

How to Dance?

NL Architects. Mies van der Rohe Award. Basketbar, Utrecht

Picture 1. Dancing the Samba. Dutch and Brazilian soccer supporters in Marseilles.

The Mies van der Rohe Foundation invited me to review the work of NL Architects at the Coup de Dés Conference in Helsinki, 2006; in particular the awarded Basketbar at the Uithof in Utrecht. The text below documents the observations addressed. My text-image talk is entitled 'How to Dance?' I believe NL architects attempt to address this important question, along with other issues.

Picture 2. We have all become clients of the welfare state. Is this true happiness? Helsinki, October 2006. Photo: Roemer van Toorn
I don't recall exactly what Bertolt Brecht said, but it goes something like this: 'Once we have eaten the sausage, the question is how to dance.' In other words: what is our concept of happiness, of culture and pleasure when we have stilled our hunger, built a home and are on the look-out for freedom? In order to answer this question NL Architects – like many other practices in the Netherlands – do the following:

Picture 3. Jewish Museum advertisement, Berlin. Photo: Roemer van Toorn

Instead of exposing the wrongs of society, like Daniel Libeskind in the Jewish Museum, Berlin, through deconstruction or a critical regionalist approach resisting our urban culture, NL Architects prefer to map out our actuality. NL Architects embrace the everyday in its full appearance. They operate and find pleasure in mass culture, embrace the freedoms of different subcultures. NL Architects have a passion for the real. Instead of practising pity-science, stressing that we have lost every opportunity to construct a world, they see many opportunities arising from our contemporaneity.

Picture 4. Mapping reality. Photo: Roemer van Toorn

In the face of corporate globalisation 'we' – the Dutch – started to map out what architects couldn't understand with the old navigation methods developed for our first modernity (Industrialisation).

Picture 5. Today a classical park provides the perfect opportunity to do yoga. Paris. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

Instead of complaining about impossibility, corruption, and the conspiracy against the world, the Dutch took the schizophrenia of late-capitalism as their starting point. Through datascaping, surfing the waves of extreme reality, they found many opportunities the critical, with its preconceived ideas, was unable to map as potential. And even architects like Norman Foster understand this.

Picture 6. Norman Foster, European Forum; Alvar Aalto Auditorium, Helsinki, October 2006. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

Picture 7. Execution more important than theory. Advertisement, Schiphol Airport. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

Talk by Roemer van Toorn

Dutch architecture discovered that architecture and urbanism of the twenty-first century is sociological rather than about form or style. It is all about programming; organising data. Doing instead of theory.

Picture 8. Times Square, New York City. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

The many zombie-categories such as reality AND fiction; humanity AND technology, transforming us into cyborgs; the local AND the global, forming the glocal; the museum AND the shop, creating the museumshop; each city consisting of both the fourth AND the first world; and the interdependence between the neo-liberal loft city AND the informal poor city require all its members – from investor, state to individual – to come up with new answers, new innovative interventions. The old maps simply no longer work in the face of the destructive creation of revolutionary capitalism today.

Picture 9. Walt Disney Concert Hall, Frank Gehry, Los Angeles. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

Well, enough about the by now famous Dutch approach. As important as renewing from within, stopping to critique reality, excavating society or interpreting instead of proposing alternatives is that Europe should capitalise on its cultural heritage (history). The Disneyfication of the world – as we detect in the work of Frank Gehry and others with less sculptural talent – must be countered. By capitalising on the cultural heritage of Europe I don't mean renovating monumental buildings or cities; rather, I refer to the long, successful tradition of reflexive practice. In other words, it is all about formations in space, time and place that are able to develop good stories. No more Hollywood one-liners, please, which celebrate the cliché by aesthetic hypnosis. In opposition to Americanisation, we in Europe *do* know how to dance. It is 'locked up' in our history. Frank Gehry uses a kind of drama that celebrates the genius of the architect. He becomes a star. The symbolic never steps outside the discourse of pure architecture. Architecture has become the spectacle itself. It no longer needs to refer to anything else. You could even say that design has taken the place of religion: design religion.

Picture 10. States of Emergency, photographed by Steven Meisel, *Vogue*, Italy 2006.

What Gehry and others do is what I call Revolutionary Conservatism, or in other words Fresh Conservatism. Fresh Conservatism is cool, it is all about shock, it is engaging, but it doesn't propose new relations. It is apolitical because it teases out contradictions on the symbolical without opening up new possibilities. It is a kind of politics as fashion, as we see in Steven Meisel's work for the September 2006 Italian issue of *Vogue*.

Picture 11. Once a collective dream, now all becoming individual clients. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

What to do against Americanisation (even within America itself)? The problem we have to counter is the 'banalisation' of our cosmopolitan global culture. In the past, the elite

dreamed of a cosmopolitan culture but never managed to create it. Now – through globalisation and individualisation – cosmopolitanism has been realized everywhere, but in an extremely banal series of formations. What we need is a new vision of cosmopolitanism. And many aspects of European culture could provide the answers.

Picture 12. Basketbar, NL Architects. Photo: Roemer van Toorn

I believe NL Architects make use of what Deleuze, Pasolini, Brecht and others call the free indirect style. I shall explain some of the ingredients of this reflexive, or dialogical practice.

Gestus Method

Instead of method acting – the actor becoming the character he/she plays –, the actor should always remain him/herself while he/she plays the role. The Gestus method creates a certain alienation effect that allows the observer to experience the construction of the play. You see the actor's interpretation of the person he/she plays. Instead of becoming the victim of hypnosis, the observer is provoked to form an opinion and start his/her interpretation. By putting a basketball field on top of a bar, users are impelled to act instead of becoming mere admirers of the thing in itself as a pure object of desire.

Picture 13. Basketball in Hong Kong. Photo: Roemer van Toorn


Popular

The problem is not to be popular in box office terms, to have high ratings, but to become popular. In other words, the issue here is that in acting out, in doing things, the collective emerges. Architecture is nothing but a set of formations that allow collective performances to emerge in time. The choice of a sports field allows activity: doing sport. Basketball is extremely popular, part of everyday culture; basketball is a collective sport, sport on top of a bar is urban. And basketball is rather conventional. While each component is so normal, when combined they become strange and invite new opportunities of a collective character to emerge in an otherwise empty university campus.

Picture 14. Basketball is everywhere, worldwide. China. Photo: Roemer van Toorn.

With the Free Indirect Style you combine the conventional (everyday sport), in such a manner that its use or interpretation is always open-ended. Instead of arriving at consensus, the relations between what we are used to – and find comfort in – is full of moments of disagreement that do not manage to destabilise us. It is a kind of friction that allows the conventions to exist – even to be enjoyed – while in the same instance they are 'pushed' to take a next step, create new opportunities, and have a liberating effect.

Talk by Roemer van Toorn

Picture 15. Basketbar middle ring of glass above bar with players, NL Architects. Photo: 

In most cases, an architect normalises things. He operates like the police. Things that could spring out of control are normalised through design, but to put a Basketbar on top of a bar in a university campus is not something the architecture police would promote. New relations emerge that travel beyond style; in fact, they liberate architecture from its autistic will to form.

Picture 16. Basketbar plan, or section?

To conclude, although I haven't explained in detail what a European reflexive practice is all about – 15 minutes simply don't allow such an endeavour –, I hope I've made it clear that the Free Indirect style makes another approach possible and is needed to counter Americanisation. The Basketbar by NL Architects is an excellent example of reflexivity that challenges use and proposes new urban (cosmopolitan) programmes by provoking combinatory forms of convention by means of a particular technique of dissensus.

Roemer van Toorn, Helsinki