

Review Article

## The Explorative Strategy of Engagement Atelier Bow-Wow's Rebière Street Project in Paris

Johan Nielsen, Yves Schoonjans and Kris Scheerlinck

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### **Atelier Bow-Wow in Paris: emerging practice in globalisation**

Between 2006 and 2013 the Japanese office Atelier Bow-Wow realised an architectural project on the Rebière Street in Paris, France, in the framework of the Porte Pouchet renovation project. This project is characteristic of contemporary emerging practices in architecture. As a matter of fact, within the opportunities offered by the development and transformation of globalisation, architectural offices have more and more assignments on remote locations far from their home office. This becomes extremely interesting when the office itself does not only have a discourse based on local anchorage such as Atelier Bow-Wow, but is also eager to design in a remote location. The study of the design processes in this paradoxical condition can provide valuable insights in contemporary architectural production.

The Rebière Street project comes within the context of the renovation project of the ZAC (Zone d'Aménagement Concerté) Porte Pouchet, a site situated at the north-west of Paris, near Clichy and Saint-Ouen. In 2001, the municipality of Paris launched a Grand Projet de Renovation Urbaine (GPRU) to reconsider several neighbourhoods situated in that zone near the Boulevard Périphérique. In 2003, the definition studies were started and a master plan was elaborated by the urban planning office TVK (Trévelo & Viger-Kohler architectes urbanistes) in collaboration with MG-AU (Michel Guthmann architecte). The Rebière Street was a 25m wide street bounded by the wall of the

Batignoles Cemetery and a nineteenth-century city fabric. The masterplan detected two major potentialities there: the important vegetation of the cemetery and the possibility to reduce the width of the street to 12,5m to free buildable space. Thus, the idea of declassifying a portion of the street, to reduce its width and to build 180 apartments in the resulting free strip was born. As visible in Fig. 1, this strip was divided in plots and assigned to different architectural offices with the task of developing them with a certain level of coherence. A collective design process was organised under the supervision of the Parisian office Périphériques Architectes.<sup>1</sup> The development of the projects was organised around several workshops and presentations to the inhabitants. Named *Autrement rue Rebière*, this collective process had an ambition of innovation in design practice. The supervisor invited Atelier Bow-Wow to submit a proposal for the project and the Japanese office was selected. Simultaneously Périphériques asked Parisian office Brunquell & André Architectes to operate as local architect and to provide them full support. From the very beginning Atelier Bow-Wow involved the Parisian office in the project development as partners in the design process.

### **Globalisation and local anchorage: the construction of commonalities**

To understand how form is produced in such remote practice conditions, reading tools based on the sociology of engagement introduced by French sociologist Laurent Thévenot can be helpful. His

sociology provides concepts that prove highly relevant to describe the collective dimensions of the design process in architecture, the role of process stakeholders such as remote and local architects, clients, engineers and consultants and how collective agreements are granted and implemented, without altering the richness of the broad range of fine nuances in the behaviour of social actors. For Thévenot the primary relation to the environment coincides with a regime of engagement based on familiarity. Yet, the specificity of a remote practice is that there is no familiarity. The relation to the environment and the local anchorage are *de facto* mediated. This mediation takes different forms: transfer of concepts, means of communication, and empowerment of contact persons. We will see that these forms of mediation are not dependent on personal accommodation and therefore imply a systemisation of the architectural process. The legitimacy of this systematisation is by nature questionable by others and can be a source of doubt or anxiety among the stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the design process in relation with the idea of *scale of confidence*, that is to say linking the design with its effects in terms of trust and anxiety provoked among the stakeholders, is a conceptual shift. It is necessary to carefully decompose the process of mediation in the case of Rebière Street, to understand how the systematisation of the process is constructed, how it influences the design and to analyse how the designer counterbalances this influence with strategies aimed to anchor the project in local identities.

Two notions in the theory of engagement are relevant to analyse these strategies. First, the notion of *seizure*, seen as the moment of the engagement in an activity and the making sense of a reality by the means of knowledge and informational markers.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the notion of *adherence* must be introduced. Adherence is a metaphor pointing to the dimension of trust in every regime of engagement as opposed to the dimensions of doubt and anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Atelier Bow-Wow in Rebière Street the coordination between seizure and adherences leads to what Thévenot identifies as an explorative regime of engagement<sup>5</sup> in the sense that the design process reflects a desire for assurance of the excitement of the new.<sup>6</sup> This regime of engagement will in turn support cutting edge design strategies able to fully embrace the unavoidable dimension of uncertainty of such public projects.

### **Operating seizure of the context and coordinating in the distance**

In the design process of Rebière Street, the first part of the seizure of the local dimensions was held on a familiar regime of engagement. Indeed, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto – who studied in Paris for a part of his architecture degree – made several trips to Paris during the collective design phase and took part in the different workshops. This allowed a form of complicity in the collaboration between the local and the remote office and Tsukamoto's personal engagement in the design process. In particular, Xavier Brunnequell mentions trips through the city of Paris on a motorbike together with Yoshiharu Tsukamoto as a strategy to seize references in the Parisian urban fabric for the project.<sup>7</sup> The second part of the seizure was the communication and coordination with local stakeholders: the designers of the adjacent plots, the client, the consultants and engineers, the administration and the contractors. In general terms, the discussions with the designers of the adjacent plots were held by Tsukamoto at the workshops and the contacts with the client, the consultants and engineers, the administration and the contractor were held by the local office. The third part of the seizure touches on local standards such as energy efficiency regulation, urban rules, quality standards, fire regulation and rules for mobility-impaired persons. These dimensions of the local context were seized by means of precise graphical documents prepared by the local office in Paris and sent to Tokyo by email. The need for coordination during the design process was largely fulfilled by a



Fig. 1

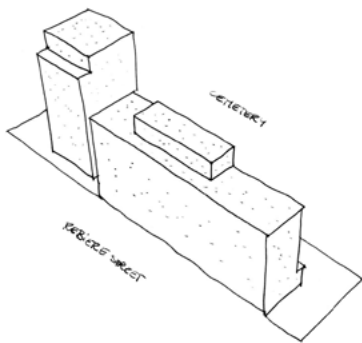


Fig. 2a

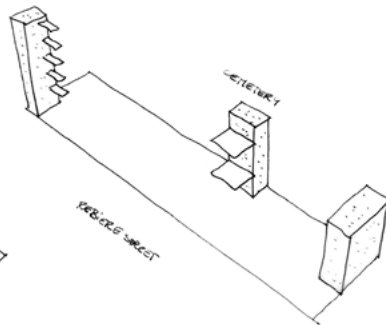


Fig. 2b

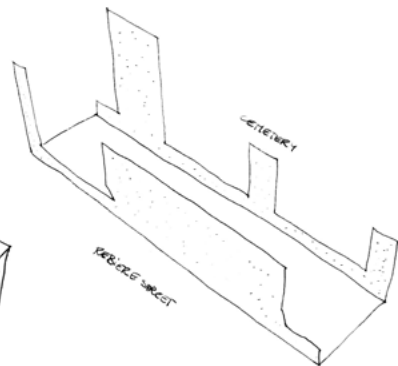


Fig. 2c

Fig. 1: Elevation of the different projects of Rebière Street (partial), Bow-Wow project in blue. Image: Zora Starcevic.  
Fig. 2a, b, c: First version of Atelier Bow-Wow's project for Rebière Street. Schemes: Johan Nielsen.

French architect, Simon Morville. By means of an academic exchange programme between France and Japan and work opportunities he became the person in charge of the project all along the different phases of development, first in Tokyo and then in Paris.

### **Creating adherences: reconstructing familiarity**

At Rebière Street Atelier Bow-Wow chose elements that would act as structuring references in the design. These references have to be legitimate in the way that they must have the capacity to be shared by other stakeholders and, beyond this, by future anonymous users. This search for shared references can be seen as an attempt to create adherences in recreating a feeling of familiarity. This strategy appears clearly in different phases of the project. The first version of the project was a piece of research on the general silhouette of a Parisian common wall considered by Tsukamoto as a central reference. In this version, two blocks contain the apartments: a small tower situated along the cemetery limit and a block situated on the street limit. [Fig. 2a]. Outside collective circulation is organised in vertical steel staircases and suspended walkways covered by vegetation. [Fig. 2b] The project is structured around the impact of the volumes upon the limits of the plots, considered as abstract *common walls*. [Fig. 2c] After this first proposal the continuation of the design process is characterised by a methodical search for suitable typologies opening up and intensifying the search for references. The search is made through the production of an important number of physical models as shown in Fig. 3, all developed at the office in Tokyo. This methodical search ends up in the definition of a typology inspired by anonymous and common references among Parisian architecture. Together with the conceptual work on common walls, it corresponds to a search of what Atelier Bow-Wow calls *Paris-ness*, as a legitimate reference to ensure familiarity.<sup>8</sup> To fully deploy this idea of referring to familiar architecture,

Atelier Bow-Wow operates another design strategy: a variation of scale into the reference. Indeed, in its final version the project presents two typologies: an apartment block and two houses. [Fig. 4] The final version of the project features at the same time one of the biggest buildings of the Rebière Street (the apartment block) and the smallest (the houses). By doing so, Atelier Bow-Wow outlines a range of possible variations of the same Parisian typology framing it with two opposite building sizes. This is a strategy to present a familiar typology to the user and to trigger a sensitive perception of this typology and its potentialities. More than a figurative reference, the typology refers to a conceptual idea of what makes the identity of Paris.

At a more detailed level, Atelier Bow-Wow enriches its constitution of adherences by integrating architectural artefacts that will work as familiar references in the project, notably covered circulation space in the form of arcades at the ground level of the apartment block and dramatically shaped balconies and full height windows at the upper floors. The arcades are essential in the structure of the building and can be considered as part of the project's backbone. As we will see, they play a structuring role for the outer spaces all along the design process and link the different parts of the project from an early stage of the design. The balconies and the full height windows, references to the Parisian balcony, structures the link between the apartments and the exterior as it will be developed below. The work on typologies and the choice of the arcades and the balconies must be understood as an attempt to engage three major shared references on a figurative, spatial and conceptual level. They are aimed to allow the stakeholders to structure the design intentions by reconstructing familiarities. We can state that the sensitivity obtained by the seizure operation is translated in artefacts that function as carriers of meaning in context. The result is a project that subtly quotes and questions the Parisian context.

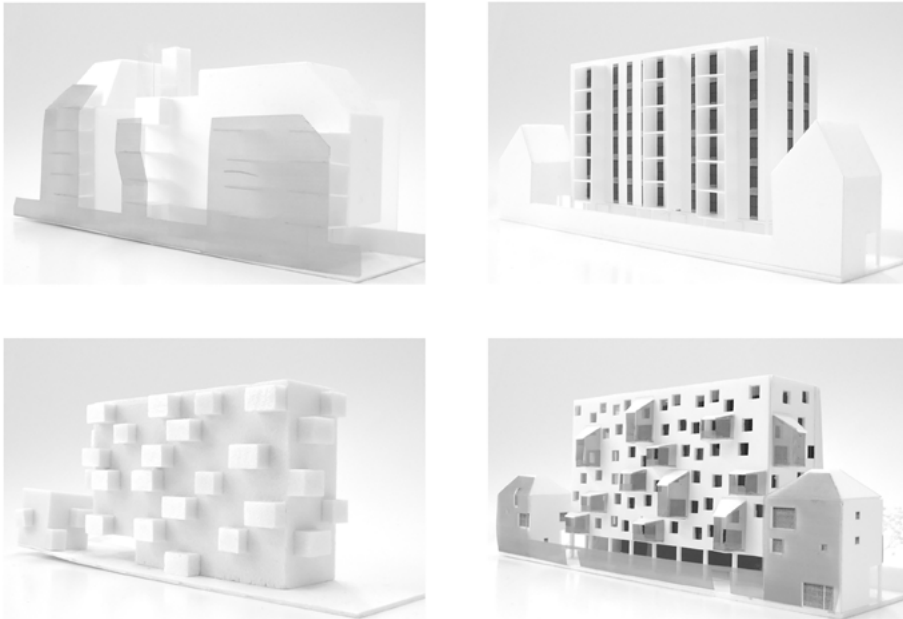


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

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Fig. 3: Intermediary architectural study models of the project. Courtesy of Atelier Bow-Wow.

Fig. 4: Model of the final proposal for the project. Courtesy of Atelier Bow-Wow.

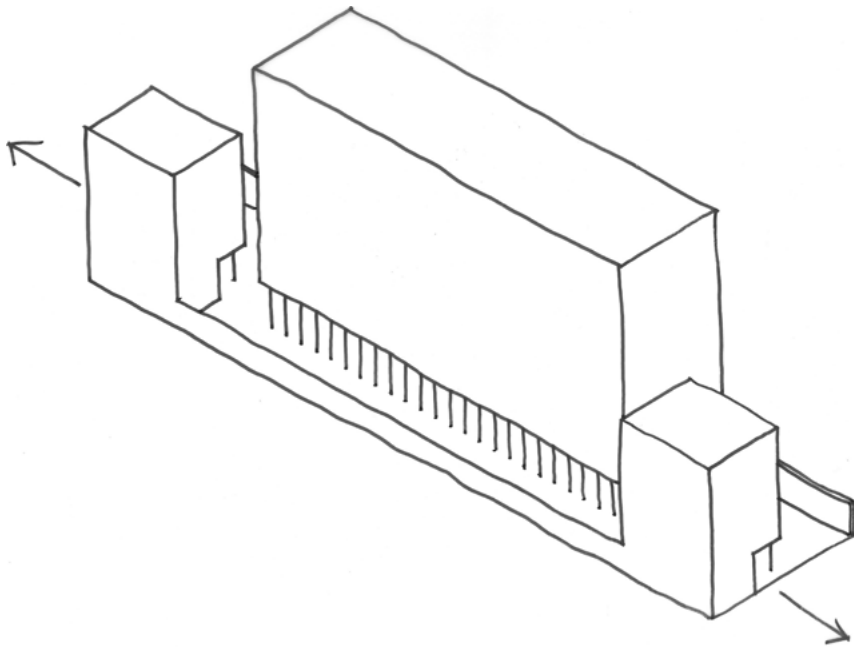


Fig 5: Intermediary study version of the project with the connecting arcades. Scheme: Johan Nielsen.

BATIGNOLLES CEMETERY

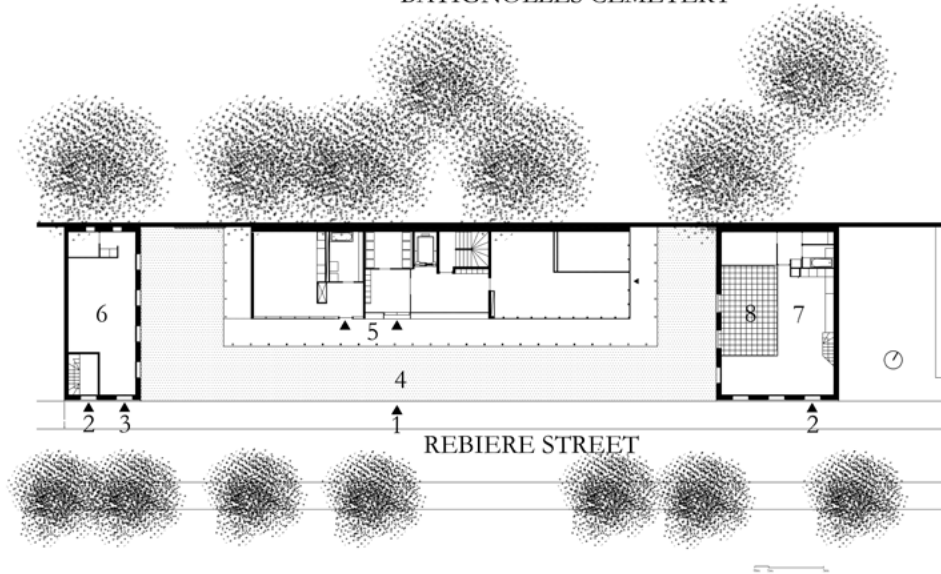


Fig. 6: Floor plans of the final proposal. Ground floor at the top. Key: 1. Entrance to collective space; 2. Entrance to dwelling; 3. Entrance to collective facilities; 4. Collective space; 5. Arcades; 6. Collective facilities; 7. Dwelling; 8. Patio; 9. Bedroom; 10. Terrace garden. Image: Author.

**The second side of remote engagement:  
designing with the uncertain**

So far, we have seen that the coordination of the operations of seizure and the reconstruction of adherences allows Atelier Bow-Wow to assuage the anxiety or doubt caused by the introduction of means of mediation in this design process, means of mediation being inevitable because of the remote practice conditions. We can argue that this coordination backs an explorative regime of engagement of the Japanese office. An explorative regime of engagement, as defined by Thévenot, is a regime based on intimacy and that is related to doubt, anxiety and uncertainty. To grasp the complex plurality of senses of reality we must not only consider familiarities but we also have to see these aspects as resources. To consider an explorative regime of engagement pushes us to consider doubt, anxiety and uncertainty as positive assets.

In the Rebière Street case, during a workshop session at an early stage of the design process, the architects of the different plots decided by mutual agreement to give a general coherence to all the plots by developing a continuous collective space across all the different projects along the street. This proposal – aimed to reinforce the link between the different projects – was abandoned.<sup>9</sup> This abandonment weakened the collective space in many proposals, particularly at the connection with the neighbouring projects. Nevertheless, this idea played an important role in Atelier Bow-Wow's project. In an early stage, when the connections with the neighbours were still possible, the two houses on the side of the project were not as long as the plot and the arcades were a promenade carved out in the three buildings. [Fig. 5] At the final stage, the project is now constituted by an apartment block and two houses. As visible on the plans the two houses are extended along the entire depth of the plot and two private outer spaces frame the collective space while a direct opening to a collective facility

is created. [Fig. 6] The house at the left contains a community centre with a window toward the outer collective space. But it also contains a dwelling with an outer terrace garden between two private façades at the second level. This terrace garden, defined by intimate façades (the façades of the two bedrooms) and indirectly linked to the collective space underneath, has been appropriated by the owners and transformed into a lush garden with plenty of plants. On the other side of the plot the house at the right is a patio house with a narrow standing volume at the front. Here too, the outer space of the patio and the perpendicular façades – a result of the very thin typology – work as a nuanced limit of the collective space.

The architect worked with intimate spaces (terrace garden and patio) and façades with intimate space windows. The arcade is transformed in a long wood-cladded porch at the foot of the central building and a planted fence is placed along the street limit. In a plot 12,5m deep the resulting collective space is generous and framed by a planted fence, intimacy-nuanced outer spaces – the terrace garden and the patio – and the wood-cladded porch. In this collective outer space hanging balconies are designed as extensions of the apartments. The balconies have different sizes, randomly distributed along the façade and dramatically expressed. They act as a threshold between the inner family space, the outer collective space and the public space. Today they are invested by the inhabitants who appropriated these spaces with intimate artefacts such as plants, little windmills and furniture. The achievement of these balconies is the result of the explorative regime of engagement by Atelier Bow-Wow and Brunnquell & André Architectes.

The design of the collective spaces of this project can be considered a risky gamble: the less controllable part of the project becomes the most significant feature of the building. The balconies are





Fig 7: The balconies appropriated by the users as major feature. Photo: Johan Nielsen.

the major architectural expression and their quality largely relies on the investment by the users. In that sense, the side of the explorative engagement related to doubt, anxiety and uncertainty is tackled as a design quality, opening up a perspective toward the idea of *uncertainty-in-designing* as a source of spatial quality.

### Conclusion

The review of the Rebière Street case illustrates the emergence of a certain kind of practice in the globalisation we currently face. In a market dominated by standardised architectural production or by strategies organised around celebrity, some offices strive to build in remote locations with the ambition to incorporate local dimensions in their projects. Technology, exchange programmes and global communication allow these offices to develop projects abroad. To understand and describe these practices, the sociology of engagement developed by Thévenot is of great value. This sociology invites us to focus on the quality of the link between the project stakeholders and its impact on the design. In this regard the idea of scale of confidence is central. It allows us to embrace the range of nuances in behaviour and decision-making. From systematisation to intimate engagement, the scale of confidence brings fresh and new perspectives in understanding the production of form.

Furthermore, the examination of a design process submitted to remote practice conditions provides relevant insights in the way architectural form is currently produced. In the case of Rebière Street, Atelier Bow-Wow achieved the coordination between local dimensions and remote practice conditions through the implementation of an explorative strategy of engagement and a confidence in the exploration of the unexpected.

Nevertheless, the poor dialogue with the neighbouring plots resulted in unresolved aspects of parts of the project. Surprisingly, the common

walls – so important in the design process – look like backsides. Likewise, the ground level and its relation to the public realm suffer from the lack of spatial presence of the fence. Furthermore, the design does not make use of the full potential of architectural details. Confronted with the reality of local building processes and the mechanisms of French public contract procedures, the project, as designed by Atelier Bow-Wow, was ultimately substantially revised. The resulting simplification can be seen as a loss of quality, but also reinforces the radical expression of the project. It appears as unfinished and austere blocks, welcoming intimate and concrete traces and expressions of the life of the inhabitants.

### Notes

This is a review article of the project of 21 housing units, a youth centre and collective spaces by Atelier Bow-Wow, built in 2013 at Rebière Street, Paris, in the framework of the Porte Pouchet renovation project.

1. Périphérique Architectes, Autrement rue Rebière, *Un workshop organisé par l'OPAC de Paris pour la création de 180 logements rue Rebière dans le cadre du Grand Projet de Renouveau Urbain de la porte Pouchet à Paris 17e* (Paris: éditions de l' Arsenal, 2007).
2. Paul Blokker and Andrea Brighenti, 'An Interview with Laurent Thévenot: On Engagement, Critique, Commonality, and Power', *European Journal of Social Theory* 14, no.3 (2011): 394.
3. Laurent Thévenot, 'Un gouvernement par les normes, pratiques et politiques des formats d'information', in *Cognition et information en société*, ed. Bernard Conein and Laurent Thévenot (Paris : Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1997), 206.
4. Blokker and Brighenti, 'Interview with Laurent Thévenot', 395.
5. Ibid, 389 and 395.
6. Ibid, 389.

7. Personal meeting with Xavier Brunnquell, 10 March 2016 in Paris.
8. Personal skype session with Simon Morville on 4 May 2016.
9. Ibid.

### **Biographies**

Johan Nielsen is an architect living and working in Belgium. He is part of the teaching staff at the Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven, Campus Brussels/Ghent. He is a PhD candidate with a research project entitled 'Space Suitability and the Design Process: a research on the remote architectural practice and local identities'. He is also involved in private practice as director of the Brussels-based office Manger Nielsen Architects.

Kris Scheerlinck is associated professor at KU Leuven and obtained a PhD in Architecture and Urban Projects (UPC/ URL, Barcelona, Spain). For more than fifteen years, he ran his own research and design practices. He is currently head of the research group 'Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities' and director of NYhub, a KU Leuven research and design platform in New York City. He directs an international research project on depth configurations in urban projects.

Yves Schoonjans is a professor in architectural history and theory at the KU Leuven. He received a Master of Science in Architectural Engineering in 1984 and a PhD in 2001. He is currently head of the research group 'Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities'. He was involved with and lead coordinator of several international programmes (Erasmus, Mundus, ALFA) and has participated in various projects, especially in Latin America. He was vice-dean international affairs and is now vice-chair of the Research Department.

