

Autonomous Architecture Against Splintering Urbanism

NFI from Claus and Kaan & Parkrand De Nijl Architecten

A lot of Dutch architecture, such as that of OMA, MVRDV, NOX and UN Studio, is heavily influenced by carefully charted data flows. The architects are not so much interested in form as in organization of content. Not standstill – such as making a point – but permanent movement that can develop along a line, is what it is all about. In opposition to this we find architects who believe in the autonomous power of form which can persist independently of the time-dependent programme. According to the proponents of autonomous architecture, the enigmatic form that arises from the organization of content is incapable of resisting the homogenizing ravages of privatization, lifestyle architecture, the proliferation of brain parks, the overdose of iconography, in short the ‘Ikea revolution’ currently taking place in the Dutch landscape. Strong form, such as developed by De Nijl and Claus en Kaan, demonstrates how powerful forms are resisting splintering urbanism.¹

Instead of inventing yet another new fashion in the battle for consumer’s attention, De Nijl investigates how architecture can embody and represent the collective memory of the city. It is not the changing life of individual use or of the programme, but how the permanent elements of architectural language can render the city legible that is of overriding importance for De Nijl. How does De Nijl arrive at a durable urban framework in the face of a constantly changing programme? In the Parkrand housing development in Osdorp, the freely divisible floor plans made possible by loadbearing facades ensure plenty of scope for programmatic mutations. But the design approach that really counts for De Nijl is that of the scale, type and the rhythm of volumes and spaces. ‘Typological analysis,’ says Henk Engel of De Nijl, ‘uses the fact that the recognisability and communicative powers of forms are based on the (historical) experiences shared within a culture, creating a common background.’² The existing city furnishes the designer with material from which a certain typological composition can be developed. De Nijl honours the ideal of the open city embodied in the Van Eesteren’s General Extension Plan for Amsterdam (AUP, 1935) by adjusting the dimensions, scale and detailing of its six tower blocks to fit in with the Zuidwest Kwadrant redevelopment area in Osdorp. Unlike the windows in a residential area of freestanding houses, the prefabricated window panels in De Nijl’s housing scheme have no autonomous meaning. Because of the use of a single prefab element for the whole project, the windows do not stand out from the surface of the urban volume but are a seamless part of it. This application of the prefabricated panel emphasizes the fact that architecture at the level of the detail can be part of the whole, that it is in the service of the collective expression that determines the city in Osdorp. This treatment of the volume not only ensures that the project conforms to the ideal image of post-war housing, but also reveals in all honesty the true face of economical industrialized housing construction. To satisfy the demand for a distinction between private and public spaces, De Nijl introduces a typology that does not appear in the modern city à la Van Eesteren. Rather than planting the towers in an anonymous sea of green, they are arranged in pairs on a U-shaped base that opens towards the park and closes towards the street behind. This courtyard-like typology introduces a new idea of community into the AUP. The diffuse character of the open rows of housing in this urban area is enhanced by combining an open layout with the ground-level occupation of the closed city. Instead of caving in to the forces that fragment the city, De Nijl raises the idea of the modern city in the AUP to a higher plane.

Claus en Kaan's Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) in Ypenburg also distances itself from the fractured city. In contrast to the context in which De Nijl realized its plan, the suburban landscape of Ypenburg offered few useful starting points for the design and the building accordingly stands apart from it. The purity and perfection of the boxy volume of black steel bands interspersed with the glazed storeys, is in its Donald Juddian abstraction almost nothing but a radical form.¹ Like the Neue Nationalgalerie of Mies van der Rohe in Berlin, the NFI stands on a plinth. From the higher placed laboratories you look out over the spaghetti of motorways. Passing motorists can observe the forensic laboratories at work from an appropriate distance.

It is as if Claus en Kaan have stacked the gridded black roof plate of the Nationalgalerie four times, one on top of the another. Inside the NFI, these Miesian undertones of representative monumentality turn into a monumental introversion. When you finally enter the NFI, after having been screened in the mousetrap-lobby on the ground floor, you arrive via an enclosed escalator in an imposing, monumental hall 70 metres long, 7 metres wide and 7 metres high. The light slits in this huge hall are so narrow as to afford no more than a glimpse of what goes on in the inner sanctum of the NFI – it is the spatial expression of the fact that the NFI is a stronghold of secret information. The building is organized around six internal patios bounded by a 1100-metre-long corridor with offices on the inner side and four storeys of flexible laboratory spaces on the outer side. The building behaves as a small town. The monumental hall, with restaurant above it, is the town square. The various work clusters around the patios form private workspaces and the street with laboratories looks out over the suburban landscape of Ypenburg.

The expression of mobility and change is outside the scope of autonomous architecture according to De Nijl and Claus en Kaan. Architecture should confine itself to designing the stable, permanent structure of a society. It should express values of community, institution and the idea of the city rather than creating space for the many false fads splintering urbanism.

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1 See also Anne Hoogewoning, 'Walled enclaves', pp. 00-00, about the typology of the enclave in the work of MVRDV in Ypenburg, and of Sjoerd Soeters et al. in Haverleij.

2 In: Henk Engel, 'Autonomous architecture and the Project of the City', *Oase*, no. 62, entitled 'Autonomous architecture and the project of the city'.

3 See also the essays by Riken Yamamoto in the *Beauftragt. Claus en Kaan Architekten*, exh. cat. Aedes, Berlin 2003.