

From Realism to Reality.

A Future for Dutch Architectural Culture

An Interview with Pier Vittorio Aureli and Roemer van Toorn

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Architectural currents rarely pass away on a given day. For the success-story of Dutch Architecture over the previous years, however, such a momentum actually seems to exist. Before this day, the Dutch architectural society held an absolute faith in the idea of “Super Dutch”. Generally spoken, there was simply no question about it. It was almost like a patriotic issue. And then there was this lecture Koolhaas’s at seminar in Delft. It was obvious that he would complain about this state of affairs, because the whole Superdutch movement was pointing at his own position, almost pinning him down. At first, he discussed MVRDV’s Villa VPRO and then ended talking about the critical deficit of the “Super Dutch” movement. After this intervention, everyone suddenly agreed that the “Super Dutch” was no longer a good, as if they had been feeling that way for a long time, but didn’t dare to speak up. It was exactly this general “coming-out” that started the After Party.

But as precise as this momentum was, as vague was its meaning. The shift it supposedly symbolised has been described in many words: a lack of commissions, a hollowed-out architectural debate, a frustration with the realised architectural Utopias of the 1990s, the crisis of a self-centred discipline... In search of a critical analysis of the current state of affairs, a debate took place in the Berlage Institute, the postgraduate laboratory that has been both at the centre and the margin of Dutch Architecture. Roemer Van Toorn, Head of the Projective Theory and Ph.D. Program, and Pier Vittorio Aureli, Unit Professor at the institute, confronted their views on past and current architectural developments in the Netherlands.

(After the) Party?

Nearly every voice seems to argue differently about the current crisis of Dutch architecture. Before starting a debate about the ‘After the Party’ condition: do you actually believe that there is a crisis in Dutch Architecture and what would this crisis then be about?

RVT : For me, the success of Dutch architecture over the last decades is based on something the Dutch have always been good at in history: the combination of extreme pragmatism and aesthetic novelty that is able to reflect a process of modernization. The last 30 years, the Dutch landscape has become increasingly artificial under the influence of the processes of individualization and globalization. The government, property developers, architects... all have been devising new experiences and imaginations in an attempt to map and react to this new reality. A vacuum had been created in which an unprecedented degree of innovation had a chance of success because nobody knew what the appropriate response to this hyper modernizing situation really was. The transformation of social democracy into a particular

variant of free-market neo-liberalism – the Polder-model politics – generated a specific political situation, a landscape of consensus. This landscape of consensus celebrated the centre of Dutch middleclass society and had as effect that the Netherlands americanised thoroughly. But, just before the Dutch became aware that a perspective beyond the horizon of the free market was needed, the economic recession started. Public housing policies and other public and cultural agendas to support the collective were put on hold to promote the economy of sprawl. Public infrastructures were sold to private parties while a moralistic ideology of a we against them emerged after 9/11. Not only in politics but also spatially the social cohesion between different cultures and classes is falling apart. From tolerance the Netherlands transforms into a society of fear. Before, architecture and urban design saw a task in representing the common good, the public sphere. Today, architecture is no longer asked to refer to the collective. The discipline has become a spectacle celebrating its own autonomy; architecture and especially design have become a mass-mediatised religion. The result of this *design religion* is a landscape of beautiful - and at times sublime – incidents that exist devoid of the problems of society at large. Instead of questioning neo-liberalism, Dutch architecture has above all aesthetised and pacified the many contradictions and problems present in the urban landscape of the Netherlands.

PVA: I agree with Roemer on the importance of the political situation at a time when critics celebrated Dutch Architecture. In the 90's, there was this unprecedented political context in which architects could promote ideas about the city and about architecture. It was a kind of post-ideological approach to government with a clear acceptance of liberalism. The neo-modernism in architecture responded very well to this political situation. But once it became clear that this branding of Dutch architecture was nothing more than a grouping together of things without a serious critical vision, it ended with a feeling of dissatisfaction, a feeling that something is really missing. But this is not only a problem in the Netherlands. This is the general problem of the architectural debate in Europe: for about 30 years, there is a lack of convincing, controversial, critical statements that have the ability to generate discourse, that can get beyond the purely journalistic commentary on the “party” and the complaints after that party.

So the “After the Party” situation is part of a more general tendency, both in architecture and society?

RVT: Actually, this “After the Party” situation might create a positive momentum. Instead of “just” embracing the many mutations of late-capitalism - as alibi for innovative architecture - we should start to question the imperial logic of late-capitalism and develop alternatives. Late-capitalism is not just a success story. Now that we have acknowledged that human existence is at least as much about fantasy and desire (the everyday and populism) as it is about truth and reason, we face the problem that we have lost any interest in continuing a social and collective project.

PVA: I agree. To me, it is important to correctly situate this moment in the history of architecture and certain conditions of its production. Architecture emancipated itself from 'master building' in the fifteenth century. At that time a new figure emerged: the Architect, a hybrid between the artist, the carpenter and the intellectual – indeed a carpenter who knows Latin, to put it in Adolf Loos' words. The Architect is not just a gifted craftsman, but a singular person who has to convince a better organised institution such as the Emperor, the Pope, the Republic, the State, the Community or the Politician. And to do so, the architect needs to have an idea, a vision, a *Theory*. The original meaning of Theory is to have an idea how things can be put together, an idea of the world. Architecture is to have a vision, based on an intelligible and interesting idea. When architecture is not about that, then we don't have architectural culture; we have what Roemer would call a "design paradise".

The problem with the 'Super Dutch' is that this label belongs to a very problematic trend in architectural criticism, starting in Europe in the eighties: the death of critical theory and the beginning of regional branding of architecture. This branding slowed down the reflection on styles and forms, and shifted the focus to functions and programmes. Regional branding is the most powerful cliché of cultural globalization. It proved to be a very easy, feasible and ideologically flexible container to promote architecture.

Reality & Research

You described mapping as an attempt of architects to understand and react to an ever-changing reality. Over the last 10 to 15 years this technique was seen as a very important design technique, a pragmatic architectural research. How would you judge the importance of reality itself for Dutch architecture?

RVT: Architecture's love affair with reality started in the sixties. The idea that utopia can only blossom when the existing landscape is cleared of all its old symbols by an authentic revolution that revealed the naked body of our existence was no longer seen as true. People understood that late-capitalism cannot fully colonize everyday life, potential alternatives are always available, since individuals and institutions arrange resources and choose methods through particular creative arrangements.

It was the moment when the Smithsons declared: "from now on we collect ads". These insights helped Rem Koolhaas to construct his Delirious New York in which he foreclosed how a passion for the real – by being complicit – could indeed lead to realized utopias. So the touchstone here is not a subjective purified vision – the architect as artistic genius - but an addiction to extreme realism. Sparked by the analyses and method of Koolhaas, a general consciousness emerged among Dutch architects that late-capitalism is not only a system which generates the bad. It is so complex and dynamic that it is also capable of switching automatically from an alienating equilibrium of control into a potentiality for multiple freedoms.

PVA: But, there is already a problem in the use of terms like “reality” and “market”. When critics or architects are using these terms, they believe that this vocabulary is completely transparent. There is no consciousness that behind these words, there is a range of incredibly rhetorical gestures. For example, there was a habit of using images or data of economical facts as a representation of “reality”. But this was done with so much nonchalance, that it turned discourses and researches into metaphysics. This naïve belief that through mapping you are making the world transparent is absolutely a mistake, and a big misunderstanding of what architecture really is.

Would you say that this is the malaise: the realisation that architecture still needs its own vision on reality, its own tools and tradition; the very same elements that the Super Dutch movement largely abandoned in their extreme realism?

PVA: In order to understand the so-called malaise, I think it is crucial to understand the precise meaning of “architectural research”. During the Super Dutch decade, this word has been reduced to a fundamentally pragmatic meaning. We cannot continue thinking that architectural research is about discovering new facts. Research must confront its nature, which is also and foremost the production of rhetoric, the production of representation. However, even when you are really pushing for that ideological consciousness, you also need to be conscious that architecture is nothing more than architecture. One should be aware of this challenging situation: on the one hand architectural discourse has to put forward a vision, but at the same time it has to deal with an abstract matter that is architecture-in-it-self. Nevertheless, this balance between vision and an abstract structure is very important; it is the balance between idea and matter. In that sense, research in architecture should not be stretched too widely. It should be a conscious act of selecting relevant and pertinent topics, in which this dialectic relationship between *idea* and *matter* is evident. The “passion for reality” of recent mapping-research has been often too much simple-minded, too random and too opportunistic and has therefore not succeeded to produce an interesting discourse beyond the fancy evidence of *reality as found*.

RVT: Indeed, the what I have called “passion for reality” has led to a landscape of incidents and anecdotes. The architect is condemned to operate as designer of the program of requirements set by investors, managers and alike. The only true free space the architect can claim can be found within aesthetics. For example, it is no coincidence that public housing, an assignment by which architects could actively contribute to both society and the city, has disappeared under the pressure of privatisation.

Are you suggesting public housing as a central theme for contemporary architectural research?

RVT: Architects do built many houses, but they hardly do research into what living could be. Form no longer follows the function, but architecture is all about telling stories: ‘We need a good story, and we are willing to pay for it,’ says Rolf Jensen in his book *The Dream Society*, written for the real estate developers of the future. Life is often conceived as the harmonious collaboration between the theatrical setting designed by the architect and the free market. In short the market has massively discovered the psyche of the individual in search for new markets. In the past we concurred the globe in search of new markets now we invade in the inner world – the interior – of mankind. This tendency suffers not only from a lack of imagination but could generate a whole series of new opportunities too which hardly anybody is researching right now. I ask myself for why architects such as Koolhaas don’t undertake a Harvard research project on living. Especially now that design and architecture are high on the agenda of the public at large, we should try to counter the Ikea-revolution and come up with better ideas of what the the idea of home in an urbanised world could be.

PVA: I fully support what Roemer is emphasising: we should start again to invest in proactive research rather than in retroactive broadcasting of what is “out there”. We cannot just wait for some intriguing input or opportunity that suddenly provides us with some intellectual excitement. We really have to act more pro-actively, in order to not only propose solutions, but possibilities for the future. We need to take the risk of choosing for a clear direction. Even if this seems politically incorrect, it can provoke the discipline beyond the aesthetics of the evidence. Roland Barthes once stated that when you are doing research, you should question or challenge the *Critical Verisimilitude* of the moment. Barthes defined this as what is not clearly expressed through choices but is still discernable as a certain aesthetic of the audience, as an automatism. Barthes argues that “*Critical Verisimilitude* prefers evidence”, and today this evidence is provided by a series of demiurgic and unquestioned key-words such as “dispersion”, “pluralism”, “multiplicity”, “difference”, “complexity”, “flexibility” and so on. Of course, these words are not bad in themselves, but the way they are so easily charged in architectural research is increasingly problematic. The task of research should be to *proactively* criticise these words and definitions. Now, unfortunately nobody is challenging these words or at least showing that these words do not represent the totality of the world.

RVT: I believe that you can only be truthfully proactive when you practice critique from the perspective of a possible alternative. If that’s not the case, you end up with the proactive work of a lot of contemporary Dutch architects are producing, which is always the next prolongation of the actual, designing a kind of super present.

Curatorship & Newness

It is surprising that the lack of pro-active research doesn’t seem to result in fewer publications, exhibitions or less debate on architecture. And maybe the current state of Dutch architecture is emblematic for that: there is the general feeling of a slump we have been discussing before, but simultaneously we can observe a growing amount of

international publications and exhibitions on this very same Dutch generation of architects.

PVA: There is a very important difference between the intellectual work of the modernist avant-garde and the current architectural and artistic discourses. For a long time, the debate in architecture was a collective, almost communitarian enterprise. Think for example of Team X. These groups discussed collectively about a possible direction, and shared an aspiration for a collective agenda. This role of setting the agenda has today been taken up by a very crucial personality: the curator or the broadcaster. The crucial difference is that this figure is not obliged to take full responsibility for his *Weltahnshauung* or his work. Curators present the work of others by using demiurgic and often neutral thematic containers. These containers are all-embracing, do not provide a precise direction or initiate a discourse. And this is one of the main problems of the 'After the Party' condition: in the end, the group of people that is *making* the architectural scene is not interested in constructing provocative collective ideas or precise shared agendas. They aim at conquering and maintaining their own position within this scene. This is not a problem in itself – all major architects in history have done so – but there are more interesting ways of doing this by involving others in a controversial debate about the discipline. And in this sense, from my point of view, the 'After the Party' condition is a problem of curatorship, not a real problem of architects; it is a problem of magazines and biennales that don't know what to launch next.

What you are saying reminds me of a recent exhibition by AMO in Brussels, 'The Image of Europe'. In this exhibition, AMO described the EU as an institution full of complexity, constantly expanding, constantly reinventing itself and constantly redefining the very concept of what a contemporary union could be. This description precisely matched AMO's depiction of the fashion brand Prada. Looking through the publications of OMA/AMO, you can trace these very same descriptions in projects such as Universal, Lille, etc., all the way back to Delirious New York. The consequence is that the architectural firm is not really describing the client, the firm or the political body they are working for. While operating as a ghost-writer for these bodies, the analyses are no longer about the clients, but they are about the firm itself. They present OMA/AMO as a kind of 'Party of Institutionalised Revolution'. While in the 70s this position was culturally valid, continuous revolution and newness have become a household strategy deployed over the last thirty years that has lost its value.

PVA: I think this is a crucial point. In the early avant-garde, revolution and newness were very controversial issues because they were immediately associated - in ideological terms - with an effort of social and cultural emancipation. Today, technology and science are presented as the core of a post-ideological newness. Thereby, newness has become tautological. I am tempted to paraphrase the famous dictum of Tolstoj about beauty: "It is amazing how complete is the illusion that newness is goodness". We really take for granted that newness per se can create a perspective of cultural and social innovation. This is a very

crucial theoretical issue that we urgently need to address: is newness an opportunity to structurally promote a certain cultural reform, or is it a tool for self-promotion? In the second case, the value of newness is again limited to the society of architects and will not lead to credibility in the eyes of authorities and normal people. The 'biennale newness' entertains in the biennale pavilion but is totally unaffordable within the normal conditions of the city. Without advocating populism or a return to the 19th century city, I think the crucial question is whether this innovation is only interested in producing a certain extravaganza, or there is the will to structurally engage again with the city, to represent an idea of the city. In the second case, the absolute faith in a neutral, technocratic newness is a dead end.

RVT: I agree with Pier Vittorio, but I would add that 'the new' *can* be an excellent weapon to be pro-active too. Novelty can have the quality that it appears foreign to us, it challenges us to look further, and it can provoke us to think again, to be engaged beyond the cliché. A lot of contemporary Dutch architects produce only an illusion of 'the new'.

PVA: When I said that a building is representing an idea of the city, I mean *building* and *city* in the broadest sense as human things *par* excellence and not as simulacra of images or as just-shapes. Architects and critics are constantly failing in recognizing in the simple formal aspects of architecture the traces of our experience of the city, of our being within the city. They are constantly looking for some pedagogic meaning, for some iconology, for messages, for 'content' through which they can go "beyond architecture". I share the desire to go beyond architecture, because as I said before, architectural culture exists only when there is a vision even beyond the matter itself. But this vision can only exist when there is a precise consciousness about architecture and its limitations. The conscious struggle with these limitations is what gives to the vision its reason to exist.

Consciousness and Continuity

Pier Vittorio, your use of the word consciousness seems to specifically point at a consciousness of this limitations of architecture. In other words, you are warning not to put the entire world in front of the architect, but to talk about the material an architect can work with: form and space. Roemer, what you said before seems to be different: you defined communication as one of the crucial roles of architecture.

RVT: I am not interested in architecture as object. Architecture is for me nothing else than a unique and specific medium to communicate. Dutch architecture today has found an excellent answer in giving form to the revolutionary conservatism, or the creative destruction late-capitalism is generating. Today we observe a reaction that advocates a return to the basic principles of architecture because the shock of the new and the resulting chaos is frightening. I am afraid that this tendency is not able to address the many problems our contemporary society is facing. Architects need to take into consideration what the performance of their architecture is. So in that sense, we should not give in to the rhetoric of the discipline that

proposes the recognition of the basic principles of architecture as an alternative. A back-to-basics is not enough-

PVA: In the 90s, it was a common aspiration of architects and especially of the so called *avant-garde* to break the classical rules of the discipline. Now, the problem of this rhetoric is of course that the more you do that, the more you stimulate this awful nostalgia for the basic rules. What is very important is the incredibly interesting challenge of architecture as a structure that wants to be something else: it wants to go beyond its own constraints but nevertheless it always remains itself. It is important to realize that only architects go to *see* a building; the essence is the experience of a building: the building is the theatre of certain experiences and desires that people have. So this conceptual movement of architecture from being nothing more than an absolute structure and wanting to be at the same time something else is so incredibly interesting. And this movement will not exist if an architect does not have the consciousness that architecture is also itself. This is for me the reason why it is still very interesting to think of architecture as a representation of the world.

Your description of architecture as “a structure going beyond its own constraints but nevertheless remaining itself” bears a resemblance with the notion of ‘nothingness’ in the way it was proposed in Koolhaas’ essay ‘Imagining nothingness’. He describes nothingness as an abstraction of design that is not generating the typical sterile minimalist project, but that allows for decisions to be taken by somebody else than the designer.

PVA: *Imagining nothingness* is certainly a great and controversial piece of Theory. And I would say we are lacking this kind of visions that were overtly controversial but so full of ideas. Many people read that text as something very particular of the 80’s and 90’s, but the idea of *nothingness* is in fact the essence of western thought: the persuasion that the "entity" is nothing, a persuasion so radically linked to the undisputable faith in the "becoming" and to the historicity of the world. *Imagining Nothingness* was also a new way to deal with abstraction, a way that is not about elegant minimalist boxes or cheap anti-form theory about the city, but about the sobriety of thought. Many years before Koolhaas would promote this concept, this mentality, this vision was the key inspiration for what I would consider the most crucial urban vision for Europe drafted in the last 50 years: the vision for Berlin as Green Archipelago made by Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas in 1977. The style of research provided by this urban project is still extremely interesting to address the city through architecture. It is a bold theoretical vision that goes beyond architecture itself. Off course, *nothingness* was overlooked by the pragmatism of Dutch architecture. I remember young architects reading this essay and concluding “let’s get rid of architecture”. So in order to be used by the younger generation, critics reduced nothingness to a cheap conceptual ready-made. For example, in the literature that celebrated the Super Dutch nothingness makes a come-back. But for this purpose, its meaning has been shifted entirely to a purely iconic

reading: it is no longer an enabling sobriety of thought, but it describes the use of low-profile and cheap materials in buildings.

To end this debate, it might be interesting to reverse this “After the Party” attack on Dutch Architecture. So we would like to know what you consider the major architectural contribution of Dutch architecture. What are the newnesses that will stand through time?

RVT: Before Dutch architecture celebrated its image, it had a profound interest in the program of architecture, the content of architecture. Not merely the functional requirements of use, but the organisational qualities of space and how through movement a certain performance could unfold. That’s one thing. Furthermore, there was the awareness that you should accept society the way it comes: Utopia is now. Instead of ignoring our dirty reality of highways, airports, asphalt... the Dutch started to open their eyes and faced the many mutations of modernization. Another aspect is that the Dutch are very innovative and creative designers. The American academia is now imitating the Dutch “method”. They are very well equipped and their theories and techniques of *datascaping* are more advanced than the Dutch, but their “translation” into designs is a horror. The Americans are lost in translation; they are ~~still~~ caught ~~in~~ by formal experimentsation. Just like the International Style exhibition at the time made Modernism fit millionaires. The Americans have much better theorists to explain it, but the designs they produce are boring, they lose their provocation, they lose their manifest character. And last but not least, the Dutch government understood that investing in culture benefits the information economy better than anything else. In fact it marked a paradigm shift from investing in society as a whole into centres of excellence such as the Berlage Institute. Instead of investing in an average cultural climate, you propagate an avant-garde creative class. This shift helped tremendously to build up a culture of examples, to build a culture of manifestos.

PVA: To me, as an Italian, this *After the party* condition resembles the late eighties in Italy when the so-called *Tendenza* generation disappeared as a media attraction and nobody was able to replace their position and theories. So from that point of view, I would suggest not to always waste energy in reinventing the wheel: it is much more meaningful to develop a radical attitude of continuity towards certain researches, but then with more ideological awareness. Though we have been criticising the missing rhetoric and representation of this phenomenon, it would be totally unfair to discredit the high quality of Architecture in the Netherlands in recent years. We can still learn a lot from it, especially by historicising the phenomenon and understanding its structural affection on the design practice. But we can also be more precise and rigorous in our understanding that architecture is not only smartness of design, but also a crucial intellectual work.

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