally, everything. Then you must make a diagnosis – most likely as a question – and propose something.

CD: So why is a *new* school necessary to do this?

OD: Because schools are not doing this anymore!

CD: Is it too difficult to change existing institutions from within?

OD: Yes, I tried that while at L'École spéciale d'architecture (ÉSA) in Paris, where I was director for five years. After four years I discovered that some of the teachers were starting to react to my administration by encouraging students to go back to old methods. They wanted to stay safely within what they knew, not make changes. Finally, there was a fight against me, and in the end, I resigned. The day I resigned, I had a drink with Matteo [Cainer] and a few other architects, and we said, "Why not do a new school?" And I said, "Yes, it's possible." You have to know that five years earlier, when I was just teaching at ÉSA, I was hoping the new director could change things. But I discovered he would never change anything about the curriculum, so I met with a group of teachers and we decided we would start a new school. That was in 2006. Then the director resigned and I was elected to replace him. I was able to make significant changes, but when they backfired I said to myself, "Ok, I'll do this with a group of people who believe in the need to change architectural education and we will start from scratch. It will be easier." The opportunity to do so gives us the freedom to question and challenge what the role of a school of architecture is today and how it could be done. Chris Anderson's book *Makers*, for instance, is an example of how

we can help students become entrepreneurs, because we consider the architect to be an entrepreneur. However, the main issue goes back to the question of humanism, putting man at the center, questioning how and where we live. Which humans are we working for? What city do we want to be in? Which space do we want to have? We want a transversality, a mix of online courses, humanistic questions, fabrication, etc. Some schools of architecture in France are doing this part, some are doing that part, but no one is doing all that together.

CD: What was your own architectural education?

OD: If I think about my studies in the '70s, I didn't really have courses. I didn't really have studios. Very bizarre. It was just after the revolution of May '68, and I was not going to school – I was studying on my own. I'm more of an autodidact. I first entered Rennes for two years, but after the first year the director told me, "You will never become an architect." I asked why, and he said, "Because you don't have the spirit. You don't have the way of thinking. You can't be an architect. You are studying literature and art history at the same time." I said okay, but I was allowed to enter the second year. At the end of that, I left the school and went to Paris, where I enrolled at the UP6, now called La Villette. Most of the teachers there were involved in the revolution in '68 – I didn't really go to school because we were always on strike. I needed to work to finance my studies, so I tried to find a job in an office. I couldn't find one, but I met a man who was writing about theory of architecture, Philippe Boudon. He wanted to hire me because I had studied literature and linguistics. He said to me, "Ah, you know [Émile] Benveniste, [Noam] Chomsky, and all these people. Okay, you come with me, and I'll tell you what: you read for me and explain it to me." So I started to work with Philippe Boudon. I wasn't going to the



ODILE DECQ. PHOTO: MAZEN SAGGAR. COURTESY STUDIO ODILE DECQ.

school because the teachers weren't there. I was just working for this man, reading for him, and, in the end, writing with him. After four years, I realized I had to pass my diploma, so I resigned, did my diploma, and then started my office. But I still didn't know anything, so I started to work, to learn by myself.

CD: Meaning you didn't know how to design or build a building, or how to do a project?

OD: To do a project, a little bit. Design, a little. But I learned on my own, because I've never worked for an architect. My parents had friends who wanted to add onto their house, so I spent time learning how to do that by myself. Preparing the description, working with the contractors, etc. In my third year, I started doing entire building design, because some friends of friends asked me to do a library. When I was director at ÉSA, I always asked myself, "Why do we have to follow an academic system? Sometimes people who are ejected from the system could be very good,

because they've been doing something by themselves. We have more of these people in the world today."

CD: Is the problem the systems *outside* education that *impose* on education?

OD: Yes.

CD: So how do you overcome that? Or do you just ignore it? What's the balance?

OD: We play with both. We push students to go through the school in their own way, following their own interests according to their own time. The school has an open and evolving approach, so they can take five years, they can take three years – it depends on them. They will have an advisor who will help them and guide them to make decisions about whether to enroll in some courses, to take others online, to do this seminar workshop, to get into this or that studio. They will be able to build their own curriculum and

research program based on their interests and passions. Another very important aspect is that we will also offer stages in specific industries and research organizations. However long they take, we will give them credit for their time and for their progress. At the end, the teachers will meet together to analyze the dossiers and assess each student.

CD: The idea of Confluence is also to bring disciplines together, no?

OD: Yes. For many years, I've been interested in fields outside of architecture, especially the neurosciences. The discoveries being made in neuroscience are really about the way the human body reacts to space and how space interacts with the body. We have to learn how the human nervous system really interacts with space and how to build, design, and conceptualize spaces that are good for people, or for whatever we need spaces to be, depending on the program. I have a brother who is a neurosurgeon, and he's working with an engineering school on the responsiveness of mechanical systems. He is trying to apply that knowledge to our understanding of the brain, and how we can operate on the brain and work on the nervous system. This interaction is very interesting, and is one reason the integration of the various disciplines is an important issue for us.

CD: And with that comment, you have just picked up your iPhone.

OD: Yes, but what young people are doing with this [iPhone] is absolutely incredible. They can have a party with this, because it is the entire orchestra. They navigate the city. They search a big library. Your understanding of the world is in there. At the same time, you are so connected, but you are also alone. We are thinking about how this digital tool can make the city better. In Lyon, for example, they have a specific app that connects all of the ways of

traveling through the city: by bike, car, bus, the metros, the tramway, everything. When you step out of your home in the morning, you say to your little special app, "I want to go there," and it tells you, "Okay, it will take you half an hour if you first use the metro, then the bus, then you walk, and after that, you take a bike."

CD: Do you see architecture becoming subservient to something like this tool?

OD: No, but we have to be able to understand it and to give students possibilities to deal with it. We have to give them the possibility to not be trapped in it.

CD: Do you think design thinking is embedded in architecture? There is also a discussion today that design is a separate, superior discourse to architecture.

OD: This is a problem. Today we have to promote and develop the idea of "architecture thinking." This is stronger and more powerful, larger and more useful for complex situations. Architecture is at every scale and not just on the surface of things, it goes deep inside. We have to take examples from the design thinking approach and push architects to lead the way by taking it into their own hands and acting upon the world. This is not a question of being a designer. If you become an architect, if you study architecture, you will have a much more global view, a much bigger vision of the world than if you are just a designer.

CD: Why does architecture give you a bigger view than just design?

OD: Because of the different fields that concern us. Because we are working for humans. Designers are just designing saltshakers, for example. There are only two or three questions you have to solve to do that. To design and build a building is much more complex. You have to

organize people's lives. This [saltshaker] is just for using at lunch. People's lives are more complex, people are not static. They have a feeling in the morning, another at noon, and another in the evening. You have to be able to help them to feel – to give them a good space for all these feelings. Design, for me, is too reductive.

CD: Yesterday I toured the Biennale with one of the curators. He kept talking about how they had done the Central Pavilion for the public. So I asked, "How do you know who the public is? Who comes to the Biennale?" And he said, "Well, the number one group of attendees is students."

OD: Yes, it's true.

CD: Why do you think that is so?

OD: Because students have an appetite. I don't know about your schools, but in general teachers teach only what they know, often without giving students an open mind, without giving them the desire to be curious about the world and everything around them. The Biennale is a place where students might discover something else to satisfy their appetite. Teachers are not giving them enough, because they are too involved in their own positions as teachers. I strongly believe that it is a question of generosity and not a question of difference between teachers and students.

CD: So how do you solve that problem? How do you get teachers who won't also become absorbed in themselves?

OD: I have friends with whom I share the same sensibility about teaching, even though I don't necessarily always agree with them on architecture. But that's what pushes us to continuously question our beliefs. We will not build a school with clones but with people with independent ideas. It will be

international and collaborative. We will have a rotating faculty, and students will have a range of attitudes, opinions, etc. But I hope that I find generous teachers.

CD: In your experience, will students come to a school where they don't know who the teachers will be?

OD: It's not problematic. When I was directing ÉSA, we did what I called the 3X studio. In one semester, they had three different teachers in a row. Absolutely different. One Russian – like [Alexander] Sasha Brodsky – one Slovenian, one South American. And they had to do something in a month. The students were really like, "What happened?" But at the end they said, "Ah, we know a lot of things now, because we are connected..."

CD: Every month was a charrette?

OD: Yes. A charrette is very good for that. They were also doing workshops. There are many ways of teaching students to be open-minded. And in the school in Paris, they are really missing out on that. This is sad.

CD: So you open this fall in Lyon?

OD: In Lyon, even if we are having some problems with funding. So we are doing this freestyle, we could be nomadic in the beginning.

CD: What do you mean by freestyle?

OD: Freestyle means we don't care about the system. I want to give the teachers the power to do what they want with the students according to what they believe. Yesterday I met some people from Hong Kong whom I had invited for 3X studio at ÉSA. They told me how fantastic it was for them. At first they were confused, but at the end of the month they were like, "Good, we can do what we want."

And I discovered it is not so usual to give freedom to teachers. And students don't know what to do today, because they have been educated by very protective parents and have become very afraid of risk, of taking a position, and of being engaged. It is the duty of the school to help the student take risks. It's written in our statement: take risks, be engaged, and don't be afraid to take a strong position.

CD: Listening to you, it seems that the spirit of '68 has never left you.

OD: I was the '70s.

CD: But that spirit, which carried on into the early '70s, has never left you. Because by the '80s, that spirit was gone.

OD: Yes.

CD: It sounds to me that when you empower the teachers, you are also empowering the students to rebel against the teachers.

OD: Absolutely. I always tell students when I lecture somewhere, "Never listen to your teachers. You have to think for yourself and by yourself. Your teacher is there for the moment. You will be an architect for your life." I was born like that, you know.

It's funny that you notice this '70s spirit. Last February, Peter Cook invited me to the Bartlett for a debate with Nigel Coates, who is also working on a new school of architecture. We were in front of a big crowd of students. At the end I said, "Nigel, don't you see? Our way of thinking is really '70s." And he said, "Yes, but I'm proud." And I said, "Eh, I'm proud, too." Because we still believe that we have to revolutionize the world again. It's time to change education again, otherwise schools will not be adapted to the world of tomorrow.

CD: No question.

OD: At ÉSA, I always said to the students during the big meeting we held at the beginning of each semester, "Okay, first I have to say something to the girls. You have to know that you will succeed. You have to believe that you will succeed. If you don't believe, come to me and I will explain why and how you can do it. Second, you have to think, to take positions, to take risks, and to be engaged. If you don't do that, I don't want to live in the world in 20 years when you are in power. I will not die for you." And they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

When I was young, I was always thinking, "I will succeed. I will do it. I will be a bull. I don't want to hear anything about this question. I am not a feminist." But the more that I look back – and look around me now – I say, "But the boys who started at the same time as me, they are in front. I do what I want and what I believe in, but what are they doing?" I always discuss this with young women when I travel around. I ask them, "What do you think about this question?" And they say, "No, it's not problematic. I'm sure that I will..." I say, "No, take care." We have to fight back, because the position of women in the world now is in jeopardy. The growth of the Arabic system, the question of Indian customs, even in France...

CD: Yes, you're right; civilizations that suppress women are growing and gaining new economic power.

OD: Exactly. We strongly believe that we are going up, but no, it's too slow.

CD: How do you answer questions about your partnership with a man [Benoit Cornette] and how that affected your career? Does anybody ever ask you about that?

OD: No, not really. I was really lucky. Lucky and unlucky at the same time. I started first.

CD: By yourself?

OD: By myself. He studied medicine, but when he got his diploma, he said to me, “I definitely want to become an architect.” I said, “My God, I was thinking that I would have a nice life, now it’s finished.” [Laughing] So, I helped him through his studies and started my office at the same time. After that, we joined together and were working as a partnership. But he did not want to be on the front end. He always said – and it’s why I said I’m always lucky – “You started first, so you have to be the front.” He didn’t like to be on the stage. So he was pushing me a lot from behind the scenes. And because he was from the sciences, he built my mind a little bit differently. I was much more literary, and he was much more scientific. We mixed both, and it was very interesting.

CD: That’s a good pairing.

OD: Yes, it’s good... So when he died, I was thinking, “My God... But okay, I was the front. I was the one going outside. I was giving lectures. I was on site. I was meeting the client. I can continue.” And I kept going. People in France – the architects – said, “What are you doing now, Odile?” I said, “I will continue.” “But are you sure? Don’t you think you will work for an architect?” I said, “A man?! What do you think?” And when I won the MACRO Museum in Rome, an architect said to me, “Ah, it’s good for you.” “My God, what does that mean?” “Because now you can prove...” And I said, “But I proved before.” Because I was the one who was doing everything up front, and he was just in the background. When we opened the MACRO in 2010, I invited a group of friends and journalists from Paris to come. At the end of the day they said, “Oh, Odile, we are very glad, because on the plane this morning we were asking each other, ‘What we will see?’ Because we did not know what you are doing.” Can you imagine?

CD: I imagine that’s the problem with any partnership when one partner is gone.

OD: And it’s why I’m very good friends with Benedetta [Tagliabue], because Benedetta has the same problem.

CD: Yes, I’m sure.

OD: I remember I went to Edinburgh when she got the prize for the [New Scottish] Parliament Building. I was in the audience, and I was shocked when the journalists asked the local partner to come up to speak about the project. So he – the man – talked about the project. And the only question they asked her was, “What do you think Enric [Miralles] would think about the building now?” My God. In the evening, nobody was talking to Benedetta, so I went up to her and said, “I know this position already. You know the position now. So we have to do something.” Because it’s horrible. I’m not a feminist, but I’m really fed up with this. In France, only 28 percent of registered architects are women, in the States they reach only 26. Everywhere in the world, we don’t reach 30 percent.

CD: How many of the students are women? More, no?

OD: Nearly 60 percent. Last year, when they invented the Women’s Prize for Architecture [Le Prix francais des femmes architectes], they asked me to apply. I said, “Why should I apply for a prize for women in architecture? It’s a gendered category.” But they insisted. So I received the prize and I said, “Okay, I’m doing this for other women. For the young girls who don’t trust enough in themselves and don’t believe.”