

Book Deventer

By Matthew Stadler
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Review by Shumi Bose

Deventer is a tale of passion and high stakes. It's about love and commitment, battles of ego and struggles of power, hopelessness and recurrent optimism. There are seductions over dinner, boardroom suits — even a jazz-funk soundtrack.

It's not a telenovella, but it is written by a novelist (among other things): American Matthew Stadler has also written on urban history, taught philosophy and tended bar. But the technique borrowed from novel writing is what brings this dense little book about a seemingly unremarkable Dutch city to life. For it is, notwithstanding the drama, a story about the city of Deventer — its built fabric, as well as the attitudes which have formed it. More ambitiously, it is about architectural history and future, the very profession and the society it serves.

Moving to the Netherlands to write a novel, Stadler weaves architectural and urban projects into a grand narrative of his personal relationship with Deventer. Between the master-planning of a hospital site and descriptions of daily pea soup, between a troubled housing estate and the cosy tradition of coffee-and-Deventer-cake, the character of a place gradually unfolds. Stadler draws his portrait from historical research, primary observation and architectural criticism in equal measure. But he is, explicitly, not a critic; his stories must hinge on characters, on intimacies.

And so it is that we are introduced to an expansive cast of players involved in shaping a city: councillors, planners, financiers, strategists and landowners. They are made familiar, with vivid descriptions and even helpful phonetics (YAWN HOH-fers, for example, for Jan Govers) so the reader may intone their names, get to know them. Pivotal to most of the stories is the architect Mathijs (ma-TICE, rhymes with ICE) Bouw, principal at the Amsterdam-based office of One architecture, whom Stadler had first encountered as a high school philosophy student in New York.

The first building encountered is perhaps One's most successful: St Jozef's medical-care facility in Deventer. Bouw's most visible coup de grace sees a historic structure sliced open and glazed, exposing not only the operations within but also the tensions inherent in its material fabric. St Jozef's fits into a larger plot, to which we return later, but it is the book's most emblematic project, symbolising an attitude of openness advocated by many architects and

planners of Bouw's generation. It is an attitude that challenges and threatens the role of the architect at the same time, and one that informs all of the projects which thereafter describe the city of Deventer.

According to Stadler — who wants to see 'architects at work in the most commonplace and vital circumstances', the future of the profession lies here, in small unnoticed victories. In drawing this conclusion, he first has to sketch — in broad strokes and accessible truisms — a brief history of Dutch architecture, passing through a patronage of Spanish and Dutch churches, CIAM founder JJP Oud, and his respondents in the Delft and Bossche schools.

The 'Catholic' architecture of the Delft School, burdened with tradition and 'place' as opposed to the concurrent light-filled Internationalism, is rendered as 'a stern, loving father you long to approach but also fear'. One architecture's decidedly 'Protestant' design for St Jozef exposes the complexity of this style — Bouw's glazed cross-section reveals an old brick skin masking a concrete frame; respectful historicism occluding a progressive core.

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Inevitably, we come the influence and supersized success of practices such as MVRDV and OMA. Rem Koolhaas appears as a commentator and sometime-mentor to Bouw, showing enough faith to collaborate with him on an unrealised scheme for Les Halles in Paris. Following OMA, wherein the shaping of space moved beyond deconstructivism towards a kind of radical psychoanalysis, came a generation of smaller but no less strategic practices. One architecture established itself among these. In 1999, the practice exhibited in a show called 'Big Soft Orange', together with Crimson Architectural Historians, NL Architects and Maxwan; curator Michael Speaks dubbed them as the 'managerial avant garde'. Motivated by public concern, these practices were unafraid to untangle the layers of neoliberal bureaucracy left by previous generations. Indeed they were happy to frame all that grey matter as an extension of the architectural problem — and just as liable to structural innovation.

On to the more problematic site of St Gertruideen, a sizeable chunk of Deventer owned by a hospital with no clue how to operate in the real-estate market. Drama builds through the application of the 'managerial' method, using ruthless business acumen to force design solutions

into the packaging of land. In a high-risk game against greedy developers, Bouw's team keeps 'power' on the side of the hospital, writing design strategy into contracts.

Approaching Deventer's urban problems through intimate dialogues and portraits — at a scale one can relate to — the reader is lulled into the banalities of city politics and capital investment. Belying a depth of understanding, Stadler amicably evaluates restaurant decor while hands shake across dinner tables. At this proximity, it is possible to eavesdrop on Deventer's decision-makers; a close reading allowed by the insistence on open, transparent processes. Even the local football stadium — football being a convenient lever in reaching the everyman — becomes a tool for paralleling the city's architectural, and by extension, existential condition.

This closeness and attendant possibility for empathy keeps the narrative compelling, even though it falls out of conventions — architectural critique with not a single photograph and nary a plan, both of which would have been useful. But unlike technical drawings, the naive watercolours which illustrate this book are easy to read,

more human — maybe more fitting for a 'profession which, a hundred years ago, promised us humanity'.

Towards the end, the tone leans towards the evangelical. The economic crash of 2008 changed everything — strategic young turks like Bouw would find it harder to take advantage of brush, confident developers and play them at their own game. Financiers became timid, and so too the architecture they waded through. But open-ended processes, involving the agency of many stakeholders and protecting public interest against speculative greed would produce, we're told, 'sites of lived freedom'.

It is a repeated folly to place too much faith in buildings; alone, they cannot produce democracy or social cohesion. But if an architectural process is necessarily understood as one of lateral engagement and inclusive agency, the idealism presented through Deventer's built fabric is not so irrational. The Dutch have, by necessity, excelled in the organisation of flows — first of water, then of goods and merchandise. 'The architect or planner who wants to work,' writes Stadler, 'must now manage the flow of social capital.'

