

Do-It-Yourself

There was no mistaking what the girl in a train somewhere in the Netherlands was saying to her boyfriend on the other end of the mobile phone line. 'I don't have time to think about my country or about politics. I think about myself. I think about taking risks. I think about enjoying myself. Most older people are so attached to old values. They belong to the "what if" generation and we belong to the "why not" generation.' This one-sided conversation is an example of the trend towards 'individualization', of a growing aversion to organized collectivity in whatever form, be it churches, political parties, or even architecture. Contemporary Dutch society is all about what the sociologist Ulrich Beck calls the 'do-it-yourself (DIY) biography'. It is about how you, as an individual, can shape your own life, including all the risks this entails, now that Nanny State has hauled in most of its safety nets.

Government in the Netherlands no longer believes in its public task. It is busy selling off its collective interest to the private sector. Seventy per cent of housing construction is now in the hands of one corporation which in turn is financed by a single bank. Private initiative is celebrated as a triumph over the monotony of bureaucratic intervention. Individual prosperity is the be-all and the end-all. Long live market forces! The retreating government gives each individual their freedom back. The result is a boundless landscape of DIY initiatives. Everyone tinkers with their own DIY biography. Every individual has become his or her own brand.

What today's householders worry about is the price of their stock market shares, the value of their home, or whether it looks good, what kind of car they drive, what they are able to do in their spare time, whether they can walk the streets in safety and how they can shape their career. Weeding one's own garden is much more important nowadays than worrying about other people. In the new suburb and the new city, public space appears to play a negligible role. You park your car behind a fence on your own territory. Householders are afraid of everything unknown that might jeopardize their possessions, their private freedom. Public space is transformed into a private domain where all the neighbours are 'your type of people' and from which 'others' are excluded. The countryside is turning into a golf course dotted with eclectic castles and modern villas while urban public space is increasingly dominated by the particular interests of privately owned shops, businesses and the tourist industry.

This new Dutch landscape is inhabited by dual earners and middle-class pensioners. Developers, contractors and investors are homing in on this market en masse. They are buying up all the available land in the Netherlands in order to profit massively from this DIY group. This is the new mediocrity that is gobbling up space all over the country. The articulate consumer is delighted to live in a gallimaufry of styles. The market allows them to choose from a veritable smorgasbord of ready-made housing options in the style of Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright or some other style of their choice. Mix and match is allowed, too, of course. This production of lifestyles in the form of private property has become the motor of society. These are lifestyle packages that do not go much further than the easily digested chunks we are familiar with from the world of Walt Disney and the big DIY chains. The innocence and haste that characterizes most home buyers is exploited chiefly in the interests of conformity. Behind the individual facades the contractor installs standardized details and floor plans that are worth nowhere near the price the occupants pay for them. The prime consideration is not the quality of the dwelling or

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of the public space, but the profit of the market.

In our individualized society, people are increasingly forced to protect themselves against all manner of risks. Public space is becoming less safe. Given the choice, householders would prefer to retreat onto their own private and secure island. A job for life is something else that is fast becoming a thing of the past. You have to be extremely flexible to continue to find work in today's employment market. And the government no longer guarantees a comfortable pension, good-quality health care or safe food. In short: your quality of life depends in large measure on DIY initiatives aimed at excluding as many risks as possible. This is a 'risk society' where people's willingness to venture into the unknown is shrinking by the day. Small wonder that householders opt for a risk-free, amateurish DIY lifestyle architecture.

The question is how individual development might transcend such a market-oriented DIY lifestyle. Fortunately there are still one or two architects, developers and investors around who, in defiance of the new situation, do their best to bypass this sell-off of the Netherlands with its plethora of standard solutions. Theoretically, the strength of DIY biographies should result in more qualitative differences rather than individual differences that are in effect all the same. Architecture, too, should in theory be liberated from one dominating architectural idiom. Architects should be able – without embarrassment – to build in any style they like.

On Borneo-Sporenburg, the City of Amsterdam gave the inhabitants of the Binnenhaven area the opportunity to realize their dream home. Instead of having the ready-made solutions favoured by investors and contractors foisted upon them, future residents developed their project on their own. Each dwelling here manifests a distinct identity. No two are the same. And it is the differences that count. If the government is serious about giving every individual the opportunity to write his or her own biography, it must at the very least allow more scope for genuine DIY biographies of the kind developed on Borneo-Sporenburg.

We associate lifestyles with the parading of the logo of a particular brand name. On Borneo-Sporenburg we find that the DIY biography produces a super-individual logo. Everyone has their own spatial condition and authentic exterior. The dual earners who set to work here, display their true DIY biography. But how public space is to be developed in this individualized society remains an open question even here.

The remodelling of the Utrecht town hall by Enric Miralles is DIY of an entirely different order. Miralles's interpretation of the historical phenomenon of the buildings passes beyond a DIY 'lifestyle'. Here various historical vestiges are welded together to form a new history. Sundry traces from the past become the focus of attention in a new bric-à-brac collage that is a reflection of Miralles's preference. The architect's DIY interpretation of the history he encountered in the buildings, results in a nostalgia for the present. Present and past allude in the town hall to a past that has never existed. The biographical DIY talent of the architect Miralles stimulates a harmony of diversity.

It is not only traces from the past that inspire the DIY architect; these days the new building materials and typologies thrown up by our new economy also belong to the architect's vocabulary. The virtual blob architecture is the most extreme example of this. There is no official architectural ideology any more. Anything at all can inspire the DIY architecture. Meyer & Van Schooten fitted out their architectural office in a classic factory building with the help of containers. Instead of a meticulously designed, high-tech space with a high design quotient, Meyer & Van Schooten opted for the non-design informality of the container and other low-cost dockland materials.

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An eclectic DIY architecture is also possible. Marx & Steketee forge disparate building types and styles into a whole with such ingenuity that each individual element of the monastery in Vught retains its own identity. Thatch, a roofing material associated with farmhouses, is employed here to roof a modern auditorium. But that is not all. A cantilever reminiscent of MVRDV's WoZoCo flats in Amsterdam, lends another annexe its own unique identity.

The new dual earners in the Dutch landscape prefer, if at all possible, to realize their dream on their own patch of land. All sorts of individual ideas can, in consultation with architects, result in something rather fine. A good example is barn-like shed in North Drenthe designed by Onix architects. The DIY biography manifests itself in the hybrid programme of terrace, garage and fashion house combined here into one highly crafted volume. It is surely no coincidence that many of the newly rich, such as Bill Gates, started out pottering about in their own garage or shed.

For those who can afford it and who are also not lacking in taste, these DIY biographies can result in very special buildings. We have moved beyond self-consciousness in that we now realize our dreams without reference to imposed ideologies. However, there is a shadow side to such individual DIY fantasies which are more often than not the product of all kinds of corporate conventions, such as commercially-dictated lifestyles. And when collective space is no more than an accumulation of such DIY dreams, with their fear of public space, what price the public realm where people can meet and address the unknown?

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