

# BOOK REVIEW

Street Architecture:  
Work by Hans van der Heijden

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The recently published book *Street Architecture* is the result of a collaboration between Karin Templin, currently pursuing a PhD in architecture at the University of Cambridge, and Hans van der Heijden, an Amsterdam-based architect of mainly urban renewal projects and residential architecture. The book compares the architecture of Renaissance Florence to that of Van der Heijden, in a plea for what Templin calls 'Street Architecture'. It is structured in three sections: the first providing 'observations on Florence', the second outlining 'a catalogue of individual aspects of Hans van der Heijden's work' and the third presenting five of Van der Heijden's projects that show how the elements described in the first two sections come together in his architecture.

The comparison with Renaissance Florentine architecture positions the work of Van der Heijden within the larger evolutionary discourse of European architecture, giving it the attention that it deserves. This is perhaps the main merit of this book: it is easy to overlook the qualities of Van der Heijden's usually modest architecture, as his buildings tend to blend into their surroundings. This, however, is exactly their main goal. As Hermann Czech famously remarked: 'Architecture is not life. Architecture is background. Everything else is not architecture.'<sup>1</sup> According to Templin, Hans van der Heijden's buildings form the background to the life in the Dutch neighborhood in the same way that the buildings in Florence formed the background to life in Renaissance Italy, 'creating a

piece of city that feels both urbane and domestic whilst exhibiting a unique but recognizable character'.

But what exactly is Street Architecture? Templin discovered the term in nineteenth-century British architecture journals during her PhD research. In her introductory manifesto for this type of architecture, she defines it as 'an ethos based not on a proposed urban theory, but on urban observation'. This leads to an architecture that is 'continuously being built by a collective for the collective'. The strong focus on the collective dimension of this architecture explicitly rejects modernist urbanism in which 'the emphasis shifted from the collective to the individual, from the continuum to the concept'. Besides the importance of the collective, Templin stresses the value of tradition, decorum, continuity and the beauty of the public realm.

To strengthen her argument in favor of the collective over the individual, Templin draws a rather comprehensive analogy with language: Street Architecture is a coherent *language* of 'a series of details, devices, materials, and types' that creates a *dialogue* between buildings and that is not constantly *translated* but rather evolves when it incorporates 'the latest cultural conventions, technological advances, [and] economic considerations'. With such importance attached to the collective, it might be difficult to properly acknowledge the individual genius of architects such as Palladio, Michelangelo, or Hausmann. Templin tries to reconcile this fact by stating

that the works of these architects, 'although recognizable . . . form part of a collective urban continuum, not as "translations" or abstraction, but as elements or devices that have evolved from contemporary forces, refined by architects or builders'. In other words, these adaptations are part of their personal *dialect*.

Interestingly enough, John Summerson constructs a similar, albeit subtly different, argument in his book *The Classical Language of Architecture*. Within the same language analogy, he states that Michelangelo transcended the classical Vitruvian *grammar* and turned 'classical architecture into new courses'.<sup>2</sup> According to Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo 'broke the bonds and chains of a way of working that had become habitual by common usage' and 'proceeded quite differently in proportion, composition and rules from what others had done by following common practice'.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, he provided an enormous incentive to the course of classical architecture in the sixteenth century. In other words: architects such as Michelangelo enriched the *vocabulary* of classical architecture and even influenced its *grammar*, rather than 'merely' developing a *dialect*. This is a subtle but important distinction.

The catalogue of Van der Heijden's work shows – through the many drawings of figure-ground plans, street sections and plans, and typological drawings – how his work modestly adjusts itself to the existing urban situation and fits into the existing urban continuum. It also shows – through the many detailed drawings of brick details, building entrances, doors, windows, balconies and dormers – the importance of paying close attention to detail. And this attention to detail is perhaps where Van der Heijden's personal *signature* becomes apparent: meticulously designed entries and gargoyles ornament the streetscape and give his buildings a recognizable coherence. In other words: even though Van der Heijden makes modest architecture, his buildings nonetheless unmistakably show personal, stylistic elements. Although related and often similar, there is a 'creative moment' visible in each of the details that he designs. The three projects that Van der Heijden realized in Eindhoven – in the Van Ostadestraat, the Willem van Noortlaan and the Lochemstraat – can help to illustrate some of these

elements of his personal signature, like his preference for monochromatic red buildings in which bricks, concrete elements and roof tiles all have a similar color.

Is the quality of Hans van der Heijden's work in its ability to modestly fit in with its surroundings, or in its demonstration of the architect's personal genius through meticulously designed details? Arguably, it is both. In that sense, the book does not fully do justice to the work of Hans van der Heijden by stating that his personal signature is a dialect rather than an addition to the existing vocabulary. Dialects rarely have positive connotations as they – to further extend the analogy – are often regarded as inferior and will generally not be used by the 'original' speakers of a language. By viewing Van der Heijden's architecture as a valuable and meaningful addition to the existing urban continuum instead of as a mere dialect, it is very well possible – and arguably also more historically correct – to reconcile the importance of both the individual and the collective within the evolution of architecture.

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1. Hermann Czech, 1971.
2. John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 47-48.
3. Ibid.

[1] Dreits Dorp, Eindhoven (NL), 2014 © Stefan Müller



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