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countless flowers bloom.

*The Netherlands between Modernism and Experiment.*

1

TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION.  
BART LOOTSMA.

# The Netherlands

Form of State: Parliamentary Monarchy since 1848, Area: 41,864 km<sup>2</sup>, Inhabitants (1992): 15,184,000, Capital: Amsterdam  
Gross National Product 1992, per capita: \$ 20,480, Gross Domestic Product 1992: \$ 320,290 Mio, Unemployment (Average, 1993): 8.3%

In 1990 Geert Bekaert and Peter Buchanan were commissioned by SNAM (Stichting Nederlandse Architecten Manifestatie) to give an overall survey of the architectural landscape in the Netherlands. Their inquiry resulted in architectural approaches as represented by Herman Hertzberger, Rem Koolhaas, Moshé Zwarts, Mecanoo, Sjoerd Soeters, Carel Weber and John Körmeling (1). Four years later, the situation of Dutch architecture has changed a lot, or so it seems. Certainly, the above-mentioned names are still dominant. Some of them, for example Sjoerd Soeters and Carel Weber, still enjoy great influence, whereas others like Moshé Zwarts are not as present any longer. Nevertheless, this classification is unsatisfying. With this survey, the interest in the specific differences got lost, and - more important - the buildings these architects completed during the last five years are not among the best. The new approaches and deeper insights these architects doubtlessly achieved were realized mainly in the early 80s, in the case of Hertzberger even as early as around 1960. Therefore there must be a new generation which is able to cope with the former and even to surpass it without any problem. Spontaneously the following buildings come to my mind which are certainly among the best five built in the last five years: the Rotterdam Kunsthal by OMA (1992), the Karbouw Office Building in Amersfoort by Ben van Berkel (1991), a day-nursery in Soest by a group of young architects (1992), the library in Zeewolde by Koen van Kelsen (1989) and the Academy of Art and Architecture in Maastricht by Wiel Arets (1993). Having chosen them raises the question if they have anything in common. At first I thought they have not, and, strictly speaking, this is true. But the longer one thinks of it, the more obvious it becomes that all these realized projects share common traces, a certain mentality, a provoking withdrawal from the current rigidity of the Dutch architectural practice. A selection like this of course always begs the question of whether the buildings selected are representative of

Dutch architecture as a whole. I think they are not, I think they are not even typical of the small number of buildings published in the magazines. Rem Koolhaas and Ben van Berkel studied at the AA, the Architectural Association in London. Wiel Arets studied from the late 70s to the early 80s at the Technical University of Eindhoven, a new school which was - compared to the Delft University of Technology - not restrained by tradition: the reception of the international debate could take place without any institutional resistance. This influence can be traced in many of Wiel Arets' designs. Wiel Arets, Rem Koolhaas and Ben van Berkel taught at Columbia University and at Cooper Union in New York. All of them have an international frame of reference. It is, however, hardly possible to give a representative survey of Dutch architecture on the basis of a few buildings. The most fascinating aspect of Dutch architecture is after all its incredible variety, by which architects of the most disparate trends operate alongside each other: Modernists and Postmodernists, Rationalists and Expressionists, High tech enthusiasts and Anthroposophists, Structuralists and Deconstructivists. If we leaf through the magazines *Holland* looks like a testing ground for architecture where a thousand countless flowers bloom. But honestly speaking, this variety of styles all too often leads to a superficial cacophony. Local councillors in cities like Amersfoort, the Hague and Groningen in particular treated this testing ground as a mailorder catalogue from which, like *nouveaux riches*, they could pick what pleased their fancy till their money was up. After that they opted for slightly cheaper imitations. The filming quarters in Almere and the estate of Kattenbroek in Amersfoort are splendid examples of the shoddy bazaar quality that can result from an approach of this sort. The building for the Dutch Architectural Institute designed by Jo Coenen, commissioned by Adri Duivesteijn, former councillor of the Hague and now director of the Institute, is the incoherent symbol of this form of collector's mania.

Maybe the main problem of Dutch architecture is that it really has no tradition. Of course there were great architects, like Berlage, Cuypers and Dudok, but at least 70% of the Dutch built environment was realized after the Second World War - more than in any other West-European country. So Modernism seems to be our tradition and even our Postmodern architecture, like that of Mecanoo for example, almost always quotes highlights of Modernism. Different to countries like Switzerland, Austria, Italy or Spain there are, strangely enough, almost no monographs on our architectural history by Dutch architects. The only exceptions are Wiel Arets, Wim van den Bergh and Umberto Barbieri (2). Dutch architectural magazines until lately have not paid much attention to topics which had to do with our architectural history. Historical research was mostly left to art history whose interest in history is quite different from that of the architects. Art historians are interested in history as such, whereas the architects are interested in topics which could have an actual meaning.

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Bart Lootsma on his selection of the best five buildings in the Netherlands.

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Architecture as a social programme.

The lack of architects interested in their own tradition led, together with the predominance of Modernism, to a very confusing situation. In the first place because Charles Jencks taught that Modernism was bad (and the Dutch are always prone to accept critical views from Great Britain) and in the second place because it was no longer clear what the ideological contents of our modern Postmodernism or postmodern Modernism really was. This led in 1990 to the famous congress, initiated by Rem Koolhaas: "How modern is Dutch architecture?" At that occasion the critic Hans van Dijk came up with the term "Onderwijzersmodernisme" ("Schoolteacher's modernism"). The result was that from then on every architecture resembling White Modernism was refused as superficial. Strangely enough, the whole debate concentrated more or less on stylistic aspects. Hans van Dijk's lecture had greater impact than the others, because it was held on a separate occasion and was afterwards published in "Archis" (3). The Dutch Architectural Institute seemed extremely happy that this typical Dutch characteristic had been discovered. At first they used it

to promote Dutch architecture in a travelling exhibition with the title "Modernism without a dogma" and afterwards they fought it in their exhibition "Stijl" (4), which pretended to rewrite Dutch architectural history on the presumption that Modern architecture played a very marginal role in it, and a bad one too. The funny thing was, however, that only very few architects and critics tried to investigate what modernity (when leaving out the stylistic aspect) really meant at this moment. And this is where I come to the selection of the buildings I have chosen. The five buildings are interesting because I think that in all of them discoveries have been made in the design process about what the preconditions for architecture today really are. They function as investigatory instruments that expose these preconditions, turning them inside out. As in the case of a coat, you can immediately see how they are made. It is tempting to paraphrase Rem Koolhaas here: "If there is a method in this work, it is that of a systematical idealization, a spontaneous overestimation of the existing, a theoretical bombardment, in which through retroactive conceptual

and ideological acts even the average is taken into account (5). The buildings I have chosen function as certain works of conceptual art do, for examples the "Mirror Cubes" of Robert Morris, that only reflect their surroundings, or the "Condensation Cubes" of Hans Haacke, that show climatic changes inside a closed glass cube. But these five projects are not exclusively didactic. Just as wearing a coat turned inside out is subversive, so these buildings are in all senses subversive. And again I am tempted here to quote from an early essay by Koolhaas about "Neue Sachlichkeit" and about the continuation of the Functionalist tradition.



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to make as smooth a result as possible.

Rem Koolhaas on Architecture.

This essay is a plea for programmatic thinking and for the notion that architecture can have a direct influence on the content of contemporary culture which, according to Koolhaas, is based in the first instance on population density, technology and social instability (6). All five projects are sober and not only because of lack of money. The roughness of their materials and their detailing emphasizes that architecture is about something else, not about the sheer phenomenon itself. When asked about the supposed bad detailing of the KunstHAL Koolhaas replied angrily that according to his impression perfection was not what the world really needed at the moment: "There is an obscene relationship between the completely desintegrating chaos of the world and a strange kind of urge of the architects to make as smooth a result as possible (7)." At present Rem Koolhaas' influence in Holland cannot be overstated. This influence can in part be seen immediately - for instance, in the work of former assistants and collaborators who have started working for themselves, such as Dolf Dobbelaar, Hermann de Kovel and Paul de Vroom (DKV), Willem Jan Neutelings, Kees Christiaanse, Winy Maas, Jakob van Rijs and Nathalie de Vries (MVRDV). More interesting however is Koolhaas' invisible influence, especially on an architectural thinking in terms of programmatic and functionality. Interesting as well is his invisible influence at the administrative level. The reorganization of the Dutch prison system can to a large extent be ascribed to him, and he has also contributed to the fact that highrise developments in the Netherlands have ceased to be a

taboo subject. But the most remarkable thing of all is that Koolhaas has stimulated a number of architects to develop in a similar way new strategies by which architecture could resist the continuous attempts of the politicians and the market to encapsulate it and to exploit its image for their own purposes. Wiel Arets, for example, was a founding member of "Wiederhall" and published several books (8). Ben van Berkel and his wife Caroline Bos have already written many texts (9). This interest for the theory of architecture takes into account the developments of contemporary philosophy. Of all the architects whose buildings I have selected only Koen van Velsen does not write, but all of them are teaching architecture (10). Two of the selected projects, the library by Koen van Velsen and the office building by Ben van Berkel seek for a new formal link to the chaos around and in architecture. Two others, the KunstHAL by OMA and the Academy of Art and Architecture by Wiel Arets do not as much seek for new formal references, but allude to the social conditions. They try to present themselves as a kind of "heterotopia" - a term coined by Michel Foucault signifying places that withdraw themselves from the control of society (11). These buildings serve as social condensers spreading new kinds of thought and behaviour over the city. The day-nursery by a group of young architects led by Ton Venhoeven combines both aspects (12). The role of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy for most of these architects is significant. Traces of his thinking can be found in Koolhaas' approach: the image of the architect as a surfer; the complex

conceptual link of his projects to the city and to the idea of the folded space. In Wiel Arets' project Deleuze's influence causes a conceptual link to the city, whereas the architects of the Soest day-nursery stress the expressionist aspect - as does Ben van Berkel - and use the rhizome as a new kind of working community. It is probably this influence which distinguishes these architects from the former generation; new concepts are constantly worked out in order to be at least able to produce architecture in a rapidly changing society in which traditional hierarchies are hardly to be felt. It is an architecture which does not confine itself to self-sufficiently referring to its own métier as was the case in the 80s, but an architecture representing society and programmatically being linked to it.

The day-nursery "Het Kasteel" ("The Castle") in Soest was designed by the architects Kirsten van den Berg, Daan Bakker, Mirjam Galjé, Matthijs Bouw and Ton Venhoeven. The latter is the only one who is a graduate of the Technical University of Delft. The others are still students there. Since the contract was given to Matthijs Bouw a different situation came about than is normal for a firm of architects. This situation was in fact taken advantage of to explore a design approach that is more appropriate to the current state of the profession. Architects are no longer the authorities, the master builders, they still were at the beginning of the century. The amount of regulations have increased and, what is more, the knowledge required in the process of construction is often so specialized that they have to consult a large number of advisors. The offices employ quite a few assistants on every individual project. They also have to deal with various subcontractors during the actual work of construction. In the Netherlands, these subcontractors are not so wilfully accepting authority, preferring to solve details in their own way for better or for worse. Last, but by no means least, architects have to deal with clients who often take the form of

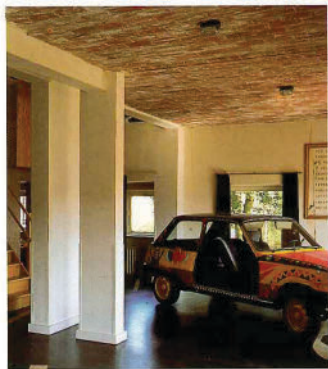
committees. All these people have an influence on the design in one way or another, even though architects try to make it look otherwise. In building this day-nursery the five designers agreed right from the start that they would operate on a basis of complete equality. Not only should every idea be taken seriously, all suggestions and contributions should leave their mark on the final design. This meant, for instance, that they often worked on each others' drawings. In a way this design approach is similar to that of the Surrealists' "cadavre exquis", with this difference however, that there the individual contribution of the participants was always recognizable, which is not the case here. The design developed like a healthily growing root that constantly produces new joints and branches, like the rhizome that Deleuze and Guattari described in their book "Mille Plateaux" (14). The way the project developed, however, was also a lot like a squatting action. The entire interior structure of the original building - a domestic science school of the 50s in a traditionalist style - was altered and a new interior put in its place. The reason for this was not just that the building was to be given another function; just as important, if not more

so, was that the structure of a machine for instilling discipline, - as Michel Foucault has described it (15) and which a domestic science school first of all is - should be largely removed. In its place a structure was introduced that offers the children a small but real world, a world that has to be discovered, where they can explore their own possibilities and impossibilities and that is not completely lacking in danger. For example there are various rooms that are more or less inaccessible for the supervisory staff. According to the designers, Alice in Wonderland is just as much a model for this world as are the street and the jungle. In this sense this day-nursery is the complete opposite of the standard current practice in Holland, where pastel colours and cliché toys constantly remind children of their character as children without ever giving them the chance of developing their own individuality. In addition to Deleuze and Foucault, Witold Gombrowicz' novel "Ferdynand" (16) was a particularly important source of inspiration for the designers.



Exterior view - photo: René de Wit





Room to play for children between 4 and 6 years  
photo: René de Wit



Kirsten van den Berg, Daan Bakker, Mirjam Gallé, Matthijs Bouw and Ton Venhoeven.  
Day-nursery "Het Kasteel", Soest 1992 - photo: René de Wit

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Architecture as philosophy: the day-nursery "Het Kasteel".

Room to play for children to 4 years - photo: René de Wit

