

Fresh Conservatism

Landscapes of normality

Introduction

The sort of economies of signs and space that became pervasive in the wake of organized capitalism do not just lead to increasing meaninglessness, homogenization, abstraction, anomie and the deconstruction of the subject. Another set of radically divergent processes is simultaneously taking place. These processes may open up possibilities for the recasting of meaning in work and leisure, for the reconstitution of community and the particular, for the reconstruction of a transmogrified subjectivity, of space and everyday life.

Scott Lash & John Urry

The landscape in which we move is becoming increasingly artificial. There is much talk of a second modernity. Old values and instruments no longer work. Property developers, architects, artists, banks, the media, scientists and multinationals are all devising new spaces and images in order to give a lead to this new reality. This incoherent situation allows for plenty of room for experiment. The smoothly operating newness of everyday moments is something that attracts many innovative or critical designers. A vacuum has been created in which an unprecedented degree of innovation has a chance of success because nobody knows what the appropriate response to this situation really is. Research, analysis and experiment are being promoted by almost all the parties that have a stake in the artificial landscape. There is scope for a host of inventors of the new.

In this article I want to describe the potential and the dangers of a strategy that makes no bones about operating, not outside the second modernity, but quite specifically in and with the complexity of "ordinary" everyday life with all its contradictions. True, many experiments do not go beyond a tendency that I will call Fresh Conservatism. In the end Fresh Conservatism achieves the opposite of the potential behind the basic principles of this approach. Simply defined, Fresh Conservatism is a tendency that presents the normally discreet character of conservatism in a spectacularly fresh fashion, as a work of art. This freshness is of course itself an inseparable part of our conservative industry of spectacle. I will go into this in detail later on.

"Sir, your coat is ringing"

In posh restaurants, portable phones are increasingly being forbidden while customers are eating. For a small moment while we are dining, traditional values are upheld; the influence of our information economy is however unstoppable. It is not surprising, then, that the waiter is often obliged to come to your table to let you know that the phone is ringing in your overcoat in the cloakroom. As Scott Lash and John Urry explain in "Economies of Sign and Space", the identity of space and place is undergoing radical change due to the pressure of a new sort of modernity. Social structures are in decline and are being replaced by a structure of flows, i.e., a set of information and communication structures. Social inequality and social class are no longer determined by an agent's position in the mode of production, but instead by one's position in the mode of information. We can no longer explain this new modernity in terms of the contradictions produced by industrial society between feudalism and the nineteenth century. A new modernity is now penetrating our everyday lives with the utmost discretion, by way of normality. This time however, there are no political explosions or revolutions. This hypermodern world - or rather, this second modernity - of everyday material and immaterial objects is experienced and consumed by all of us, while at the same time it virtually always escapes our vigilance, no matter how determined. We need to learn to look closely in order both to escape the fresh hypnosis of this hypermodernity and to be able to assess at their true value the different qualities of this second modernity that lie concealed under the skin of society. New concepts, instruments and forms need to be devised if we are to operate within this second modernity in a fashion that is active and not consumerist. In

short, we long for new fantasies and experiments. This search for, and creation of, a new space for experiment is a fascinating quest, but there is also a danger lurking in it. I call this danger Fresh Conservatism. This is because the second modernity, while it enables us to find new possibilities - an immanent radical space and aesthetics - is also accompanied by an excess of political blindness. This illiteracy is generated by a middle class without perspectives. Disneyfication and museumification are the order of the day. This middle class culture almost makes us feel nostalgic for the social commitment of the traditional bourgeoisie. A striking feature is that this middle class, more than any before it, is colonizing the world. For a long time now they have been at home in our worldwide second modernity, while ordinary citizens remain confined to their national borders.

Towards an operative criticism

Criticism should not be unmitigated opposition, nor should it be confined to noncommittal observation from the sidelines. Much criticism is one-dimensional. Either it is in search of ultimate truth or else it ends up endlessly historicizing in its ivory tower. It is both important and difficult to tell the truth, but playing the game in practice, taking risks as a critic and investigating what can be done in practice, is even more important. Play the game as critic and show what the limits are. Architects deserve to be helped, not just by burning things down, but also by building them. We should be looking for new routes and for a different perspective. It is not so much a matter of thinking about something but of creating movement. As a critic, my aim is to understand the recording, illustration, observation and history in the light of the present situation and of the possibilities contained in our second modernity. My analysis stems from a deliberately subjective position. I don't merely illustrate; I also want to help think up solutions. Speculation, experiment and a readiness to make mistakes are part of this process. My analysis will therefore be thoroughly imbued with my own ideas. Subjectivity and observation should be understood in relation with each other. Thinking from a subjective perspective means that one sets to work out of a sense of incompleteness and in a spirit of speculation. And it is precisely this that is involved in the practice of architecture. The absolute does not exist in reality - except perhaps for a moment in the virtual world of the academy. I think it is time we began experimenting both in theory and practice.

Fresh Conservatism

For the sake of clarity I will first define what I mean by Fresh Conservatism. John Travolta hits the nail on the head in the Fresh Conservative film, *Pulp Fiction*: "Whatever you do, do it cool". Being fresh certainly means impressing people with one's perfect health and lust for life. It means being open to new impressions and concepts. Being fresh makes you cheerful. If you are fresh you don't let on when you're tired. There is no trace of dreary routine in freshness. You are open-minded and not colorless. Freshness also stimulates the discussion and sale of an argument without it necessarily being a debate about content. Freshness is short-term. Conservatism means clinging to existing values. It rejects all radical reforms. Conservatism is synonymous with what is lasting. Its aim is to defend and restore accepted values. Something is conservative if it is packaged in what exists. Today we can understand conservatism as having to do with the blissful mediocrity of worldly possessions. Typical of this kind of culture is that all disagreements can be resolved if the parties involved are willing to enter into dialogue. The potential of our middle-class culture for assimilation has of course surpassed all expectations. It is a process of leveling under the guise of fragmentation: all kinds of utopias and totalizing dreams are disqualified. People prefer moderation when it comes to conflict-solving. When we combine freshness with conservatism we get a result that fits perfectly into our present cultural climate. Of course we want to preserve what we have, but we are also looking for the new, for challenges that satisfy us as individuals and that also prolong our comfortable material and immaterial abundance. Fresh conservatism stands for a condition in which deregulated capital and social democracy complement each other perfectly. Culture plays a decisive role in this game. It is a fresh pill that acts like dope. Fresh Conservatism is a situation where a certain degree of conflict (subversion and radicalism)

serve as stimulant and identity, thus forming an essential element in a fragmented society where the results of conflicts in power and interests are swept under the carpet. Fresh Conservatism presents the phenomena of fashion and style as the manifest products of an insoluble tension between the ongoing attempt within the supermodern metropolis to achieve individual differentiation and the increasing tendency of modernization to homogenize and level all difference, including human difference. Style emerges as a paradoxical form of protection. This style bestows upon the individual a sense of stability and unity and imbues him and her with a sense of superindividuality, of belonging to a society; it counters the tendency of capitalism to fragment and divide different social groups. And at the same time, style and fashion are also a means of individual expression so that one can still preserve some last semblance of individual freedom. Fresh Conservatism keeps us out of mischief. It throws up fresh ideas nonstop, amusing us and keeping us happy. But what is it all about? Where is it leading? What are its goals? In a moment I'll take a look at what Fresh Conservatism has in store for us - its new instruments, forms, ideas and untold possibilities. But first of all, a word in your ear...

Fresh Conservatism & Radical Immanent Architecture

In my view, the thing that makes the development of a provisional utopia within our second modernity so difficult and at the same time so interesting is that many dimensions of Fresh Conservatism are potentially exemplary - namely of how to create a different and better oppositional architecture, film and art. Walter Benjamin remarked that we are capable of picturing the utopia to come because it has already left its traces in the now. It is as if the future has returned and left pieces of itself with which we can configure a different future. It is worth identifying what are the interesting dimensions implicit in Fresh Conservatism. There are new possibilities... and dangers. First, however, let's look at the similarities between Fresh Conservatism and the radical immanent architecture that I argue for.

Return of the "Realwelt"

Popular culture seems to be making a comeback in the world of architecture, film and art. Commonplaces of our everyday experience are rediscovered and reinvented. We no longer feel a need to escape the "Realwelt"; instead we are eager to step into the river of our second modern everyday lives. The idea of opting for another, alternative world no longer seems interesting. Culture products are no longer simply talking about themselves but are engaged in a "crossover" with other systems and fields. Professions are being redefined; new instruments are being developed. Things are combined that we previously couldn't have dreamed of. In short: this postmodern condition, with its decentralized individualism, can create gaps that oppositional practices can exploit - practices that can no longer remain within the bounds of narrow specialist fields that have no meaningful connection with the everyday world.

Increasingly art and architecture are breaking free of representation as generated and maintained by the system. Priority is given instead to real presence. Simulation begins to wobble on its pedestal. We no longer want to remain dependent on institutions. There is a need to break open a whole range of everyday conventions and stereotypes. Public information should no longer be aestheticized. Attitudes of distance or objectivity are shunned; instead people seek contact and interaction with the other in everyday reality. The position of architects and artists is being dismantled. It is no surprise then that the phrase, "relational work", is on everyone's lips. According to Nicholas Bourriaud, the new work of art is "relational"; its content is the interhuman experiences that it generates; every visitor becomes a spectator, discussion partner or next-door neighbor. The new art does not rely on any passive experience to restore contact with user and viewer; the keynote now is active participation. This architecture and art aims to coincide with reality. It is not so much a will to abolish the profession, but more to liberate it from institutional-representative structures, from the extolling of autonomy and the tradition of critical marginalism. It is a plea for acting and experiencing. It is inspired by a utopian desire to connect with time and reality, both being

understood as fragmented. The traditional role of architect and artist are being reviewed once more. If it is to discover reality, the profession must reinvent itself. Strategies and programs are devised that are the result of getting one's hands dirty in everyday reality. They speak the language of our mass production and circulation - of popular culture, in other words. It is an architecture against architecture, an art against art; it does not attack the profession, rather it is a response to the mass presence of the other. The attempt is made to break free of space in the sense of demarcation, dependency, central management, centralized order and control. It aims to link up more places at once, so as to escape from the suffocation of the enclosed.

Pessimism is old-fashioned

This new optimistic attitude distances itself from deconstruction and from the belief in fragmentation and the impossibility of totality. That does not mean any retreat into worshipping simulation and the impossibility of reality. The nostalgic image of the historical city has no fascination for it. It regards all ideas of the ground and tectonics as the permanent foundation for socialization of the site as being doomed to failure. There is no longer any sympathy with the permanent criticism of society or with the paralyzing impossibility of making a better world - an attitude that degenerated into a strategy of negative criticism. Intellectual pessimism would appear to have turned into its opposite - an optimism of action. Life is no longer thought of as a linear process, but as a complex totality that is full of contradictions. We are all guilty of - and we all profit from - the boons of schizophrenia and media addiction, the ecstasy of self-destruction and the seemingly total lack of borders. The important thing now is not the identity of architecture and art but what they can do - always depending on a specific territory and cultural program.

The superpresent as commitment

Commitment is found in the context of the everyday. These artists draw their inspiration from the second modernity. Fascinated, we wander through this second modernity, we get our kicks from it, unconsciously we use it; it may even disgust us, but we hardly ever - if at all - give so much as a moment's thought to it. Non-design, the non-places, the yes-places, the outskirts, the terrains vagues, the utterly normal, the museumification of our inner cities, the theme parks and the everyday character of our mass culture is their chosen theme and inspiration. As specialized tourists, they record all the new phenomena that operate in our everyday space. They do this with gusto and utmost jollity; with a roar of laughter and an enthusiasm that is often naive, they put off passing judgement. These intellectual cowboys gallop through our worldwide citified landscape. With great efficiency and without once letting the word "aesthetics" pass their lips, they outline what amounts to a new aesthetic full of functional and pragmatic argumentation. A world is opened up where the presence of the past in the present has ceased to mean anything. Commitment is found in the context of the perfectly normal. They are not so much interested in the architectural objects as such but far more in the activities that take place around, inside or through the object that is plonked down in a specific (urbanized) spot. Words such as emancipation, humanism or criticism are alien to this idiom. Theirs is a practical approach. Photoshop-ping a building or likening a master plan to a Gruyere cheese are more appropriate in our second modernity. With work schedules full to bursting, they build onto the new space. They bowl over existing preoccupations that the market too knows are no longer effective. Research and analyze reality is their motto. Cooperate with the system, the market, the rules and the norm. Don't reject them; make them work for you. We are all in the wave machine together. Discover the gaps and holes in our ever-changing condition. Be optimistic and be not sparing in one-word replies; more is possible after all than your prejudices can predict in advance.

Practice

The architecture and art that I am talking about is at home in the landscape of normality but it also turns it upside down. If everything goes smoothly, it radicalizes the mainstream - by becoming an intrinsic part of it. It strips bare a second modernity that for many people is

(unconsciously) experienced as authentic. It no longer makes sense to try and preserve the traditional values of before the industrial revolution as a hearth of resistance or a refuge for quality of life. The spaces of hypermodernity have long since become commonplace. It no longer makes any sense seeing TV and image culture as the great Satan, as part of a technology that has laid waste the authentic moment of the past. Authenticity is no longer to be found in some sort of grounding; its permanence is of another kind. Authenticity is much more the act of interpreting. Authenticity is a process of constant becoming. Our infrastructural landscapes are no longer any non-place; they are an activity of placing that becomes meaningful through different subjective moments. We no longer experience ourselves as homeless in our automobiles. The car is the ultimate place for letting yourself go in total privacy.

It is time we took a look at:

- 1) the strategy for these alternative practices
- 2) their fields of interest, and
- 3) the means these architects exploit

1) Strategy

Experiment: "the startling unpredictable new"

The new generation of architects virtually always begins with research. They analyze that which is so normal that we almost fail to see it. The "Realwelt" is their field of research and observation. They dismantle that which we would normally take for granted. This is important because it is precisely through normality that is so unobtrusive we hardly notice it, that our supermodern life is changing so decisively. In the work of MVRDV for instance, systematic data are of crucial importance. They see the city as a datascape. They use a method based on "systematic idealization", a spontaneous overestimation of whatever is available, a theoretical barrage in the course of which, due to retroactive conceptual and ideological interventions, it is possible to integrate even mediocre elements. The program of requirements, which sometimes seems impossible to comply with, is followed to the letter as are the complex and stringent Dutch building regulations.

This attitude of making such an extreme commitment to constraints and regulations is a risky one, because the claim of realism to have a cognitive function is both a source of strength and its Achilles' heel. Political correctness is of course always lying in wait for those who fail. Despite these dangers, however, the experiment with the "Realwelt" remains the basic aim; this is because it is in the margins and gaps in the supermodern that one discovers those "unclassified" realities that chime perfectly with the "Realwelt" on the one hand, while turning it upside down on the other.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch was concerned with the utopian function of new cultural practices, arguing for the deliberate development of what he called the "Novum". "The startling and unpredictable new ... is always at the forefront of human experience." By this Bloch meant "the qualitative reutilization of the cultural heritage." He stressed that if art were to contribute to ideological transformation it would have to make people aware of the critical power of subjective hope for some future development as a driving force for change. In this connection Bertolt Brecht stressed that "true realism" (daydreaming) needed to change as times changed, that such realism was not an aesthetic based on ideal types drawn from a stilted tradition but a political vision based on real struggles in contemporary daily life that the masses could identify with. To achieve this constantly changing focus on a changing world, experimentation is essential; new and changing aesthetic devices are required, as is the recognition that true artistic freedom also means being prepared to risk failure. The purpose is not to tell the truth to a passive audience, but rather to provide structured possibilities for thinking about the nature of capitalist and socialist relations and of the spectator within them. Experimentation is a way of merging critical enquiry with constructive action. Experimentation in architecture and art is thus a way of combining critical enquiry with constructive action.

Absolutely fabulously radical

The fact that these designers speak the language of our times, does not mean that they don't distance themselves from mass culture. They express their opposition through a degree of unease, radicalism or subversion that at the very least provokes the public's curiosity. It asks questions and gives new answers. It is even shocking, despite the fact that it originates in a retrospective field. There is always a moment of estrangement that cannot be contained by the familiar. In this sense they do not jive with mass culture. One can talk of a deliberate friction with our culture of consumption. This innovatory moment is wrapped up in a concept. In this sense they are fresh. The danger of course is that the shock of the new does not go further than the shock itself. All too soon a shock will overtake its target. Of course shock is the trick par excellence for attracting the attention of the media. The question remains however of where the shock is intended to take us. Because if it doesn't take us beyond the spectacle, this freshness will only give us an unadorned dottiness, promoting nothing but itself. The question is whether this fresh radicalism is genuinely radical enough to change anything or whether it just offers new images for what we have already without inventing or revealing the new in an innovative fashion.

MVRDV Osdorp, housing for the elderly, construction

This is a delectably fresh and visually recalcitrant building. Enormous impossible overhangs. Galleries between the projections and the main building volumes make these impossible overhangs look quite absurd, but "absolutely fabulous" as well. It all looks so intensely fresh. The building is a total statement of daring and of extreme inventiveness, while at the same time this exaggerated heroism remains within the laws of gravity, the limited budget and the strict Dutch building regulations. I take my hat off to it! But where is this radicalism heading? What we see is certainly something radically different, but what's it trying to say - this shock of the new? I fear it remains stuck in its own spectacular visual moment. Behind the facade not much has changed. I fear we need something more if we are to surpass Fresh Conservatism.

2) Fields of Interest

Landscapes of normality

The present-day flow of information desensitizes us increasingly to the common and the banal. We fall back on our prejudices more and more, taking pleasure in extreme feelings and powerful sensations. The apparently normal goes by unnoticed, like an artificial landscape. It seems irrelevant and of little fascination. But this is exactly the terrain that Fresh Conservatism has made its field of study; and it is also that of the approach I advocate myself. The Fresh Conservatives deliberately explore the artificial urbanized landscapes of normality of our second modernity. This is of course because that's where all the large-scale commissions are to be found, but it's also because it is an inexhaustible source of other realities that link up with the everyday. Broadly speaking, one can distinguish four fields in this artificial landscape. 1) The apparent irrelevant, 2) dirty realism, 3) abstract space and information networks 4) and the field of taboo.

a) The apparently irrelevant

First of all there is the superordinary quality of everyday life. Of the dormitory towns, theme or fun parks, shopping centers, expressways, etc. This is the authentic world of the domestic. This is the space that theory insists on labeling "homeless". But don't we know better by now? Hasn't homelessness itself long since become a home for most of us? Normally speaking, we don't talk about it, because it is such a commonplace in our culture. Call it the banality of the apparently irrelevant.

b) Dirty Realism

The second field belongs to "dirty realism" - a term coined by Bill Budford and Liane

Lefaiivre. It consists of the abandoned industrial terrains, the terrains vagues and other marginal areas that we label as dangerous, extreme, marginal and conflict-prone. These areas have already been colonized through and through by the media, the academy and by our profession. They continue however to exist and we experience them as sublimely sensational. Who hasn't seen Pulp Fiction and Paris Texas?

c) Abstract space and information networks

Data networks, networks of goods, transport, people, money and information form a colossal monumental landscape that we view increasing as an intrinsic part of our existence. We hardly ever stop to think about it. They are in a perpetual hurry. They influence and shape our awareness of both physical and imaginary space.

d) The field of the taboo

Finally there the other, the marginal - that which we don't get to see. The field of the forbidden. The atmosphere of taboo that makes its home in everyday life. These realms are far from normal. They are licentious and yet they belong to everyday life. They are kept at arm's length by normal correct behavior. These are the secret and intimate terrains of our everyday lives and they are the subject matter of films and art - the field of the night, the hidden underbelly of the family, puberty, incest, sexuality, and other physical and social "dark" desires and fantasies.

These four fields are increasingly being opened up by architects, artists and other avant-garde figures. In search of the other. The usual and the normal - that which we usually take for granted but which underpins our culture - is made more explicit. Traditional concepts for explaining this reality are no longer adequate for picking up their signals. Traditions are dismantled. In architecture a floor becomes a wall that becomes a roof. The ordinary is harnessed to transform existence as it is now. According to the architects of MVDRV, "There is something very attractive about combining pastoral city planning with modern lifestyles". "... [our] designs show that extremes and opposites inspire and feed off each other. The pastoral refers to people's inclination to adhere to all that is noble. Our rapidly developing urbanization is dictated by the sublime. The marriage of the pastoral and speed leads to exciting forms of hypermodern pastoralism - the hyperpastoral." The normal becomes abnormally pleasurable. Extraordinarily ordinary just because we suddenly notice it.

3) Instruments

The architecture and art I am referring to is not critical or oppositional in the sense of rejecting the present condition; it is new rather because it shows supermodernity in a programmatic way, in an abstract and minimal aesthetics and organization that, if it goes according to plan, is incommensurable. It is often radical as well. A wealth of instruments brought to bear on it. I will mention just a few: Congestion, Void, Depth of Focus or Intensification, Sampling, Noise, Malfunction, Difference, Multiplicity, Alienation, Playfulness and Inversion. A couple of slides will show what I mean, better than many words.

Congestion

Through congestion and/or compression, openings and voids are created. Our banal experiences become more intense and playful as an exposed spectacle. Normality is given new expression through repetition and compactness. These differences generate a newness with new qualities. Something fresh emerges from the normal landscape.

Void: Light urbanism MVRDV

"Our land seems to become full." (...) "The lighter type of urbanism questions the permanence of the town: should we consider all of the existing urban fabric as permanent? Are all buildings that valuable that they should be considered as monuments? Can this heavy and fixed way of urbanistic behavior be replaced by a lighter one in which we can give space for

experiments and imagination?"

Depth of focus

Depth of focus brings the viewer into a relationship with the subject that is more intense than his relationship with reality. As a consequence, viewing this kind of work entails a more active mental attitude on the part of the viewer. It gives back to reality its original ambiguity.

Sampling and Noise,

Sampling combines everything with everything. In music ambiance, house, rock, Latin music, soul, rock and roll and easy listening can all be sampled in one whole. Sound and image are cut and montaged by the video-jockey indiscriminately. Everything moves, hangs crooked, is out of focus or jumps unpredictably like a firecracker in a constant rap. The result is a noise that fascinates. Uniformity threatens due to lack of contrast. Sampling means sickly sweet freshness. It confronts the world, but ducks any oppositional consequences. Long live the rush.

Inversion

By "inversion" I mean a method of turning acceptable forms and/or urban cultures inside out. Programs, typologies and/or architectural elements can be inverted. Put a traditional building block on its side, shove as many "standard" family homes up against each other.

Malfunction

Sometimes a deliberate fault, an apparent misunderstanding or a shoddy detail can result in a surplus value that triggers off thought and action. Malfunction can spark off improvisation. The code doesn't fit any more. Design without an uppercase D. Dirty details play a crucial role here. They may consist of cheapskate materials, shoddily produced parts or a really dumb-looking assemblage.

Playfulness

Laughter, clowning or carnival can break open extreme normal stereotypes without disqualifying them. In my opinion the subversive irony of Kormeling and NL architects, is a case in point, but oversimplistic. It is a shame, but the humor of Kormeling and NL architects doesn't transcend the coolness that you also get in the Dutch Generation X - the new generation, that is, who grew up in the Dutch modern suburbs. It's a no-hope generation, without any idea of god, of a future or of anything outside themselves; it is about the badness and nothingness at the core of one's own identity.

Horizontality

The disappearance of the political

But if there is no doubt that one of the dangers which threatens democracy is the totalitarian attempt to pass beyond the constitutive character of antagonism and deny plurality in order to restore unity, there is also a symmetrically opposite danger of a lack of all reference to this unity. For, even though impossible, this remains a horizon which, given the absence of articulation between social relations, is necessary in order to prevent an implosion of the social and an absence of any common point of reference. This unraveling of the social fabric caused by the deconstruction of the symbolic framework is another form of the disappearance of the political. In contrast to the danger of totalitarianism, which imposes immutable articulations in an authoritarian manner, the problem here is the absence of those articulations which allow the establishment of meaning common to the different social subjects. Between the logic of complete identity and that of pure difference, the experience of democracy should consist of the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation. But this articulation should be constantly recreated and renegotiated, and there is no final point at which a balance will be definitively achieved.

Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe

Panorama of the Superpresent

There is one important aspect I have not mentioned yet - the horizontality of the landscape. With the aid of the concept of horizontality I can distinguish whether a work is Fresh Conservative or whether it goes a stage further. At present the landscape plays a vital role in organizing our urban condition. In architecture we have rediscovered the landscape. It looks as if it is no longer possible to devise any new decorative or compensatory role for the landscape. Instead it is ascribed a complementary function and can be both an object and an instrument of intervention. Traditional categories such as soil, genius loci and morphology give way to mobile interferences between situation, object, landscape, sociology, ecology, material and politics. In this space users and programs are in perpetual motion. An extremely diversified range of international and local infrastructures takes root here. The users of this landscape are no longer inhabitants in the traditional sense of the word - they are more like passers-by, nomads and tourists.

In most works of Fresh Conservatism all kinds of programmatic information are combined in a single totality of continuous spatial landscapes. The landscape and its manipulation - for instance, by suddenly interrupting the currents to make way for an activity that requires another tempo - seem to be extremely effective. The world of objects becomes interconnected. It is an integration of many things in a huge totality with a multiplicity of voices. The idea of living in an enclosed space no longer makes sense, but has become a fiction. Walls become floors. Architecture becomes infrastructure. All that counts is the dynamic surface. Negotiation with everything in the field of activities is a key to design; borders are there for crossing. This horizontality is a coherent way of making room for the perpetual contradiction of global processes and local singularities. This is the landscape of the faceless capitalism of transnational entrepreneurs. In this world landscapes replace old city centers. The city center is no longer a unifying element: instead it is the landscape that fulfills this function.

Fresh Conservatism overlooks the fact that there is such a thing as a political dimension to everyday life. It forgets that the landscape also has its vertical moments. Fresh Conservatism changes the "realwelt" into an attractive carpet metropolis, glossing over the consequences of reality. That there is more to reality than a splendid visual surface does not concern these architects. The subsoil becomes polluted and eroded. Reality is transformed into a wonderfully beautiful panorama. The true nature of the artificial landscape is much more complex, more confrontational and far more exciting than the fresh conservative panorama would lead us to believe. This means that we come up against a trend - that many architects want to include as many differences and consequences in a landscape as possible, including forms of conflict and "risky spaces", without bothering to categorize them. Whatever the moral issues and no matter who are the concerned parties, they are all given all the space they need on, between, in, or under all the layers of interpretation and multiformity. And it is exactly here that the potential and the danger of the landscape lies. Koolhaas rightly pointed out that the landscape effortlessly unites the non-unifiable, covering the unpalatable, converting vulgar consumption into an oasis. "Landscape is fast, simple, cheap and efficient. It is flexible and free of controversy; it can be either decorative or programmatic. Landscape covers the cool, the sterile and the chaotic, the natural and the artificial. Landscape can be either left or right, critical or uncritical, frivolous or serious, Disneyland or cemetery." This new generation of designers has driven the familiar landscape of normality to a fever pitch of alienating ecstasy. The danger exists that this dynamic and shift of position will give rise to a friction that either does not know where it is going or else refuses to say. Unfortunately the "Realwelt" as displayed in its fresh radical guise is not sufficient. Conservative forces remain untouched. They have simply put on different, fresher garb - the emperor's new clothes. The superpresent is unveiled in a state of ecstasy. We are faced with a form of criticism as

aesthetic transgression. What we need however is an architecture of the everyday that would avoid any aestheticizing of concept and form, by taking a political stance in its aesthetics. This means that program, concept and form combine to form a cultural perspective: the design will express certain social expectations and consequences, contradictions and requirements and these aspirations will be openly stated. Fresh Conservatism has lost sight of the fact that textuality, ambiguity and deliberate vagueness are often on the side of the dominant ideological powers. The subversive pleasure of the supermodern can therefore only be an alternative when it also develops a program that goes beyond the banality of the everyday and which also relates to social movements and their programs. This is something that is missing in many contemporary works of architecture and art.

They end up museumifying in a fresh way the banal conservative tendencies contained in the landscape. This horizontality points to an art and architecture which is like liquid: it links a whole range of statements that are in a sense parallel to those of the new languages of science, electronics, DNA biology, chaos, disasters, infrastructures, etc. It is this wave-like process which allows for a whole variety of formations that connect up in many directions. Ben van Berkel says: "The meaning of working with architecture and structural questions is not so much found between two opposite categories, but in the deliberate, general negation of all categorizing." This way of working resembles that of video jockeys, the culture of zapping, sampling, shopping, remote control, and even genetic manipulation. Michael Hayes rightly says that a certain "ideological smoothness" makes its appearance. "By rejecting the theory of the difference and replacing it with a network of relations with different sections you are on very thin ice ideologically", he says. The effect is to obscure the reality on which the ideology was originally based. What is lacking here is the idea that a social structure is composed of various fields or levels, some of which are more influential than others. "Ideological smoothness would seem to be the typical mode of expression of my own generation of baby boomers and their younger brothers and sisters", says Hayes. "Through historical circumstances and class affinity they have developed a particular pattern of cultural production and consumption. In this pattern different forms of cultural expression (...) are disrupted, as though all distinctions between high and low, hip and passé, left and right have virtually been abolished." It all comes down to the well-known adults' lullaby - "don't worry, be happy".

In this series of numerous time moments with varying, divergent and fragmented aims, difference itself collapses under its own weight, so that all criteria or standards are absent. We can surrender to amnesia, ecstasy and hypnosis. It is not without cause that our times resemble the Fin de Siècle - a period that was above all a crisis of the bourgeoisie in a bourgeois society. It is also no coincidence that our culture is swamped in decadent therapeutic intimacies, affirmations of the superbanal and other multiformities that keep us doped and tranquil, while the existence of any differences in content or forms of power concentrations is simply ignored. What we get are statements of an ultimate longing for individualized bodily being.

Overtaking Fresh Conservatism

Operating and dealing with deregulated capitalism in order to redirect it is essential; disguising these trends or trying to duck them is pointless. This is an approach however that calls for courage, a willingness to take risks, and an openness to new possibilities; one needs both the nerve and the chance to experiment in our supermodern world. Experiment implies a risk of failure. Success is possible but the chance of succeeding varies depending on the project. It is a pity, but many recent experiments have still gone the way of Fresh Conservatism. They end up being the opposite of what their approach and preoccupations were aiming for.

The familiar can be converted into a sort of alienating ecstasy by Fresh Conservatism, but this dynamic and shift in position will often give rise to a friction that doesn't know where it is

going or else refuses to say. In this sense Fresh Conservatism is nothing more than a supermodernity that is displayed in all its nakedness in a state of ecstasy².

The VPRO broadcasting company premises, designed by MVRDV currently consists of a number of different villas, in different parts of Hilversum. They will soon be moving to a single large building in a rural setting. In its design MVRDV has aimed to retain the villa typology. The everyday quality of the villa is experienced as valuable. The existing villa typology has therefore been adopted for the new design. Nathalie de Vries of MVRDV comments: "It won't be a garish villa, but it certainly will be colorful. We have proposed a number of elements that one associates with villas, such as balconies, sliding doors, a fireplace, a chandelier to be hung centrally somewhere and a whole range of throw rugs in all the rooms, large and small." That's not all, however. New technologies call for a different way of working. The computer has become an inseparable part of every office table. Office and other work space has to change to comply with these new needs. New possibilities and elements of everyday life are literally combined here to form a landscape, while differences and social qualities are not overlooked. In this building the situationist notion of the "dérive" and the insatiable supermodern are face to face. The situationist drift, that aimed to undermine the dominant culture of consumption and the flexible vagueness of our second modernity overlap so cheerfully that it results in a new, more open way of working, both individually and collectively. The insatiable broadcaster, like a contemporary globetrotter moving from spectacle to spectacle with sensory antennae constantly alert, can find peace here. He/she can work flat out and at the same time have a good contact with colleagues; this building is a synthesis of a natural setting and the hectic world of information technology.

The VPRO building by MVRDV is an architecture of the everyday that rejects any aestheticizing of activities, concept and form while offering a clear alternative. This means that program, concept and form combine to make up a cultural perspective: the design expresses certain social expectations and consequences, contradictions and requirements, with these aspirations being openly stated. When this is understood, one is working on a provisional Utopia. This architecture should not provoke an immanent criticism by merely inverting things (this would be being retroactive); it should also combine innovation with a social program. If it fails to do so, we remain trapped in a one-dimensional culture of spectacle and consumption.

Self-censorship experienced as freedom

Fresh Conservatism seems to have overlooked all this. Fresh Conservatism is changing our second modernity into a hypermodern theme park about banal normality. It is a museumification of the superordinary - expressways, brain parks, supermarkets, air terminals, terrains vague, etc. The deeper levels of true normality are ignored. The potential of our second modernity is buried under fresh ornament. This hypermodern ornament should not be thought of so much as object; rather it should be understood as the aesthetics of a conceptual diagram of relational events. Differences and contradictions are included in a horizontal landscape in a fresh way, but the essential forces of the economy of signs and space can go on fighting their old battles undisturbed; only their design and formulation are new. In brief, Fresh Conservatism is an astonishing maximized form of self-censorship. A striking fact is that nobody realizes that it is self-censorship; instead it is understood as the ideal model for the individual's freedom to develop as he/she will. This is the panopticum of pluralism, where self-censorship disguised as individual freedom calls the tune. It is the unconscious mode of self-censorship experienced as ultimate freedom. This is the horizontal landscape that functions both to totalize and to disorientate. A whole range of power distinctions and institutional interests are swept under the surface. We zoom around an opportunist, no-strings, perfectly functioning network of voids and concentration, without noticing the disturbing contradictions. They've simply become too beautiful.

Radical immanent architecture³

The approach I am after carries the charge of an utopian impulse but struggles against reproducing an idealist utopian vision that universalizes experience and promises progress. What we should opt for is a positive and necessary social responsibility, within late capitalism, which relates to the social world of the individual and that of the collective. To quote Bell Hooks, we have to go in search of "... ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings [which] create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined to narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of everyday ... a space is there for critical exchange ... [and] this may very well be the central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur."

This is an architecture that gives no primacy to form and abstraction, the optical and the figurative; it is the processes and powers that operate in space and the aesthetics they convey that are seen as crucial. What is important is not the distant and abstract, but that which is incorporated; not any fixed, clearly coded and demarcated functions, but overlapping, continually evolving political activities and a social contract. If we reject this choice, then we are forced back on a strategy that is in tune with the possibilities arising from the landscape of artificial normality; there will be no escape then from those buried conservative forces that increase dependency rather than liberating us. In that case, as architects, we will create a fresh dynamic space that will be perfectly in tune with the entire range of conservative mechanisms. And this is exactly what I want to warn you about with the phrase Fresh Conservatism. We can learn a great deal from Fresh Conservatism but in the end we have to overtake it. Fortunately, our second modernity offers us a new range of possibilities that are not lacking in risks and adventure.

Roemer van Toorn, 1997

Footnotes

1) This phenomenon should not be understood as meaning a trend or any sort of ism. Fresh Conservatism is a conceptual frame, a means of understanding what is going on in the current landscape of the "avant-garde" in architecture, art and film. Fresh Conservatism, moreover, is not something purely Dutch. Its scope is much wider. The Dutch do perhaps form a vanguard in the domains of architecture, industrial design and graphic design. In art and film, however, Fresh Conservatism has long since formed a worldwide trend.

2) One wonders whether some of those Dutch architects who explore the space and imagery of the second modernity don't make the same principled political mistake that the moderns did - that of underestimating the ideological power of economics.

3) See also the article: Roemer van Toorn: Architecture against architecture, Towards a radical immanent architecture, in Film + Arc 2 catalogue, Graz, 1995.