

Duelling in skin

Interview with Wiel Arets

Roemer van Toorn *Wiel, in the past few decades you've made a name for yourself with spectacular projects here and abroad. You've won several architectural prizes within a relatively short time, and you also make significant contributions to architectural education. Where does this intense concern with architecture come from? What is it about architecture that interests you?*

Wiel Arets For me, architecture is a way of dealing with life, a way of looking at the world. Which doesn't mean to say I'm only interested in architecture. But when I go to an exhibition, for example, I look at it as someone who is himself engaged in design. I want to know how the artist works, why he or she does certain things. I think every artist, film director, writer and good architect uses his discipline as a medium for expression, as a way of giving shape to life.

RvT *How does this personal interest in architecture relate to the significance of architecture in society? Is your architecture a criticism of society?*

WA As an architect I operate as a part of society, not as someone criticising society. Architects, artists and writers represent what is going on in society. I think that as an architect you are a part of a society that wants to progress, that is always looking for new ideas. If I look at the detail on the new Porsche, the way the glass roof more or less disappears, that's a detail that appeals to me. Or the possibilities that now exist to do cancer research in space. How is NASA approaching that, what are the logistics? That fascinates me.

RvT *But shouldn't you do more as an architect than simply represent this reality?*

WA There are two ways of doing architecture. Architecture can please people, or like a writer chart accurately what is going on in society. The majority of artists, writers and architects are out to please. Innovative architects on the other hand, like Rem Koolhaas, Herzog & de Meuron - and I would like to put myself in this category - are called critical, because they pointedly express a view which is not commonsensical. We are probably to some extent ahead of our time, we probe the boundaries of what is possible in society, and this is regarded as critical. The difficulty is that the work that such an architect does has to be comprehensible to the public, which is not always easy. The way you have to learn to drink a good wine. Most people would rather drink an eight-guilder wine than one that costs eighty guilders. One has to learn to appreciate the taste of a very good wine.

The most you can do in this situation is give an initial impetus to 'combinatorial thinking', as one of my favourite philosophers, Paul Valery, described it. Valery's thinking relates to a world in which two things put together produce something. The person reading it is the binding agent. Not only what you are presented with but the various combinations you are handed make possible what he calls combinatorial ability.

RvT *If what you aim for is combinatorial thinking, what is your attitude toward a client?*

WA I will always listen very carefully to a client and take his programme very seriously. I will also always look very closely at the situation, and the opinions of the contractor for example, the building advisor and the acoustic advisor are also important to me. But that doesn't mean I don't go beyond these factors. I listen to the most varied opinions about the proposals I make, because from them I can often derive innovative solutions which include something for everybody.

I'm not interested in clients who commission something and say 'great, you're a good architect and that's it'. I'm interested in clients who have an opinion of their own. For example, I have a commission to build a small museum on an estate with a small castle. The client in question told me that not only did he want a building for his art collection but he also needed room for his chickens, his gardening tools and for growing chrysanthemums. Together we decided to put all of that in one building, art under the same roof with the chrysanthemums and the chickens. It interested me because in the castle the art had always been stored in spaces where people lived, where all kinds of goings-on are mixed up.

RvT *You say you don't always adapt, that you look for unexpected solutions in a dialogue with clients, among others. But aren't there certain pre-assumptions beside that which influence a design? For example, there are a lot of art historians who think art should be exhibited in a white, neutral space.*

WA I think that's nonsense. Art isn't best shown in a neutral space. When we see a window in a museum, we all say: 'wonderful'. I hate seeing art put in a sterile environment. Art belongs in a context. Do we have to look at art artificially for five hundred years? Buildings are torn down too. Art isn't that sacred.

RvT *Does the exchange with all the parties involved lead to other ways of organizing the programme for a building?*

WA When we got the commission to build the Academy of Maastricht, the government had put together a list of requirements which pointed toward a division into little compartments. When I saw that, I immediately thought: we shouldn't do it that way, and I proposed choosing an opener structure and abandoning all of those conventional classrooms. The building is now designed transparently, the various disciplines can watch each other at work as a result of the open studios. In addition, I added parts of the plan in a flexible correlation to the opening up.

RvT *Is that why you are also sometimes involved in designing furniture?*

WA For the main office of the AZL pension fund in Heerlen we also designed the furniture. We did that because we needed a certain percentage of acoustic material in that space, and also because we wanted to add visual

divisions. We thought it would be a good idea to serve those functions with an intelligent shelf design, and because no such design existed we made it ourselves. So we only design furniture when it isn't already on the market.

RvT *Apart from the client, the dialogue with the surrounding naturally plays an important role. Can you say something more about this? Your work is often compared to that of Tadao Ando. Do you see this as an accurate comparison in this context?*

WA In brief, Tadao Ando wants to bring nature back into the city in an artificial fashion, and that's not my overall concept. I want much more to take the urban or modern condition as a point of departure for my buildings. You can tell that the Ceramiek office near the fly-over in Maastricht needs the motorway. The road has an absolute impact on the building. It's not a matter of the form of the motorway but of the programme it offers. I was inspired by the film *Chunking Express* which contains images filmed in Hong Kong, of escalators and motorways moving very closely alongside houses and thus entering into an intimate relationship with them. This produces a very new, different urban space.

RvT *In many European cities you are faced not only with tabula rasa conditions but also with historical surroundings. How do you deal with this?*

WA At the AZL office in Heerlen they wanted to tear down the old office. I decided to preserve a part of the building. I thought it was important to keep some historical traces. We plugged the new building into the old site, and now you can read its history. This is something I find very important. I always try to read myself into an existing site. A building should decipher the code of an existing site, in order to create a new code inside it. From the deciphering the building can win the energy it needs to change the situation in a positive sense.

RvT *The surrounding, the dialogue with the client, the building's programme and history all play a part in the realization of the project. In one way or another we can trace these qualities in the building. To what extent does the façade play a role in this? It's not for nothing that you speak of the 'skin' of the building.*

WA The skin for me isn't the facade of a building. The skin encloses the whole building, which lodges itself in the skin of the city into which you cut a building. When I talk about skin, I don't only mean the thickness of the building but also the earth, the skin of the earth. Half of my building is lodged in the earth. Why is this interesting to me? Because I have a feeling that the earth has a kind of porousness, and this porousness, this infiltration, also exists in our society. In the skin, social and political factors find expression. I want to see the political, social and economic character of the city as material, because I feel you can communicate something with it.

RvT *So the skin has different meanings at different levels? Can you give a few examples?*

WA For the city of Almere we recently designed a theatre in a restricted competition. This building, which remains unused for most of the day, is situated on the water in a prominent place in the city. We came up with a façade that reacts interactively to sunlight and opens up like a flower in the daytime. So that the façade is less influenced by the theatre's programme, but plays with the intensity of sunlight. As a result the building enters into a relationship with the environment.

Another example is our design for a cinema in Groningen. We designed toilets for it, ladies and gents together, with urinals for men and women, behind a large common area which allows communication. At the moment you go in, a red light comes on and the transparent glass door becomes an opaque glass door. The skin, seeing and being seen, continues indoors. In this the route plays an important part.

In the Almere theatre the performer enters in his jeans, and that performer I bring very close to the public, but on a slightly different level. The audience enters in dinner jackets and meets the performer via a slightly different route. At the moment that the curtain rises, a reversal has taken place, for the performer has suddenly become a different person. At the moment they are different, they meet without touching; a little later they stand face to face and need each other. That tension is what dictated the whole theatre design.

RvT *The manipulation of the skin, in which routes play an important part, doesn't produce a comprehensive perspective, but aims to string fragments together. What is the benefit of this?*

WA It's true that I'm interested in the fragmentary. The fragmentary allows the possibility of seeing now this, now that. The police station in Vaals has a crisis centre, with an enormous sloping window placed two metres above the area. There's rarely a crisis in Vaals, but in case anything ever does happen we made screens which can block the view from the outside. Apart from that crisis centre there's the kennel, from which the dogs bark at you, the administration, of which you only see the corridor, the entrance door, the entrance, which you pass into, followed by the moment when you run into the hat collection. The whole building has interpenetrations related to the programme but invisible from the outside.

RvT *The skin can embody both a public and a private sphere. How do the public and the private relate to each other?*

WA That depends on the nature of the commission, of course. You want to be able to sit at the table in your pyjama's in the morning sometimes and if you do you won't find it pleasant to have big windows onto the street. Although I do find it exciting when - as is the case in my own house - someone coming in can see a person in the bath in silhouette. People are much more curious where the private sphere is concerned. We tease people. They think they can see something but in fact they only just fail to see it. I don't want to eliminate these things. Public buildings are more like semi-public buildings to which public space is related quite directly; I'm intrigued by this voyeuristic condition. I think we're living more and more in a society in which private and public are

allowing their former identity to become more nuanced. When you're in your own house, you should be able to be aware, more than in other places, of your individual self. On the other hand, houses have acquired an increasingly public character, TV has entered, as has the telephone. I suspect that we'll soon have two kinds of buildings, buildings with a public character in which you are private, and buildings with a private character in which you are public. I also think office buildings will acquire certain programmatic aspects which have more to do with living, I think that leisure starts to enter offices. I'm convinced that for example in a few years, swimming pools, saunas, etc. will be added to houses as well as to offices. At the same time people will be working at home more. In the office we've found that when you introduce private facilities, it benefits you in terms of business. A space with a comfortable chair is now seen as a space where people communicate with each other and that communication leads to productivity. What you see is that both in houses and in public buildings, the elements of private and public life are mingling. There will probably always be a difference in emphasis. I built my office and house here, but they're really two offices and two houses. If this office goes, you can make this architectural bureau into a house with a simple adaptation, by adding a bathroom. In residential areas you can thus create conflict situations. Living and working in these areas breaks through the negative monotony.

RvT *How should I understand the transition from the public to the private? Is there a firm borderline or a gradual transition?*

WA I've never made a building in which that borderline was hard. There is always a transition. There is always a kind of slowing down, a gradual process. For me that's very important. Everything has an introduction. I often even find the preface and the epilogue more interesting than the central part. Even in the case of a housing design in Groningen, where you walk out of the elevator straight into the living area, as in the American model, the elevator as we designed it acquires a very interesting transitional quality.

RvT *Adolf Loos thought that when you design a bank, the building should convey that the client's money is safe inside it. What is your view of a representational role for architecture?*

WA I would think it odd to design a bank which led people to think, I'm not bringing my money there. But let me take my Boxtel police station as an example. It has an exterior made entirely of glass, although police stations are often approached aggressively, and though there's a complex of cells on the inside. That led to a big discussion, because the client wanted a sturdy skin, one that would radiate strength. My idea was that a glass skin shows character, that this apparent fragility conveys strength. It has an additional advantage. If we ever have to demolish it, glass is better for the environment. We should take the environment into account. I think we should deal with our resources shrewdly. Another point is that when someone breaks one of the glass plates, it's easily replaced. Whereas a smooth stone front can be irreparably damaged if someone throws a stone against it.

RvT *To what extent should I take the design of the Boxtel police station, which suggests a stack of containers, as a statement about the police as an institution?*

WA People ask that kind of question about all of our buildings. The simple fact is that we articulated the glass front for three reasons. Firstly, it has to do with the fact that light penetrates much further into the building when you build the blocks separately and only connect them at the communication area. Secondly, it gives the units a kind of independence, they become a series of small offices next to each other. Thirdly, it's fascinating that you now suddenly perceive the building. The building is on a busy street where people drive fast. There is no parking at the front. A ramp between the parking lot and the building takes the visitor to the entrance of the police station. On this spot there is an opening in the building where visitors are confronted with the busy street at the front of the police station. This is a fifth front. We can't actually speak of the front and back of buildings.

RvT *When a building eludes institutional representations, isn't a sort of collective memory created which is suggested by the autonomous form?*

WA At the Almere theatre the glass film façade folds open and shut under the influence of the sun. It's not an autonomous gesture. Under the influence of the sun and what happens inside the skin keeps changing its character. A different example. The stairs and porch in front of my office and home in Maastricht aren't an autonomous gesture which merely requires an empty space. The porch enters into a relationship with the surroundings. When we had an office here and had only just come to live here we were greeted with several boxes of champagne. The neighbours wanted to surprise us in the garden. But after we had been in the garden, everyone said goodbye, for several hours, on the porch on the street side. It's a place where you welcome people and take leave. You do it in public.

RvT *Herman Hertzberger would say that a porch needs an awning. If you don't do that you make things uncomfortable for social man.*

WA Yes, but I put the awning in the garden in the shape of cloth screens. An awning indicates permanence. In front of the office and the house you take leave briefly. If the leave-taking then takes three hours, fine. But if you put an awning over it the nature of the porch is institutionalized too unequivocally.

RvT *In the design of the porch you try to go beyond the unambiguous determination of meaning. Is it true that you avoid this latitude in the details? That you on the contrary strive for a high standard of perfection, in which nothing is left to chance? There aren't any dirty details like the screws in Gerrit Rietveld's Zig Zag chair, are there?*

WA I can take you outside and you'll see that we used a cement frame made of wooden planks, where we screwed the screws in a fraction, so that there is an imprint of each screw in the cement. I could easily avoid this detail by filling or by choosing a different way of securing the boards. Contractors always

propose doing this. By using a material like wood we give more character to a austere material like cement. At a second reading we see irregularities in the material. In our boards you can see the grain of the wood if you stand closer by. When I talk about precision I'm interested, like Rietveld, in the place where the screw is applied. I think that when you look at the Rietveld chair, you see immediately that it's put together with screws. I think you should never see the polish. The virtue of the Porsche is that you can see from a distance how it's made. That's why I'm more interested in the Porsche than in the Ferrari, because I think the logic of the making and the influence of the condition for which the form was intended is very important. What I find so fascinating about the mooncar is that you can tell from that car what the moon looks like.

RvT *The artist and filmmaker Wim T. Schippers once went over the body of a Parisian taxi with a hammer, as an art object, and then spray-painted it. He wanted to undermine the car as a status symbol and still leave it as a car. Wouldn't your Porsche improve if you dented it all over and then painted it again?*

WA I don't like that kind of thing. For me everything has to have a reason which emerges from the making or use. I would never use a bent form because I like arched forms. The arched form I use has a reason within the logic of the use or the situation.

RvT *In your buildings the structure and the arrangement of the space is not only crystal clear but also emphatically present. While in the films of Lars von Trier and Jean-Luc Godard, which you admire so much, one is not made aware of the order and the structure at all. Is less more?*

WA The big difference between architecture and film is that in film you remain passive while you are psychologically open to all kinds of filmic experiences. When you're moving through a building you're like a cameraman. The viewer walks through the building and sees things by manipulating the route. That's why the route is so important to me. The construction appears simple, but I can only do that because I take certain measures which you don't immediately realise. The route in the building is, in principle, the route that in a film is the cameraman's route. Thus you get a complexity which also emerges in the work of the two filmmakers you mentioned. What I find fascinating is that both of these directors often have different scenes interacting with each other in very different ways. That is something you experience constantly in architecture as a viewer. Most films don't stand out because they tell a story which is unusual, but because they treat the age-old story of Joseph and Mary, as Jean-Luc Godard does in the film *Je vous salue Marie*. I think this is also true of my work. After the second, third reading it becomes more and more interesting. I don't seek complexity of form, I seek complexity of content. I seek polyphony of content because it allows a multiple reading.

RvT *Almost all films take place within the commonplace. The lived experience in an everyday space is central. Is it your intention to address yourself to the commonplace in your architecture, as many artists and architects now do?*

WA For me architecture is not an commonplace affair. When I go to a bakery, I choose a specific bakery. I don't think the baker I choose makes a commonplace product. When I go to the bakery where I get my bread, I can smell that the man is a Titan in his field. Just the smell of the bread. I don't have to have anything on it. I'm not interested in every baker's, cobbler's or artist's work. I make very specific choices. The problem with a word like 'commonplace' is that it suggests a kind of dunning down of our culture. We live in a society where you have to be commonplace, you have to do things everybody understands. If you don't get good ratings you don't score, you don't get funding.

I do feel we should allow that commonplace to exist. I'm a person who's very absorbed in life, because I feel we can learn from it. The commonplace has extremes which fascinate me, inspire me. The commonplace is routine, but also has astonishing extremes. I like going to a bar in Maastricht, which has existed for as long as anyone can remember. I also go to events which attract large audiences. Of course I took my children to Disneyland. Though I have to admit I left with a migraine.

RvT *So you do think there's something valuable in the commonplace?*

WA The commonplace is not packed with innovations. The commonplace revolves around conventions and banalities. Even so the commonplace can teach you things. The fashion designs by Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, which I find very innovative, are obviously inspired by the extremes of the commonplace. I can be inspired by the cultures of a country, by a documentary film, or by a person I meet in a café. It's then my task to transform these experiences or to reshape them into something else with the aid of materials and details which together make an innovative product. I'm not out to achieve innovation as such, I'm out to make something with character, something which can play a part within the surroundings, which can recreate those surroundings. If you don't manage that, you haven't made a good building.

RvT *Inside your buildings many varying notions come together in a space. All sorts of experiences are transformed or reshaped. You create an abstract multi-linear conjunction of all sorts of readings of the context and the programme. What does this give you?*

WA What I find fascinating is the duel. The communication of opposites. There is always communication everywhere. I do my utmost to allow the glimmer of the outside world to penetrate when you're inside a building. Communication is essential. I try to allow conflict situations to live on: as a positive conflict, as something that doesn't work negatively, but where the conflict leads to a relationship. Two poles reinforcing each other.

RvT *I sometimes see that you get involved in panopticon effects. Like the conference room in the AZL pension fund which hangs over the entrance? Are you trying to provoke a dialogue between the chairman and his employees?*

WA This conference room looks like an authoritative space. But it's the space that belongs to the former mineworkers who founded the pension fund. Thursdays between 9.00 and 11.00 these former mineworkers can get information about their pensions. They are also served coffee in this space. I put these people in a public space. The mineworkers look down from this space at the visitors who come into the building via the wide front steps. The tension is that this space belongs to the mineworkers and not the board of directors. Is that power? It's a voyeuristic game full of positive conflicts.

RvT *Watching and being watched often plays an important part in your work. What do you hope to achieve by this?*

WA When the head of the National Library in Berlin gave me a tour of the building by Hans Scharoun, he told me their library often figures in films, like *Der Himmel über Berlin* by Wim Wenders. Scharoun's library inspires interesting films because it realizes a complex consciousness within its contours. A great many people have met in this library, fallen in love, even wedding announcements in the paper name the library as a perfect meeting place. What fascinates me is that a building like a library, where you go to read books, appears to facilitate so much communication without people talking to each other. That interests me. And that has everything to do with the way in which people look at each other and are looked at.

RvT *It happens less and less frequently that people meet in a public space. Do you think the architecture of a public building has the responsibility to compensate for that alienation?*

WA No, it doesn't have anything to do with responsibility. I'm interested in artists and architects who express something in their work which puts forward a certain point of view, to which you can take up an attitude. A building should have character, provoke conflict. Something has to happen which makes you think. The worst is a kind of neutrality.

RvT *So convention should be fought. People should go out looking for discoveries, but you don't care what direction?*

WA No, as long as it's not commonplace. The commonplace for me has to do with loss of personality, with the total loss of energy.

RvT *You make very precise, accurate, beautiful drawings and models perfect in their representativeness. They're always neat, orderly, and structured. We rarely see in your publications the use or the surroundings. The life which is given space in the buildings can be imagined but isn't present in the representation. What are your reasons for choosing these orderly representations?*

WA There are two reasons, and at first it wasn't at all conscious. Principally, I feel a building should have a kind of timeless quality. If you have people with certain hairstyles walking around your building, a photo would be dated after three years. I feel that as the architect I should never put myself in the

viewer's shoes. That's like meddling. As an architect I should make a product with which a viewer can do something with his own ability to comment. The user should be able to construct his own story in the building. When you photograph it, you should let the product speak for itself. The same goes for a film. If you go to a film you want to see the film, not the heads of the people in front of you.

RvT *It strikes me that in a representation you focus on the objective aspects of the building, while in their use it is dynamic experiences which are central. Isn't that a paradox?*

WA In every building I design I strive for a dynamic connection with the context. When the picture is taken I don't show that. That's true. Because then we're talking about another medium. The photographer doesn't show the architect's reading, he shows his own reading of the building. I don't see the photographer as serving the architect. So you shouldn't see the photographs and the books which have been done on my work as the vision Wiel Arets has of his own work.

RvT *We all know that in the world of architecture, publications are very important. Photographers who interpret your work wrongly may have a harmful effect. Why do you work so often with the photographer Kim Zwarts?*

WA Kim Zwarts will always show the building in detail. I find that very important. Using black-and-white photography he avoids simplification in a very subtle way. You begin to see the poetic, almost mysterious character of his work. The pictures, which we often choose together, make you think. A single one of his pictures says a lot about the work. That's important to me. A photographer doesn't have to document in the sense that if you've seen all those pictures you know how the building works. Photographs are totally different from reality.

It's like a director making a film about my buildings. Or a writer putting one of my buildings in a novel or a book of poetry. Each discipline launches its own point of view. All of those points of view taken together, and the more people go and look at it, the more they can make something of the work.

Translation from Dutch to English Sam Herman