PV: I would like to ask about your attitude towards technique. In some projects there are some very constructional starting points. The trusses in the Arosa Sportstheatre are over-dimensioned to avoid extreme stresses, so that they can be simply bolted together, and the ceiling components in the Barbican Concert Hall have maximum dimensions related to the two-metre available opening into the room. But in the London brick house, the vaults which form the major rooms of the interior are actually spanning in the opposite direction to what you would expect, and in the Zurich Landesmuseum, a curtain, or rather a wall shaped like a curtain is actually a part of the vertical structure. You seem to be ambivalent about allowing technical expression in architecture.

AC: I think that from very early in our practice we had the idea that the way you select and handle a material or a structure could be a powerful way of making space. This was probably a reaction to a modernist idea that composition and technique are parallel narratives in the design of a building, or the contemporary attitude that designs a building, and then builds it according to the most economical or fastest methods. If you think of le Corbusier, there is often a compositional imperative and there is a technical imperative and both are modernist and progressive. But they are often separate from each other. Industrial and vernacular buildings are much less self-conscious about technique, they use the techniques that are available. They have an enormous power because of the ingenuity with which they apply a restricted technology, a technology that is very deeply understood. These structures can also be profoundly engaged with the culture from which they emerge. I guess that we are interested in this dynamic between construction and the experience of construction. At a time when one can build in almost any way, we are interested in being very specific about these choices. Freed from technical limitations, perhaps construction can now, for the first time, be a completely aesthetic endeavour.

PV: An old industrial or vernacular building would never have vaults that appear to span in the opposite direction from their actual span.

AC: Sometimes we do go out of our way to make the relationship between space and material perverse. But this is not something that you would immediately notice, instead it would be the overall atmosphere of the room that was powerful.

PS: In that particular project, the idea of brick lining the spaces of the house is more powerful than any reference to structural precedents. In general we do not like the idea that a structure itself takes on a completely primary role in terms of making a space.

AC: In a big building one is more prepared to let the structural system run through, the regularity of the structure can obviously contribute to making a clear internal organisation. But in a smaller project there is something triumphalist about a structure that goes on and on. When we were working on the brick house there was a lot of discussion about the Maisons Jaoul and projects by Kahn, and we really worked hard to remove the structural image of those buildings from our project.

PV: In the Maisons Jaoul you can clearly see the vaults from the interior and from the exterior, they are understandable structural elements. And in the Lewerentz church in Klippan, the steel cross visibly supports the structural vaults. Is the vaulting in your brick house mainly a spatial act?

AC: Except that the material, the brick and the concrete is still working. If the material was just appliqué there would be a lack of tension or pressure in the space, the whole construction would be flaccid and the space would not be convincing. Somehow the material still needs to be engaged in the construction, however tenuously.

PS: The theme that I am interested in with the brick house is trying to undercut the obvious reading of
the vaults as having a kind of dark, melancholic, cellar-like quality which is mainly what Lewerentz was interested in, and transforming it.

PV: I would say the reference to a kind of cellar is quite appropriate with these looming buildings around so near.

PS: But it should feel almost as if there is a higher internal pressure within the building which is pushing out against the surrounding barriers of the site. One is trying to subvert, while at the same time working with that image of the brick. It gives the building a certain kind of fragile feeling, not visible fragility, but an emotional fragility.

AC: We didn’t talk about a cellar. It is trying to make an absolutely interior space which is centred and quite inward looking, and when you go up the ramp from the entrance you have arrived somewhere, in a place that is far away from the city and the street. There is no question of it being a space that would have views, or a space where there is a transparency between the interior and the exterior. You feel enveloped by this one material but there are releases. The exact extent of the room would be mysterious.

PS: I think the amount of light through the roof lights needs to be very carefully judged. Not too much light, but not as dark as a church, since a house should not be as intense as a church.

AC: That was something we were interested in; there would be areas that are quite bright, and others where the walls disappeared into the ceiling. Darkness is not a popular subject in architecture. It is something that irritated some British architects about Walsall. There is, in this country, an orthodoxy that says every interior must be flooded with light. But actually an interior should be about a range, of brighter areas near the window, darker places away from the window and towards the corners.

PS: The house does actually have a cellar.

PV: Is it vaulted?

PS: The cellar is not vaulted. It is low.

AC: It’s probably not even brick.

PV: Adolf Loos radicalised Semper by postulating the first task of the architect is ‘to hang the curtains of the room’, that is, to decide what the atmosphere would be, and then afterwards he had to devise a structure that would keep all the curtains in place. Would that be a good translation of your view?

AC: That Loos essay, ‘The Principle of Cladding’ is one that we have discussed with students for many years, especially from the position of being architects in Britain, where architecture has been for so long obsessed with the construction of the wall and forgetting about the character of the room. Loos’ prescription of what not to do is a perfect description of British high tech architecture. We definitely subscribe to Loos’ position, but we are interested in the matter of the walls, in how we can make their construction somehow responsive to a spatial imperative. We have hardly ever done projects which have columns, we always do projects that have walls, because walls can play a role in making the character of space. So in Walsall, all the walls that you see, structural walls, are cast, and that is not the normal way of building in Britain, but it was important to us that the structure was making space.

PS: It is much more mute and quiet to use walls as a structure, and one is not so aware of whether the walls are structural or not. We’re quite interested in that uncertainty, and that ambiguity being a part of the atmosphere.

AC: And of course, if you make a wall, the load doesn’t necessarily follow the path you have designed for.

PV: I tried to follow the beams in Walsall, but I couldn’t. Yet the presence of all these big slender beams feels comforting, and you don’t really mind where they are bearing.

AC: In Walsall, the depth of the beams is related to the height of the space over which they are
spanning. All of the beams are spanning about ten metres, but over the 7 metre high foyer they are 750 mm deep, and over a 6 meter high gallery, they are 600 mm deep. The shape and pattern of the structure is also referring to the timber beamed ceilings that you find in medieval interiors.

PS: In Arosa too, the scale of the trusses was more of a spatial idea, and also a generous joke. It was more to do with the proportion of the structural depth to the occupied space. The structure was much deeper than it needed to be.

AC: We were interested in the idea of structural redundancy. There was an early idea, that the lightest structure is not necessarily the shallowest one, which is what you usually try to do. And if you expand the depth you will have less stress in the connections. We also have this photograph of a very normal American warehouse, taken with a very low viewpoint, so that the truss zone had the same depth as the space of the warehouse. This seemed to be an amazing idea. If the structure zone is compressed it becomes separate from the occupied zone. If the structural zone is really big the occupied zone goes into it, a bit like a cathedral. It is almost as if you dematerialise the structure because you imagine yourself in that space.

PV: The inflation of the structure and the interior space corresponds well with the inflation of the skin.

PS: Well, the cladding was going to be fabric, it was going to be like a tent. We made models of the structure and tried to stretch cloth over it, and none of it worked. We were interested in the cloth having creases, rippling, and it didn’t feel right. Then somebody came in to talk about ETFE pillows for the Barbican and we realised that it would be the right material for the Arosa project because of the cellular structure which we hadn’t appreciated before. You could have this soft quality, but it could be bound more closely to the geometry of the structure of the building and not simply wrapped.

AC: Deciding on the ETFE gave the building its final shape. You’re not sure what the shape is, then you finally find the right material, and then the shape becomes natural.

PV: Which suggests there was only one choice possible and it was your task to bring it to the fore. You had to find the right material that corresponds to a feeling you already vaguely felt. But with the Barbican, you have told me the ceiling components were going to be glass for a very long time, the acoustician first accepted and finally rejected it. Would you say that the Barbican could have been successful with another material?

AC: Probably, yes. We don’t think about it now. You have to go with it.

PS: We always talk about materials, but as a way of thinking, about a physical effect. It’s true to say it does change. With the Barbican it was an emotional upheaval at that particular change.

AC: But we had a specification for the material, from early on, that it was working optically and within a range. It was light emitting for a long time and it was painful to have to change that, but when we were looking for the actual material, the range was narrowed down and it was about seeing how the materials worked in the space. We chose whether the material should be glossy or slightly matt, whether it should have a stamped pattern in it. We had all of those options; we had mock-ups of all of them.

PS: There’s nothing fixed about any of those choices. It’s very important to us, keeping it in the air until the last possible moment to be sure that you’ve made every possible advance in the surface quality of the building. It’s not something that we settle on right at the beginning and stick with.

PV: I don’t think many architects would be happy to do only the services and the ceiling of a room. Yet it looks as if the Concert Hall only now has become itself.

PS: I guess we are always of the view that if you do something that makes everything else around it feel poor, then you haven’t really done the place much of a service. You may have done something amazing but if you make the whole feel weak, then you haven’t really made a convincing project.

AC: When you add something, you always have to judge it in relation to what is already there. The idea of contrast is completely uninteresting in 2002, I don’t know if it was ever that interesting. You make a project, which is new, and then in five years, it is not new anymore. So it cannot only have a validity as
being new. Soon it will be the old piece and there will be another new piece. And if you can articulate something which was previously only latent in a place, like your description of the Concert Hall, that is a real achievement. Nowadays this is hardly the territory of architects, because architecture must be exciting. Non-stop excitement.

PV: You reject contrast, but you embrace heterogeneity. In your competition entry for the Zurich Landesmuseum the power of heterogeneity is absolutely striking. Simply by replacing one wing, slightly stepping forward, the static neo-romanesque ensemble gains depth and, surprisingly, picturesque quality.

AC: Picturesque is something we have talked about. It is a very powerful way of working and is what in Britain great 19th century architects like Webb and Shaw were masters of: making a picture which isn’t classical, but puts different elements together to achieve a kind of coherence or balance. The existing museum is supposed to be picturesque, but only at the detail level. It doesn’t actually manage to pull it off at the urban level.

PS: Ultimately the image of the existing building from the park is problematic because of its strong symmetry, and yet it doesn’t feel grand in a generous way. Neither does the way in which you enter or circulate around the building have anything to do with the axial arrangement, because you have entered at the corner of one of the wings. The idea of intervening at the centre was to make the composition into a more complex and picturesque spatial arrangement, that more closely reflected the diversity of spaces within the museum.

AC: It is a matter of interpretation whether we have done a lot, or only a little to the character of the existing museum.

PV: I guess it is not only about breaking the homogeneity of the existing building, or about repairing its failings, you want the heterogenous ensemble to be perceived as one single entity.

PS: It should be possible for a building to have radically different parts and still feel like one building. We were trying optimistically to think of buildings that have been improved by their additions. We could not think of very many, but we liked the idea.

PV: Could you explain the use of various types of textured concrete and the tiled frieze in the façades?

PS: We were trying to find a decorative image for the building, because that seems the right response to its adjacency to the existing building which was tectonically unrigorous.

AC: It will have a similar tonal value, a similar painterly disposition of different materials, but it’s meant to be much more rigorous, it’s meant to be a pure Semper façade. It’s a picture of the structure so it’s real architecture, it’s not the structure itself. And it seemed in Switzerland, of all places, that’s what you should do for a museum. The architectural culture there is so aware of that issue. And yet the existing building, which is an important, highly visible, institutional building, absolutely collapses on that front.

PS: The façade reflects that it’s a warehouse building that contains thousands of objects which could wander round the building. To me it’s like looking at a cabinet or rack with thousands of objects lined up.

PV: All this detail would be noticeable only from nearby. Walsall too has a double scale: inconspicuous as a silhouette, full of interest when you’re near. You surprised me by mentioning Islamic architecture in this respect.

PS: It’s not a conscious intention. I know that Lewerentz was interested in Islamic architecture, and it’s amazing that his church volumes come from observations of Persian architecture. But it is true that often in our buildings there is an interest in avoiding expression of the intermediate scale of the architecture. When you look at the various projects they tend to have a quite dense, volumetric scale which is something you appreciate in the distance. And then when you get close to them there is a fascination with a detailed surface. They don’t tend to express their internal complexity in any kind of articulation of their shape and that’s a quality that we found in Islamic architecture, which is volumetrically quite basic with a very strong surface decoration.
AC: We were interested in engaging with ideas of ornament because it’s a historical museum, with amazing terrazzo floors – we imagined there was a place for very rich intricate interconnected patterns. I mentioned Owen Jones’ Grammar of Ornament. There has been a huge investment of energy over thousands of years in developing two-dimensional ornamental patterns and you don’t actually need fractal geometries in order to enrich it – they are already there. The idea of self-generating geometrical patterns are in his book. We only did a bit. There is an ambition to bring it in a bit more than we managed.

PV: Could you possibly conceive of new media in your façade?

AC: I wonder. There’s an assumption that these new media are more interesting than brick and I can’t believe that. I think things have an equivalence. If you use materials that people know about or that have a tectonic tradition there is a much higher potential for transgressing expectation. And I think architecture and artistic production has always been about that. Are that many artists just completely rejecting traditional media? I don’t think so; they’re extending it. And how do you transgress a supposedly new medium? I’m not sure.

PV: The images of new media could be a contemporary equivalent of the elaborate iconography a Semper or Schinkel building used to have.

AC: We’ll see. And of course the problem with the media façade is the same problem with having 50 television channels; you don’t have enough content to put on it. Is that necessary, do buildings have to be programmed like that?

PV: Let’s take the issue of heterogeneity to an urban scale again. You called the urbanism of London Anti-Plan, and you like its complex patterns of ownership and private action. “In diversity there is tolerance, and my favourite pieces of the city are those in which change is visible and the ongoing negotiation between new and old is most extreme,” Peter wrote. Your brick house, developed in such an awkward situation to such spatial richness would be a perfect example.

PS: Being based in East London, and through the circle of people that we have talked to over the last ten years – people we have taught with at the University of North London for example – we have a longstanding interest in this kind of realism about the city. This area of London, as you can see out of the window, is like worlds grown together, making unplanned and unexpected arrangements. That is something we have always found an inspiration. I hadn’t really thought of the brick house that way, but we have done projects that have been explicit in trying to engage found circumstances and turn them from being low key to the high key by strange manipulations.

AC: The good thing about distortion is that it usually undermines the autonomy of the new pieces, it allows for connections to be made. Not necessarily ones that you were planning, but a kind of open-endedness that makes it easier for later interventions to take root.

PV: Is heterogeneity about small scale, or rather about a mix of scales? In your Rotterdam Boompjes project, you explicitly try to keep the grand scale of this kilometre of dockside area intact.

AC: This year with our students at Bath we are looking at a very large site in the centre of London which is going to be developed for offices, projects of about 100,000 sq metres. A very ordinary programme. The intention has been to develop schemes that make a judgement of how much homogeneity and how much heterogeneity you need on the site, and what are the range of scales that contribute to a feeling of urbanity. You cannot do this with a master plan, which we now know result in other kinds of environments like office campuses and business parks. Our thesis is that one way to make a piece of the city is to work three-dimensionally and not just in plan. That you make an almost artistic judgement about how much consistency and how much lack of consistency you allow and encourage. We are interested in how much can be left at a conceptual level, to be developed in a range of ways, and how much has to be formally consistent. In the Boompjes project our judgement was that in Rotterdam there is a tendency to break up big projects so that they look like a bunch of little projects put together. If you have a row of buildings they have to be different colours. We thought that this place which used to be the ceremonial front of the old docks could actually be reconstituted as a big and very present piece.

PV: You are suspicious that Dutch urban planning is only faking inconsistency, while in laissez-faire
conditions the existing situation really requires distortion and inconsistency.

AC: A lot of contemporary Dutch architecture is a simulacra of heterogeneity. The situation is actually very controlled by comprehensive urban plans. This is not real variety and I wonder if it would not be better if all the buildings were the same. More significantly, the fact that there are five different architects doing five different façades in the end implies that architecture has been disempowered, because architecture is just the surface.

PS: It is not about a still life composition of pieces. It is more an enjoyment of the arbitrary adjacency of things.

AC: But the tendency, especially for big commercial projects, is to assemble land, to erase the existing land divisions in order to be able to idealise the site. This strategy still has a faint connection to a modernist view of the city. The big developments that are happening in London now are really changing what central London looks like. They are replacing a hundred buildings, or fifty buildings, or five buildings with a huge new building which is very bland, not necessarily because the elevations are bland, which they are, but because they try to remove all of the ambiguity and complexity in the name of commercial efficiency. Their architects, people like Norman Foster, are not fans of ambiguity R his whole ideology is about clarity and efficiency.

PV: It's a dilemma. The spatial qualities of East London we discussed were brought about by speculation. But we all feel that contemporary speculative development is eradicating spatial qualities rather than enhancing them or bringing new ones about – even if from an intellectual point of view you could argue that these are forces that we should use to develop the city.

PS: With our students, we end up asking ourselves what is one's attitude to making cities, what is one's attitude to urbanism now, because there seems to be so little one can admire now.

AC: One has to decide if architects should be surfing the waves of the global economy. Or should our practice show what would be lost if we uncritically follow the economic hegemony. There's a position, which is hugely popular, which says that airports and shopping malls are the basis for new architectural forms and new urban possibilities. It comes from Koolhaas, but people like Foreign Office say that new overlaid programmes and, more bizarrely, all sorts of new ways of working with computers will allow you to have new spatial urban possibilities, and that architecture, rather than being resistant to the forces of global capitalism, should respond, should represent it. I still believe that architecture should be resistant. It has a potential to resist the way literature and fine art can resist. And the clearest way to resist, even if it is not very effective, is to not do certain kinds of work.

PV: Why are you dismissive of urban planning?

AC: People make plans for cities, constantly, and then the first thing that happens is they're broken. It's not only London, it happens everywhere. But individual sites or assemblies of sites get planned and built. You cannot sustain the plan beyond that scale. And does that matter? Haussman worked at a bigger scale – when you have an absolute power, you can work at a bigger scale. Maybe the implication of democracy is that you don't work at that big scale.

PS: It's not entirely clear whether you celebrate the fact that it doesn’t matter or whether you are resigned to it.

AC: I think at a smaller scale it can be something to be celebrated. At the scale of the quarter, or of the street or of two sites next to each other, you can really do something. Kolhoff talked about buildings of enormous density, which were able to energise a part of the city, and actually you could get consensus to make them because it's a single client or group of clients. That’s what our Boompjes project was trying to be. It was quite a big site but still the site of a building complex, not of the city, and it happens to be in a pivotal position. But you can't sustain it much further. It's beyond your comprehension. You would have to start to make generic decisions.

PV: A valid role for planners could be to differentiate between areas which are pivotal, where one should intervene and areas where one shouldn't.
AC: But usually these decisions have a kind of spatial implication. You do need to look at it with a spatial sensitivity. You can have strategies, like the one they have in lots of countries but not here, that for important sites you hold a competition, you agree on the solution, and then the developer bids for the building. That’s an interesting way round. It’s a way of identifying key sites and developing planning briefs for them. You remove some of the excesses of the free market. Or instead of a master plan for large sites and large projects, you get a group of four or five architects who respect each other and whose work is not identical. You decide on the ambitions for the project, you decide what has to be consistent, and then you design separately, periodically looking at and discussing each others work. In this way you could maybe re-create some of the conditions that led to the formation of urban quarters. Maybe it is a pathetic ambition, but you could actually make a big project that had a level of complexity. The missing ingredient is a client or a city insisting that this model be followed.

PV: As a mediator between planning control and speculative endeavour, you try to bring in a spatial design competence.

AC: You could balance the very blunt forces of the market. Architecture is, not a neo-liberal, but a liberal profession and an artistic discipline. The work that Gehry did in Venice, in the late seventies, gave a kind of legitimacy to the shacks and the ambiguous kinds of urbanism we were talking about earlier. I also think of Siza’s career in democratic Portugal, and that same generation in Spain after Franco who gave a physical structure to a democratic society. That was really taking the responsibility of the profession seriously.