

Lost in paradise*

People in the Netherlands don't dream about the Utopia of a heavenly paradise, but are convinced that social-democracy's Blairite infatuation with the free market, the so-called politics of the 'third way', is capable of delivering heaven on earth. For everyone who is party to the success of corporate Holland, the earthly paradise does indeed seem to be manifesting itself. Yet because of the 'total' material and psychological freedom, the middle class has lost its way in this paradise. The many recent urban design and architectural projects in the Netherlands bear silent witness to this.

The consensus paradise

The secret of this paradise is that all parties, however contradictory their interests, are always prepared to negotiate. Instead of the rough and tumble of ideological viewpoints being played off against one another, bureaucratic intervention ensures that a cosy consensus is reached between the different parties. The disadvantage of this approach is the tendency to defer thorny issues indefinitely. Public responsibilities are thereby ceded by the public administration, leaving private interests holding all the trumps. Whereas in the past the government, as the guardian of public interest, managed to maintain an order of sorts, what we have now is an organized chaos that works in favour of the private sector. Briefly, what this boils down to is that salaries are kept structurally low in the Netherlands in comparison with neighbouring countries, attractive fiscal constructions are invoked for the benefit of (international) companies, the government pays for infrastructure, utilities are privatized without the buyers having to bear the risk associated with less profitable divisions and the government relinquishes much of its control over land-use policy.¹ For the last 20 years – during coalitions led by first Ruud Lubbers (Christian Democrat) and then Wim Kok (Labour Party) – consensus politics has been surrounded by an aura of sanctity.

Paradoxically, the Netherlands' cosy consensus culture is attended by a plethora of regulations that would not disgrace a Kafkaesque bureaucracy. To mention just one example: according to the holy writ of the Buildings Decree, every new dwelling in the Netherlands must have an 'outdoor space'. Architects, however, regard this arbitrary imposition of balconies on the outer wall as a typical example of consensus terrorism. In order to appear to be complying with the Buildings Decree, they put a glazed veranda in the living room. When the occupants open the verandah windows, thus letting outdoor air into this area of the living room, there is legally speaking an outdoor space. Later on, of course, the occupants are canny enough to remove the redundant glazed inner walls in their officially approved dwelling. Instead of reflecting on the meaning of an outdoor space, or devolving responsibility to the architect, the government lays down rules that then have to be circumvented by devious means.

The consumption paradise

The modern order of collective values – principles of rationality, equality and democracy – which gave rise to the much-praised Dutch building tradition, is well and truly a thing of the past. Under the impact of rapid commercialization, government authorities and civic leaders have abandoned their role as defenders of the public interest. Instead of standing up for collective amenities, they act as broker to give ever more scope to market forces. The role of the state has been reduced to providing the infrastructure and public funds required by business and industry to maximize profits. The Netherlands has become a corporate state. At the same time, politicians are turning into fixers with a craving for media status: they make a name for themselves in their municipality by initiating masterworks by celebrated architects. It is the triumph of the welfare state: we have all become customers. Citizens don't count in this society unless they are able to consume. The Dutch middle class, with its petit-bourgeois Utopia, shamelessly allows itself to be constrained by the success of the easily attainable.² It parades the wealth that flows from the quick profits of the shareholder democracy with a hedonistic connoisseurship that finds expression in fashion, exotic restaurants, art fairs, Taschen coffee-table books on avant-garde architecture, adventurous world trips and in

watching do-it-yourself television programmes about cooking, gardening and interior design. The majority of consuming citizens in the Netherlands are in possession of a tidy fortune, but they no longer know quite how to spend it. It's difficult to dream about a heaven on earth now that ideology has been pronounced dead. So while the consumption paradise flourishes, collective commitment dwindles. It is changing the Dutch landscape into a planned chaos of individual pleasure domes. The overdose of bureaucracy this entails only adds to the absurdity of that chaos. The landscape consists of an accumulation of individual Edens – the public realm has ceased to exist. While the private paradise scores success after success, public space is experiencing a total sell-out.³ In historical city centres the fascinating urban fabric is being annexed by the consumer paradises for the benefit of shoppers, day-trippers and tourists. New housing estates are not getting the public amenities or public transport that were promised on paper.

The imaginary paradise

Our lifestyles are increasingly determined by dynamic influences. The main causes of this culture of mobility are migration and the media.⁴ They create a constant stream of transnational images that mingle with the experience of physical space and the immediate community. As a result, more and more market players are becoming interested in creating experiences, in fashioning imaginary worlds for the customer. 'We need a good story, and we are willing to pay for it,' says Rolf Jensen in his book *The Dream Society*, written for the property developers of the future.⁵ Designing experiences, that's what it's all about in the information society.⁶ Life is to be seen as a theatrical setting realized by designer and free market in harmonious collaboration. That setting should by no means be seen as static. A 'story' must unfold, culminating in a unique experience in which the user actively participates. This in turn means that the user must be offered a permanent range of choices. After all, life is not about things, but about experiences, isn't it? However, as projects like Carel Weeber's 'Wilde Wonen' ('untrammelled housing') Almere's 'Gewild Wonen' ('sought-after housing'), Bentham Crouwel's Villa ArenA, MVRDV's Ypenburg houses and VHP's Batavia Stad make clear, rather than being allowed to absorb the experience for themselves, the customers – or 'guests' as they are called in the experience economy – are invited to step inside an experience that has been mapped out by the imagineers.

Architects, too, operate as imagineers nowadays, even when they are designing mono-functional housing estates. They give form to the total experience of the user. Future residents play an active part in this process without actually creating their own world. The diversity of the housing supply may seem enormous, but what looks like diversity is in fact sameness disguised as difference. In many new housing estates you can choose from patio dwellings with a view of the night sky, houses in which the pleasure of living is enhanced by the sound of babbling brooks incorporated in the spatial master plan, or castle ensembles in the middle of, say, a golf course landscape. The role of the architect can be described as one of appeasement: he conceals the appalling price-quality ratio while at the same time immersing the occupant in the experience paradise. Mediocrity is concealed behind mesmerizing illusions. In the thematized narrative that the architect realizes in consultation with the market, predictability is the order of the day. And in this imaginary paradise the classical design is not alone in being reduced to mere ornament; modernist and conceptual designs, even the last stubborn 'blob', suffer the same fate. We are saddled with a media-genic and populist free-market architecture that is fast turning the Netherlands into a middle-class dream landscape.

The paradise of the middle classes

In this corporate and globally oriented society, migration and the media are not solely responsible for the changing task of architecture and urban planning. Individualization must also bear some of blame: people are increasingly demanding their right, as unique individuals, to determine their own lives. Neither the church, nor the state, nor the nuclear family, nor politicians must be allowed to restrict the life of the individual. But what is to hold all those

individuals together when there is no longer any consensus on these matters? The agenda is being set by the middle of the middle class. Despite the emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual, we are witnessing the emergence of standardization and uniformity on a large scale. The individual, it appears, is being radically institutionalized by education, the market, the media, design, leisure, work and other kinds of centralist processes that manifest themselves via the life of the individual. The Dutch middle class is the product of a typical, originally petit-bourgeois mentality. Weeding one's own garden is the first priority. Characteristic of this middle class is fear of the unknown and an exaggerated concern for painstakingly accumulated possessions. This latter-day middle class is preoccupied with its own interest – security – and correspondingly less concerned with other people. It has a short-term memory and a limited long-term perspective.

In the Netherlands we can distinguish two kinds of middle-class paradise: the not so new *nouveau riche* paradise and the more recent manifestation of the bourgeois bohemian paradise.⁷ The first is characterized by the insatiable desire of dumb, good-looking people to flaunt their suddenly acquired wealth, the second by the compulsion to display spiritual and intellectual qualities appropriate to a well-educated elite. The bourgeois bohemians are interested in the bewitchingly different, such as diving for pearls in a tropical ocean, or owning a Japanese garden. While their instinct tells them they should be anti-establishment, they are also aware that they belong to the new establishment. It is the world of the ex-hippy turned shareholder. This new elite reshapes society not so much through authority as through cultural interventions. It is this bourgeois bohemian who also blends culture and commerce in the aforementioned imaginary paradises. Which is why there has never been a greater demand for designers than now.

An important aspect of this middle-class paradise is the so-called hotel lobby effect. In the lobby of the bourgeois bohemian you are greeted with a cheerful, welcoming, luxurious and impressive decorum. The 'branding' of the city and of architecture, in the museums for example, is an essential element of this lobby culture. These 'middling' people feel a huge need to display affluence, comfort, erudition and individuality. Because of their connoisseurship, every lobby culture is different. While one has a yen for a deconstructive villa by Eisenman, another is more interested in smoking Havana cigars in an apartment by Krier. Such experiences serve to hide the much more profound contrasts that life has to offer. Jo Coenen's huge villa, with fantastic spaces and perfect details, occupied only by a husband and wife, is a perfect example of the culture of the lobby. In the paradise of the middle class it is impossible to separate the internal from what lies outside; in the lobby culture one is always and everywhere at home. The space and the design are stripped of their political dimension. Even the shock of a subversive design appeals to the connoisseurship of the bourgeois bohemian.⁸ The distinction between private and public interest and the right to adventures beyond the lobby are lost for good in the appeasing splendour of the paradisaal design.

The design paradise

In this new paradise there is more work than ever for the architect. Everything must be designed in order to ensure a paradisaal experience. This of course represents a new challenge for the architect – in spite, or perhaps because, of the many dangers it entails. No one engaged in architectural practice can ignore current conditions. Practice involves getting your hands dirty, but that is also exciting for it is the only way of initiating change. What position do the various Dutch architects take on this?

At first glance architecture appears to have been liberated from questions of style and ideological debates. Most architectural firms accept and produce the spatial conditions for the status quo. Despite their very different strategies and aesthetic premises, their projects facilitate appeasement. They refuse to relate critically to reality. Instead of making time for political reflection, all their time is invested in designing the required paradisaal environment. We can distinguish several outcomes. There is the minimalist architecture that results in functional, efficient, beautiful and technically competent buildings. On the face of it, a neutral architecture, but appearances are deceptive. This minimalist architecture, with its clean lines

and appearance of thrift, provides the consumption culture with a perfect alibi for parading in front of the footlights. You scarcely notice that you are in a consumption paradise. When all's said and done, what goes on in Villa ArenA is no different from what is on offer in Batavia Stad, but the furniture paradise designed by Benthem Crowwel gives shopping an aura of respectability.

Another group is firmly persuaded of the salutary and inspiring effect of architecture as object. This architecture – one thinks of Mecanoo's chapel in Rotterdam – seeks in architectural beauty a remedy against the planned chaos. Yet other architects seek an answer in an ironic and cheerful game by which they provide their designs with a double meaning. The absurdity that emanates from the overdose of data generated by our society presents MVRDV, for example, with an endless fund of alibis for producing one intelligent one-liner after the other, with the added advantage that they attract media attention. Exaggeration is used to reveal the many paradoxical laws that lie hidden in our society. But although these retroactive manifestos address topical themes, they do not develop – any more than the other approaches – a progressive alternative trajectory. In the end even this radicalism works as appeasement.

Towards another kind of paradise?

All the projects included in this Yearbook manifest an outstanding architectural quality. Nevertheless, the editors wish to do more than simply document qualitatively excellent projects. If the Netherlands is to continue to play a leading role in architecture, it is vital that architects and critics should be prepared to engage in a debate about the values and standards implicit in projects and publications. Dutch architecture seems to be suffering from a pragmatism virus. The packed diary evidently does not allow for critical reflection on the consequences of one's actions. There is a real danger of architects and urban designers unthinkingly accepting that we live in an age in which there is no place any more for ideology.⁹ In the age of modernism, architects blindly followed the building programme dictated by the industrial society. Now architects are just as blindly following the dictates of the experience economy. So far, in the editors' view, the success of architecture under the Dutch polder model has in most instances resulted in a strategy of appeasement. This architecture possesses an innovative strength that is to be found in its acceptance of and fascination with the changing design task in our new modernity, but unfortunately it does not see it as its task to develop alternatives as well.

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* Many observations in this article are the result of the fieldwork by the editorial board of the Architecture yearbook.

Notes:

1. See also Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover. Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy*, Heinemann, New York 2001.
2. See also ‘Beyond embarrassment’, in: Anne Hoogewoning et al. (eds), *Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook 2000-2001*, pp. 4-7, NAI Uitgevers, Rotterdam 2001.
3. See also Paul Scheffer, ‘De verloren jaren van Wim Kok’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 March 2002.
4. The permanent movement of our culture brought about by the media and by migration is dealt with in detail by Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998.
5. Rolf Jensen, *The Dream Society. How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business*, MacGraw-Hill, New York 1999.
6. B. Joseph Pine II, James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy. Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston (Mass.) 1999.
7. David Brook, *Bobos in Paradise. The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, Touchstone, New York 2000.
8. See also Roemer van Toorn, ‘Fresh Conservatism, Landscapes of normality’, in: *Quaderns Re-active*, Barcelona 1998.
9. A hegemony of the end of ideologies.