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Interview with Amanda Levete
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Amanda Levete (AL) was interviewed by Yasmina El Chami (YC) and Savia Palate (SP) on 27 March, 2019, at the AL_A office, London. Following the issue's theme, the interview asks how we might rethink the notion of 'concinnitas' in contemporary architecture, and discusses Amanda Levete's approach to materiality, aesthetics, urban context, and representation through the recent projects of AL_A.

YC: Concinnitas, a term from classical antiquity and rhetoric, was used by Leon Battista Alberti to define beauty as the result of a harmony of parts coming together as a 'whole'. But concinnitas is also representation; it is the ability to make intelligible a form of argument that unites the various parts of a building and clarifies their relationship. Starting from this dual aspect of 'concinnitas', as a set of relationships and a discursive object, we thought we could discuss the way many of your projects seem to us to display a concern with addressing this interplay.
SP: Perhaps we could start by asking about your recent work on the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) and the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT), and of the importance of an existing context in these projects?

AL: The first thing to say is that for me, architecture starts on the ground. It always starts on the ground. That is where the life of the city plays out. And that is where you get a continuum of life across the city, on the ground plane. By having that focus as a starting point, it allows us to see every project not just as a cultural project, or a retail project, or a commercial project, but as an urban project. I feel very strongly that our responsibility as architects is to make a contribution that goes beyond the limits of the building. And therefore by seeing something as an urban project it immediately implies that you think beyond that, and that you help persuade your client to be more ambitious, to think about how what you do projects the ethos of an institution so that it can be understood by the public. The V&A and the MAAT museums are both a good example of that.

Opposite
MAAT Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology, Lisbon, Portugal

YC: How does the urban context articulate the relationship between an institution and a public, and how could this conversation be mediated by architecture?

AL: In the V&A it was very clear to us, even at the competition stage, that for this idea of a new way of entering the museum to work and be meaningful, then we have to find a way of breaking down the threshold between the museum and the street. This was completely fundamental to the way we began to think about the project because our instinct was that if we take the street into the museum and the museum out into the street, it would begin to address what the responsibility of a contemporary museum is, which is to engage with contemporary life. And you do that best by going beyond the limits of the institution. In a very literal way, as well as metaphorical way, we altered the Grade I listed screen that fronts onto Exhibition Road in order that the public would have full visibility through it, even when the gates are closed. So the moment of threshold, of decision, between being on the street or being inside the museum is a very blurred one, because you can just drift in off the street through multiple entrances. And this was far from obvious to do because when you have a Grade I listed building the assumption is that you don't touch it: there's only one thing you can't design in life and that's heritage. Therefore we have a responsibility to be sensitive to heritage and to protect it. On the other hand we have a responsibility as architects to breathe new life into buildings and keep them relevant. So you have to find this equilibrium between respect for the past and honouring the future, while projecting optimism about the future.

Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum, London, UK
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V&A Museum, London, UK
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SP: So what did it take to be able to alter the screen, and what were the considerations that had to be taken—both architecturally and technically—to achieve the alteration?

AL: Our argument for the V&A was that the imperative was no longer to hide, but to reveal; that we could break down the barrier, and it has made for a very different way of entering the museum. It means that people see the museum in a different way, and the museum sees itself in a different way. What was interesting to us was the courtyard's very particular didactic character, echoed both in the V&A's building as well as its collections. We wanted the courtyard to speak of this continuity; to make visible things that would otherwise not be visible. Another paradox that was inbuilt into the project was the idea of this big event, the huge new gallery space below ground, which isn't visible to the public. This was the biggest project the V&A had undertaken in more than a hundred years. So the question we came up with, early on, was this powerful notion, this phrase: how to make visible the invisible? When we spoke those words it became clear to us what we had to do; that thought, although abstract, was physical enough to drive the project at the macro and the micro scale, and it is played out in different ways. For example, the pattern of the tiles on the courtyard comes from taking the complex three-dimensional geometry of the structure that supports the courtyard which is the ceiling of the gallery below; a huge piece that is a folded plate and deals with a meter-and-a-half difference in level between Exhibition Road and the museum. So we took this three-dimensional structure and flattened it into a two-dimensional surface.

From that we extracted a visually very complex pattern—a visual complexity rather than a technical complexity—which became the layout for the tiles, and in that way the surface of the courtyard speaks of the structure below. There's another example that is a bit more literal; we wanted to get some moments of dramatic sunlight below the ground, because descending underground can be quite a disorientating experience. So we conceived a way to get the light down through an oculus, but the oculus was designed as though it were an empty museum vitrine. Looking through the oculus you see the structure of the ceiling that supports the courtyard and you see below into the void of the gallery, and you get an immediate visceral understanding of the gallery.

YC: So these strategies operate on several scales, the way you describe them as coming both from a structural result but also an architectural and urban strategy. Is there a level of metaphor in the way the V&A courtyard disrupts the idea of a classical museum's pedestal?

AL: You're right it was a very conscious decision to do that—if you look at the main entrance of the V&A along Cromwell Road it's up a flight of stairs, and it's a very grandiose entrance, very intimidating. Back when it was built horses and carriages would drive up to it and it was for the great and the good, even though the idea of the museum was to offer a great piece of Royal patronage, to create a place of culture and learning for the masses. So you have this democratic ambition, but the building itself doesn't speak of that. We wanted to make this new entrance speak of a greater informality, of less separation between life and culture—culture isn't something you go to, but it is in us all of the time. And one of our arguments was to question where the building begins and ends; not at the front door—something more dispersed, more amorphous than that. And you look at the way people use the courtyard—they just come to hang out, some people cycle there, kids play there, it is entirely different. We tried to anticipate that, and I was very keen that we would design the courtyard in a way that would allow the public to appropriate the space, so to not over-design it—to not put in seating, to not put in shade, as those things could be added later if needed. But to provide this huge space that can be used in many different ways.

Selfridges Department Store, Birmingham, UK
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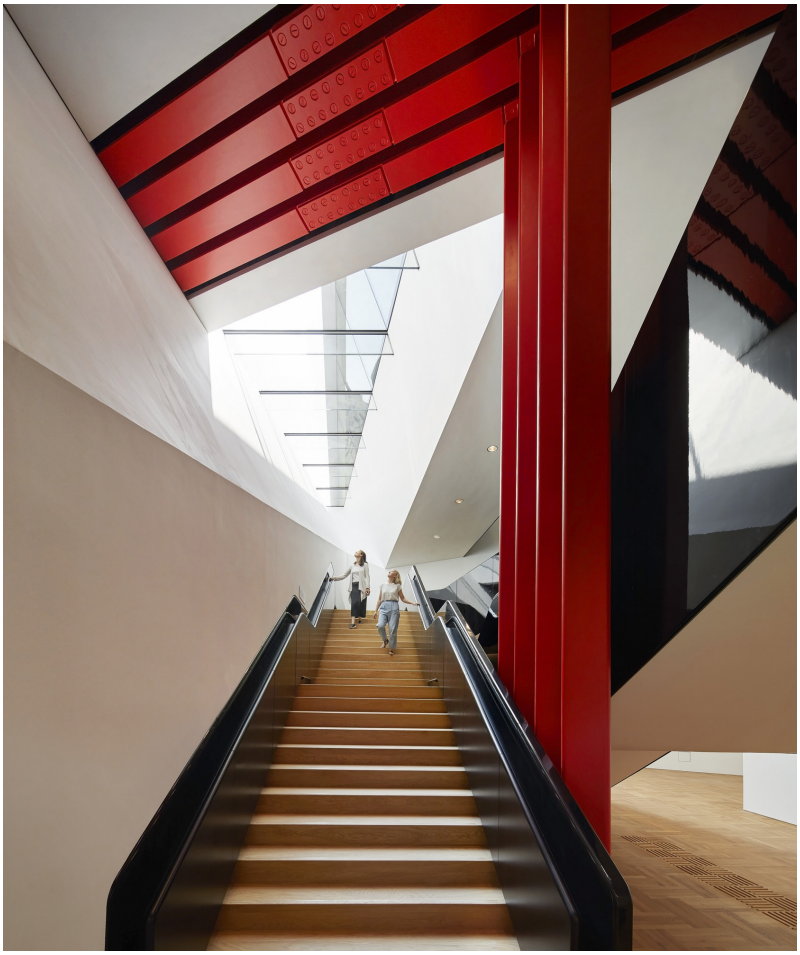

V&A Museum, London, UK
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YC: To follow up on this idea of the architecture of the ground—in the architecture of Alberti concinnitas often operates through the façade, as the element which makes the building legible within the space of the city; and I find it very interesting that although in Selfridges it is very much about the façade, in your recent work it seems to be no longer the element that articulates this relationship. Is that an evolution?

AL: In a way Selfridges is the anti-thesis of the position we are now taking, because it was a different era, and Birmingham, at that time, was a place of high deprivation. There was very little to respond to. It was just a big open site, and at the same time, they were building the shopping mall, and Selfridges was to be the anchor at the end of it. The only thing we could relate to in a positive way was the church, so we decided to push the building very close to it, to emphasise this relationship and to make the point that the church used to be the place of congregation and now it's the shopping mall. We conceived of this billowing structure as a soft backdrop to the church. This was a very formal proposition. But what has stayed with me and is absorbed into what we're doing now as AL_A—as opposed to Future Systems—is particularly to do with the façade, which is this idea that came from a very pragmatic place. We had created this three-dimensional curvaceous form, and so the question was how do you clad it, on a developer's budget, because when you clad a

MAAT, Lisbon, Portugal
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three-dimensional shape it's notoriously difficult to do it with straight lines. So we came up with this very simple, low-tech idea, of using aluminium discs, because circles are much more forgiving and visually overlap in interesting ways—you can think of scales on a fish, sequins on a dress. What really interested me was not only this technical way of dealing with the façade, but the idea of achieving visual complexity through very simple means. It creates a richness that speaks both to the pragmatic and the poetic.

SP: To what extent do you think these ideas are today transformed, especially within the rapid advancements in technological possibilities? It seems in the MAAT and Selfridges that there is an idea of bringing together structure, technology, and language into a single idea. Are there other concerns that drive these ideas?

AL: Actually the repetition of motif, which you can see in the courtyard tiles of the V&A but even more clearly in the façade of the MAAT, made from thousands of three-dimensional tiles, means that depending on your angle of viewing, on the time of day, the weather, the sun, it looks and acts completely differently. It speaks to something that I'm much more interested in on a wider level which is the idea of maximum effect through minimum means, and for me, it's about thinking responsibly about the possibilities. The MAAT was built at a time of great economic austerity—so rather like Selfridges it was about making something visually rich but very affordable—but it goes beyond that, because I think now we are living in very uncertain times, and the uncertainty of the political climate and the future necessitates what I call a new sobriety, and we have to take a more responsible position and think much harder about spending money wisely, and doing the right thing. To look for clever ways to create architectural richness through an economy of means is important, and you can read that on many different levels.

In the case of the tiles at the V&A we took this further because you have this visual complexity that derives from six tiles but we wanted to invest it with an additional layer of meaning. I'm a great believer that the general public actually connects with quite complex ideas, not even maybe knowingly, but an appreciation of something comes from the understanding that there's something behind it. It's about authenticity and integrity of ideas; about creating something that isn't simply an empty vessel but actually has meaning behind it. When I went to visit the V&A for the competition, I was completely taken by the use of ceramics on the building—which I had never really noticed before—and I became really obsessed with ceramics. So once we had won the competition, I asked whether we could have a tour of the ceramics collection with the keeper of the collection; and could we find a way to make the courtyard speak of the richness of the collection through the techniques, the material, and the pattern. We wanted to introduce colour because the V&A is, of course, rich in its use of colour in its architecture and the collection. So we started to imagine that the courtyard would be tiled in ceramics. But as we did our research it became clear that the base clay of porcelain is much more beautiful and nuanced. It works much better with the grey-white Portland stone that is prevalent at the V&A, whereas typical ceramic has a more biscuit-y colour. So we then set out to explore the limits of porcelain. Porcelain was typically used as a faïence material in the Victorian period, mainly within households, and occasionally you could find it in use on a domestic porch, but it's slippery and not fit for purpose—so part of our research was to find the right maker to work with to explore the limits of the material.

MAAT, Lisbon, Portugal
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We looked for a number of different makers and we ended up focusing on a family business based in the Netherlands, which had been working with porcelain for decades. They had this intuitive understanding of the material and were interested in exploring these limits with us, to try to use it as a surface for an outdoor public space. That kind of desire to explore, to test the limits, to do something new, that is the ethos of the V&A; and its collection is this kind of marriage between industry and craftsmanship, and artistry and production, and so all of those things came together and are made visible through the very specifics of the tiles and their production.

SP: That's also particularly interesting because the V&A then seems to be doing the reverse of the MAAT where the façade looks complex, but the complexity is achieved through simple means, whereas the V&A looks simple, but is actually constructed and conceived through a very complex and intricate process.

AL: Yes it's true, but also Lisbon has this fantastic tradition of tiles and we had this very long façade—similar to Birmingham, because in a department store they don't want windows—so the question became one of scale, of how to bring back the scale of the human grain to the massive façade, and how do you break it down. And so the idea of multiples, of repetition of motif, of those tiles, had a kind of direct lineage from Selfridges, but again we took more of a craftsmen's approach here. In the MAAT the tiles were all handmade, and they are three-dimensional, and so they are constantly hit by the sun from different angles. And we used the sides of the tiles as much as the surface, so you get this incredible complexity through the light, the sun, and the shadows.

MAAT, Lisbon, Portugal
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Abu Dhabi Mosque, Abu Dhabi, UAE
Copyright AL_A

YC: And were there any ideas of introducing influences from Islamic architecture here, given Portugal's history? Do you think observers can sometimes make assumptions and links between projects, that architects don't necessarily think consciously about?

AL: Not directly no, but we were working on a mosque at the same time, and those visual references were there, but it wasn't an especially conscious choice. But I do think sometimes, because it's so much in the ethos, it's ok to be inspired retrospectively. I think the way we describe our work as architects is informed by how other people describe it.

SP: You mentioned in a previous talk that your work starts with a conversation rather than a sketch. Could you elaborate on this a little further?

AL: The reason we do that—it is partly to do with a very collaborative way of working here; we have four directors, including myself, from three different continents—and the way we start working is that we resist making a formal proposition for as long as possible because it's important to me that we, before we look for the opportunities, interrogate the purpose of the institution for whom we're designing, and the purpose of the project. In the increasingly digital world that we are living in, it becomes more important to do this, I think, because it's crucial to ask yourself for whom am I doing this and why? It's a critical basic question at every stage whatever the typology however big or small—and if you prioritise that as a starting point and a question you keep it grounded, rooted in the ground plane. So just going back to the V&A for a moment, that notion of the how do we make the invisible visible came before we had made a move. It doesn't always happen to have such a powerful, iconic thought, but it was a powerful idea that came out of the paradox of the site, and before any of the design decisions.

Another example of that playing out in the V&A, all along the Exhibition Road in the Aston Webb screen, and what remains of it, is that you see the shrapnel damage from World War II.

V&A Museum, London, UK
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Having secured the consent to radically alter the screen and open it, we had to completely take it apart stone by stone and rebuild an entirely new structure. We were then confronted with another paradox: having argued our case persuasively over a number months and won it, the irony of having then to close it at night. We had made this case for opening up the museum, and the porous relationship between the museum and the city, and suddenly we had to accept having to close it because although the space was open to the public, it still belongs to the V&A and there's a precious collection behind it that needs to be secured and protected.

And so we looked at so many different ways of designing these gates; glass screens that would disappear into the ground, normal gates, etc… Nothing looked right, nothing held the gravitas of a museum gate or even felt worthy of having altered a listed piece of architecture. But because in any case, we had to remove the entire screen and number the stones so that the piling equipment could come through, we commissioned a survey drawing of it. When the drawing came back, they had drawn and traced the outline of the shrapnel damage from WWII as a two-dimensional surface, and when we saw that we realised we knew how to do it. We wanted it so that even when the gates would be closed you would be able to see through, so we had the idea of having perforated gates and the question was how could these trace the imprint of the shrapnel.

We designed a software that would calculate the different angles of perforation through 35mm thick piece of anodised aluminium. So when you see the gates from a certain vantage point or when they are open to the depth of the screen, you read the outline of the imprint of the shrapnel damage. In that way, we would be making visible the invisible and memorialising the absence. There is an inscription on the original screen from WWII that speaks about the enduring values of the V&A, and there is a new inscription now that we have added on the screen, that speaks about how we have altered the screen and how that is a memory of the shrapnel damage. So again there is this idea that even though the building has been altered it is trying to be very explicit about its history.

YC: What about the role of persuasion and narrative, both in shaping the project but also after the project is finished, in the way it is experienced and perceived? Do you think the architect needs to act as a 'persuader', and what are your thoughts on the way changing media means that today images are perhaps more powerful in disseminating architectural narratives than the space itself?

AL: Persuasion is a big part of being an architect, but I think that in order to speak with conviction—and you can only persuade if you can speak with conviction—you need to have developed a very clear narrative argument of why one form leads to another. There is no single definitive solution, only a very well-argued solution, and a well developed one in terms of its design decisions. Therefore, it is seeing architecture as a piece of strategic thinking. In my experience, if the thinking is powerful and authentic enough, the formal expression almost takes care of itself. It becomes itself perpetuating, and it allows us not to fall into a stylistic trap of self-reference, which could easily happen. And for me that is the way I enjoy working as an architect, to design through thinking. But you have to be able to articulate it, and through design, bring it to life.

MAAT, Lisbon, Portugal
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SP: Do you connect this idea of persuasion to something you have previously stated, about the architect's role as an entrepreneur? Or is that more in the sense of policy-making or collaboration?

AL: I think it's about for whom we are doing what we do. It's not only about persuading the client to let you do things, but more about being able to communicate without using words to a generalist public, who pass by a building, use a building. And it's really hard to define it. But I believe that there are a lot of shapes and forms of buildings around the world that are to an extent empty vessels. And I think the public can see through that. I believe that the public respond to something that has a depth.

SP: Is this perhaps one way to be doing architecture that is political?

AL: Well to me why I love being an architect is because architecture crosses on so many fields; touches on issues of national identity, personal identity, politics, society, urban issues, economics, aesthetics. But I think as a profession we have lost a lot of power and we've handed over responsibility for many things. And we've lost agency, and that's a choice you make, or you make a choice to claim it back. Architecture is, in a sense, inherently reactive because you're waiting for a client to commission you a project. But because the whole business of building is today so complex, it is fundamentally collaborative, because you need to bring together so many people, from so many different disciplines. So surely if we can do that, can't we also be the initiators? If we can observe around us and see what is needed, and we recognise the unmet needs in our communities, can't we go find a site, and then bring a community together as a client, and then put the funding together, and then design the project. There are a number of small practices today doing that at a small level and I think that's very gratifying. It's also a way of allowing ambitious young practices or groups of people to start claiming agency without having an established practice.

YC: So is this notion of architecture as tool of political agency only about policy or also ingrained in the architectural project?

AL: I think we all need to find a way to make a difference. We initiated a project, here at the office, to run an architecture club for young children from less advantaged backgrounds. We spoke to a number of kids at a school close to the office, and we put together a small group of ten students aged 8 and 9. The club ran for two years, and we had a hundred percent attendance. We would go and pick up the kids and would treat them like the most important guests that we receive. So we would take them upstairs to the meeting room, and we would bring the whole office up there and sit in rows and they would have to present to us. Some of the narratives that came out of the model making process really highlighted the tough upbringing of these children. I was very keen that they would gain confidence just in speaking, and so we coached them in how to present. And there was something about taking children out of their environment and bringing them here into this big double height space, that was evidently so liberating. I got really excited about rolling this idea out across different schools in the city, but we sort of ran out of time. But I do think it's important to do things that go beyond the role of the typical architect and you get so much out of it.

SP/YC: To conclude, can you give us your own idea of concinnitas, and its relevance today?

AL: I don't think I can definitely say what it is; but I think that if you design with real intellectual thinking behind the strategies you adopt, and invest it with thought and care and love through design, that it becomes apparent; it makes the invisible, visible. I don't think it's about perfection or repeating the same thing until it's perfect. Because this doesn't advance the debate. I think some of the most important buildings—and to me one of the most important buildings of the twentieth century is the Centre Pompidou—is that they're far from being perfect. But conceptually the Centre Pompidou is perfect, it's raw, and it changed the way that we see our museums and cultural institutions, and the way we use them, forever. And to me that's beauty—to change things.