

Architecture of the Background

On March 21st, we will vote for our new city leaders. City dwellings, urban growth and its limits are important themes in this political season with politicians stumbling over one another to declare great ambitions for house building and warm pleas for sustainable cities for everyone. It is clear: city dwelling has remained popular, and there is a political gain in shiny plans for iconic high rises, metropolitan ensembles, and large-scale city extensions. Now, after a period of relative quietness, we have picked up where we left off, and urban building production is at full speed.

A substantial part of this urban building production is made – as so often is the case in history – at the fringes of the professional debate. Who looks beyond the glittering light of the icons with which cities and their leaders profile themselves, noting that ultimately it is not the ‘handstand on one finger’, as the Dutch would say, but rather the regular dwelling production of the background that establishes the quality, and therefore the success of our cities? The Netherlands can profit from an impressive tradition of the interrelationship between urbanism and architecture, but as with all traditions, it also needs to perpetually find a form within the changing conditions in which the urban production is happening.

Under the guise of the crisis, a significant shift has taken place in the past few years. Where, until the financial crisis of 2008, conventional clients, such as housing trusts, directed what types of housing were built and how they were built. We are now witnessing how volume housing builders have taken over this control through the introduction of extreme, competitive standardisation. At the very least, volume housing builders have become co-makers, and they are – not for the first time in history – the driving force behind regular house building in our cities. After the crisis, architects have woken up to this new reality with many still navigating between a pragmatism aimed at survival, and a never-ending cynicism regarding the alleged ruination of the architect’s role in the construction process.

This new reality requires reflection on the profession, on the role of architecture in the urban production, and how the fruitful overlap of urbanism and architecture can be articulated anew. That is a search which inevitably leads to the foundations of the European city. The success of the exhibition on Haussmann in Paris is a great example of that. The related publication has already become a ‘must have’ and shows the vitality of the reciprocal relationship between a structuring urbanism, and an operational, production-oriented repertoire of architecture. It is an approach which reveals itself again and again in different identities in the successful episodes of the European city. The publication ‘Street Architecture, Work by Hans van der Heijden’ by Karin Templin must be understood against this backdrop of the reflection on the architecture of the city.

The publication can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it is a concise monograph of the residential work of Hans van der Heijden. On the other hand, it is a reflection on the contemporary, practice-based possibilities of the architecture of the street. Precisely this double reading, as a reflection linked

to practice, makes this publication worthwhile. Karin Templin's introduction of the meaning of 'Street Architecture' is followed by an analysis of the built production in Renaissance Florence. Subsequently, the work of Hans van der Heijden is elaborately dissected in a series of magnificent drawings as a sort of vocabulary with which the city and the architecture talk to one another. A conversation spans all scales of the design, from the role of the ensembles that construct, finish, and repair urban tissue, to themes such as repetition and the face of a building up to the meaningful detail of the gargoyle. The evocative 'Dubbing' by van der Heijden himself offers a perspective of the potential of this approach in the current reality of city building. The concluding documentation of five schemes underlines that this reality is still capable of producing great buildings.

Where the meaning of architecture for the city often is measured against the iconic value of the object, van der Heijden's work points in a different direction. A careful, and simultaneously production-oriented iconography of the architecture of the street offers a tool for architects working on urban housing. A 'Street Architecture', rooted deeply in the tradition of the European city and simultaneously 'Street Credible' to our contemporary housing producers, provides new élan for the architecture of the background. It is the background, where the city materialises, that really matters.

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