

Towards a Critique of Change

Delft Lectures on Architecture

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Architecture is never a private matter and nor is it an intellectual playground for an elite.

Miroslav Šik, Lukas Imhof, 2013

Such pragmatic views are not so easy to defend in Dutch cultural conditions. There is no country where architecture is so firmly encapsulated in various policy bodies and cultural institutions as in the Netherlands. The professional association of Dutch architects is now little more than an advocacy group which only just manages to remain a contact point in labour agreement negotiations but which launches fewer and fewer initiatives aimed at maintaining an architectural culture. The archives of Dutch architects are preserved in The New Institute, grants are doled out by the Creative Industries Fund NL, the title of architect is protected by the Bureau Architectenregister, debates, exhibitions, events and even Architecture Day are organized by grant-maintained local architecture centres. The building regulations and industrial standards, which really have an enormous impact on architectural production, are drawn up by specialized institutes. In the names and logos of most of these institutes, the word 'architecture' no longer appears. The architect as culturally engaged professional, the carpenter who has studied Latin, who is at the centre of the construction world, is absent in this representation because few of these institutes are ever staffed by architects, let alone practising designers. The same is true of architecture criticism. That, too, has become specialists' work. The architect has been reduced to a bit player in a strange orchestra, who can only wonder whether his impresario will ever again fill the auditorium. Things are different in other countries. The British RIBA is active in all these fields. It owns the largest architecture library in England, manages the archives, openly gets involved in changes to regulations and standards, organizes debates and prizes at regional and national level and is also responsible for training architects as well as the regulation of the architectural profession.

The fragmentation of Dutch architectural culture is at once a strength and a weakness. One attractive feature is that fledgling architects are given a helping hand via a generous grants system and that same system also enables architects to conduct research outside the academic

circuit. On the other hand, it must be said that the institutes that surround the architectural community have distanced themselves from everyday building culture and employ their own particular jargon. In this situation it is no wonder that the debate about architecture is unsatisfactory when it comes to practical integration, and that it has got bogged down in a deadlock between extreme practitioners of the likes of Sjoerd Soeters and Winy Maas. Now that architecture has been subsumed under the creative industry, there is every reason to fear that a practice-oriented and balanced focus on the design discipline and architectural culture has finally ceased to be sexy. With some exaggeration it could be said that the creative industry's main concern is to serve architecture up attractively to investors, builders and developers and that it avoids any hint of critical analysis and ignores the performative aspects of the profession. The architectural design is an export product. In the creative industry optimism is in order if this merchandise is to be marketed in pristine condition. How did that all come about?

When you are young and want to become a film star, you go to Hollywood. When you want to be an architect, you go to the Netherlands. The Netherlands are the Hollywood of architecture.
Burton Hamfelt, 2003

Is this ironic? Is this a publicity slogan of one of the many institutes promoting Dutch architecture abroad? A mantra? Or is it a fantasy of an eager architecture student? No, this is the serious credo of Canadian/English/New Zealand architects S333, offering their explanation for setting up practice in the Netherlands. S333's case confirms the myth of the Netherlands as a tolerant society, open to foreign contributions to a modern and ever lively architectural debate. Inevitably, the Netherlands' liberal image is tied in with the reputation of Rem Koolhaas and his OMA practice. In S333's terms, Koolhaas is the megastar of an architectural Hollywood.

From the mid 80-ies onwards negotiation and a 'merciless good cheer' became the self-evident weapons of the new architect's practice of Koolhaas. Problems seemed to bounce back on his ironic elasticity. This was confirmed by early Koolhaas projects like the design study for the conversion of the Arnhem Panopticon prison. Koolhaas' design report was analytical, well written and lucid. Koolhaas had no office, but was reported to have a good presence and to be able to talk. He produced an enormous volume of neatly drawn perspectives, plans, sections and puzzling diagrams. The prison design illustrated Koolhaas ability to idealise the architectural problem, in this case the Panopticon principle. In fact, based on a basic understanding of the building type, Koolhaas proposed to replace the central control that had originated from the solitary confinement with an 'empty' centre overlooked by prisoners. Koolhaas freely discussed loose facts like the monumental properties of the architecture, its semiotic and ideological

values and its typological possibilities. Ultimately, the 'dismantled' Panopticon is placed upon a cruciform new set of corridors below ground, a new ideological basement like a 'historic relic'. Such rhetoric was appealing to Dutch students and young architects at every level.

The prison was never built and neither were a range of other early OMA schemes. The designs that did make it to the construction site in the 1980s were anxiously awaited. Many publications, most notably OMA's first retrospective book SMLXL, make us believe that the Dance Theatre in The Hague, the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, and the villa Dall' Ava in Paris are the first built works of the paper architect Koolhaas. This is inaccurate for OMA had built a number of schemes well before that. In the 1980s, a police station in Almere, a twin tower housing estate in Groningen, a bus terminal in Rotterdam and IJ-Plein social housing district in Amsterdam were realised. All these designs were excluded from eventual publications and with good reason.

Projects like the police station compared awkwardly with the international design production. Architects like Michael Graves, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Aldo Rossi were far more successful in how they transferred their ideas world to the construction site. Koolhaas started flirting with imperfection and the provisional. No money, no details, just concepts.

The radical conceptional appreciation of the architectural problem as such, held in reciprocity with the realism of client structures, budgets, social agendas etc, was never better illustrated than in Koolhaas' students thesis on the Berlin Wall. Falling in love with the Wall required a hard stomach in those Cold War years. The Berlin Wall was idealised as architecture, or rather: as a concept of architecture. In retrospect, it seems that when Koolhaas presented such student work he instantly destroyed the possibility of any future development in his own work- well before he became an architect. *There is no success but failure, but failure is no success at all*, Bob Dylan sang.

My first presentation. [...]

The images that appeared on the screen - former conditions, concepts, workings, evolution, "plots" - assumed their positions in a sequence that was gripping almost beyond my control; words were redundant.

There was a long silence. Then Boyarsky asked ominously, "Where do you go from here?"
Rem Koolhaas, "early 70-ies"

The Dutch architectural scene, meanwhile, was busy with itself. Postmodernism never fell in fertile soil. Activism and production were the words of the 70-ies and 80-ies. Building for the

neighbourhood was the background for enormous, government steered social housing programmes. Architects such as Paul de Ley were be associated with the squatters movement in Amsterdam. The Rotterdam city council would proudly present their annual reports on production quantities. Without any irony these would contain recordings of the built results. A victory of social democracy for some, unsatisfactory in qualitative terms for others. By the mid 80-ies criticism grew, for instance through the violent photography of Piet Rook, seemingly in tune with the documentary photography of the municipal annual reports. Organisations like 5x5 [with Francine Houben and Adri Duivestein] were one of the first in the mid 80-ies to start what was to be called the 'quality debate'. It was an anti-movement, uniting 5 different professionals from 5 [later 6] different cities in their resistance against things that were wrong. But what was good?

Mecanoo was an office which rooted in such activism, working on urban renewal tasks from a distinct typological and aesthetic angle. There were strong academic side-lines. The book 'Formes Urbaines' by Castex and Panerai was translated in Dutch only eight years after publication in French, two decades before translation in English. Their typological study to the urban house focused on the organisation of its interior and exterior territory. Analysis and operational strategies were very much aligned. Analysis for instance by Castex and Panerai would focus on the sequence of the house in relation the streets of Berlage's Plan South and the rear gardens. Urbanists like Quadrat would much later use similar strategies to programme the mass production of Vinex sites.

In 1988 Art Zaaijer and Kees Christiaanse graduated on a housing scheme which followed completely different rules. Typology was not viewed as a tool for analysis and the production of nameless quantities of housing, but as a device to produce a unique architectural gesture. Probably more related to the housing typology as developed by Roger Sherwood in his famous book 'Modern Housing Prototypes', Conceptualism in Dutch housing architecture was born. Looking at magazines such as DASH this particular view of type is probably still quite closely linked to the way TU Delft students are taught. The quality debate of the 80-ies converged into the term Superdutch which was coined in the mid 90-ies by Bart Lootsma. Conceptualism and collage techniques could count on considerable consensus within the elite of the architectural Hollywood. By that time the work of Koolhaas has lost all of its awkwardness. This beautification of intentionally provisional *No money, no detail* architecture was branded as Superdutch, easily renamed as Sugardutch.

Meanwhile, more traditional directions in architecture were explored by foreign architects. Paradoxically, Alvaro Siza, Bob van Reeth, Hans Kollhoff, the Krier Brothers and Aldo Rossi

built significant brick projects, continuing design strategies that might sooner be the result of integration and craft rather than collage and imperfection.

Since Perrault, since the decline of the classic rules of Vitruvianism, there has been no reliable and authoritative code by which to determine what belongs to architecture and what not. Thanks to the combined forces of theoretical manifestos, designs or built work and criticism, the domain of architecture wanders across the continent of culture, much as Poles travelled across the map of Eastern Europe.

Hans van Dijk, 1989

So what is there to say about the current state of Dutch architecture?

First, having seen some 1200 projects for the last 3 editions of the Dutch Architecture Yearbook I find myself cheerfully pushing at an open door: architecture is alive and kicking in the Netherlands. There is no such thing as a crisis in architectural praxis. Praxis simply continues, architects find their way and make do and get by - as ever. But I will return to the topic of crisis later.

Second, after all the euphoria of Sugar Dutch architecture, it is clear that the Netherlands has become a rather typical European country. Looking for best practice I saw a reflection of the construction output that differed little from that of other countries. There is no dominant tendency in Dutch architecture anymore.

There are the big icons - architecture for mayors and aldermen that expresses prosperity, self-consciousness and progress in more or less believable ways - and the small icons: often rather watered-down versions of well-known exemplars. There are individual houses that bear witness to the idiosyncrasy of their clients. And there are those small commissions in the arts where the significant creative opportunities are immediately exploited. Uniqueness is a given in all these cases, but things are completely different in the larger volume sectors of the industry - the architecture of offices, housing and schools. It can't be avoided that architect must respond to the conventions of building and dwelling. With the collapse of urban policies and design guidance, the Dutch architect, just as in the rest of Europe, has become somewhat of a lonely soul. The architect has been dragged out of his comfort zone and must earn his spurs in each project again and again. In complicated public building, the designers often apply a version of the current internationalist modernism. Its open language is useful in the manipulation of the programs that are permanently in flux and in dealing with the ever more complicated building

service technologies. In housing design, long the Dutch arena of innovation, however, we find a reorientation towards older design methods and architectonic motifs. Tacitly, the pitched roof has returned.

And this brings us to the third aspect. Among Dutch architects 'tradition' remains a dirty word. It is the hot potato of the Dutch design world. Here the reorientation mentioned above does not go hand-in-hand with architects explicitly declaring themselves and, as a consequence, tradition is not a subject of debate. And that is where architecture in the Netherlands diverges sharply from other European countries. Elsewhere the notion of tradition has been liberated from its negative connotations and it can be used for what it actually means, namely 'the old habits of large groups of people'. This attitude, which is prevalent for example in industrial design, would open the way for a more assertive approach to the mass-markets of volume building, which are inevitably dictated by codes and conventions.

In Dutch architecture, however, 'tradition' remains a silent intellectual undercurrent. Compare that to the recent opening of the 'Pasticcio: Continuity in European Architecture' exhibition, curated by Adam Caruso and Peter St John, at the Flemish Architecture Institute in Antwerp. Almost 1000 people gathered to witness robust arguments to support the colourful continuity of the European architectural tradition. The thesis was illustrated with a wide variety of projects by architects from different countries and age groups. Their shared belief seemed to be that the tradition cannot be viewed a closed belief system, but should be seen as an energetic and progressive discourse that transcends generations and nationalities. This notion of the traditional has surpassed all sectarianism (including, for that matter, the dismissal of modernity). These differences were celebrated in Antwerp, to the dismay of a number of critics who didn't know what to make of such a rich mix with no apparent boundaries.

A fourth observation is the increase of renovation work and within that the massive trend to the method that was much in use after the renovations of the famous Hotel New York (1993) in Rotterdam and the Palais de Tokyo (2001) in Paris. The shells are stripped, their dilapidated state accepted for what it was and they are then rendered usable by means of targeted interventions in their interiors. The 'design' is chiefly a matter of direction. It encompasses the scale of the demolition work, the minimal finishing of the shell and effective additions to the building. In its best form the design is a technique of improvisation and collage. Frugality and an elementary reading of the existing building are an extension of one another. It is precisely in the tension between retained structures, historical relics and the unavoidable contemporary interventions that the potential of this approach lies.

In its worst manifestations this approach slides into a formula in which roughness and

incompleteness are just a stylistic device, or worse: a pretext for scaling back architectural, heritage and monumental ambitions in situations where the investment capacity is limited. De Ceugel cultural incubator consists of the hulls of pensioned-off houseboats that have been 'finished' with scrap materials. In Rotterdam Katendrecht, the former Fenix sheds were modified to house a practice space for circus artists and an alternative food market, using found and rescued objects. The dividing walls in the building were arranged with an eye to convenience and without much regard for the architectural structure. The retained structures, historical relics and contemporary interventions are reduced to a reassuring ambience of now familiar improvised architectural fragments. The modern city dweller recognizes the picturesque quality and knows that this will be a congenial place to be. A provisional architectural world. Everyone and anyone can do it, or so it seems.

A final observation, as yet not visible in publication, is that architectural design functions in a rapidly changing procurement and financing structure. Large construction firms like ERA Contour make it possible for any developer to conceive a housing scheme in a few mouse clicks behind the laptop and receive a cost plan within minutes later. Using similar strategies, architects are trying to break into the market of sustainability. Via digital portals they offer not only design options, but also assist with the financing through mortgages and grants. The end results of such modus operandi is largely a product of consumer's choice. Financing is a mix of small and large money: private money saved by individual house owners, institutional money supplied by banks and energy companies. Design practice is changing rapidly, not dissimilar to the way book are sold has already changed.

Hans van Dijk's quotation above comes from 1989. Architecture was more than just the practice of a profession, the Wall had yet to fall, Europe would be unrecognizably carved up again without the Poles moving one centimetre and the term Superdutch had yet to be coined. Now, in 2015, the definition of architecture is once again wide open, because the field of operation has been permanently changed owing in large measure to the increase in renovation work and the differences of procurement and financing. The future of the profession is just as uncertain as it was in 1989. Manifestos and critiques are out of fashion. Codes are more than ever a distant prospect. How then to define the architecture in the field of renovation and reuse is an open question. Such a definition, let alone a demarcation, will not arise automatically from an unexamined praxis. The assessment of adaptability, as well as of the economic conditions for construction and the appropriate architectural means, constitute a new challenge for architects. Architecture today: everyone and anyone can do it, or so it sometimes seems.

Yet this new reality does not lead inexorably to the suspension of architectural pretensions. By no means all designers pride themselves on being 'Architects without Architecture' of a

permanently provisional world. One could argue that architecture needs a degree of obstinacy and perfection, seemingly contradictory qualities that the design sorely needs in order to survive as a self-assured spatial art. One could also argue that it is not the architectural praxis which is in a state of crisis and that architectural theory, criticism and education simply are in crisis, because they are not on board anymore when it comes on the understanding of current design tasks and finding operational strategies for those. Praxis is hardly guided and criticized through operational theorems anymore. Superdutch has provided a strong - and for many very convincing - canon. Architectural criticism, one could argue, for a long time has restricted itself to a simplistic comparative technique: who is in, who is out? Progress could only be judged within an established canon. One should think that such inward-looking critique is a contradiction in terms and that it has never been very plausible, but that it has become downright unworkable today. Reading back Van Dijk's words, an architectural theory that is aware of a changing play field should be divergent and not convergent, difficult and not easy, studying the small and the large, renovation and new build, the spectacle and the ordinary, looking at mass production just as well as at gems and icons.

However vital Dutch architectural practice may still appear, it seems clear that a better understanding of the 'old habits of large groups of people' is the key to surviving the harsh Dutch economy of today.