

Towards a Cosmopolitan Praxis

It scares me. No, not foreigners, other religions or headscarves in the street, but the Dutch politics that wins voters by disqualifying world citizens. What frightens me is that neoliberalism in the Netherlands, but in many other European countries too, propagates the idea of the nation state – one's own citizens first, the border closed to the unknown – while our civilisation became a global one a long time ago. Back to the nation state to save the domestic market or democracy is an outdated principle. At the start of the twenty-first century, borders – the basis on which the nation and international politics are based – are undergoing strong political transformations that our civilisation owes to its own success, namely its global stake. In the past it was only capital that was free to establish itself, but now, at least in theory, as citizens we are free to move anywhere in the world. Instead of closing the borders, our civilisation ought to be opening up new roads to give our global cosmopolitan culture – nobody complains about the culinary diversity of the Netherlands – every opportunity. We should be curious about, not frightened by the unfamiliar. With the growth of globalisation we should turn our backs on provincialism once and for all. What the élite could only dream of in the nineteenth century – a cosmopolitan culture – has become reality through globalisation as a splendid accident. We are all cosmopolitan now, but what a civilisation can mean, what the idea of the city of the future can be beyond banal cosmopolitanism, is a question that politicians, architects and critics in the Netherlands have failed to ask themselves until very recently.¹

Nostalgia for the present

Under pressure of neoliberalism – the celebration of the market and boundless individualism – the traditional idea of the city – that of Amsterdam's canals and later Berlage's plan for South Amsterdam, but also the modern idea of the city as manifested in the Bijlmermeer housing estate in South-East Amsterdam, for instance – no longer exists. Under pressure from the market economy, the idea that architecture can serve the public interest has been undermined. Economic and private interests are rated more highly than cultural and collective values. Not only does the economic logic of property developers and investors determine the city's landscape, but the city council too acts as a property developer and investor. By acting in this way, the Dutch government follows the market regime, and the public task becomes a derivative of market-orientated thinking. While the Modern Movement sought to improve the world with its architecture primarily from a social functional perspective, what count today are plans intended to give the city a better (bankable and touristic) competitive position vis-à-vis other cities in the world. And superarchitects – preferably with star status – are engaged in order to promote the economy of a city with a stunning design. In this century, most of us may live in urbanized areas, but we have lost sight of what this urbanization – culture of sprawl – really could mean for our civilization. The old values and maps with which we navigated in the past are no longer operational. When architect Sjoerd Soeters et al. build 'Haverleij'² – housing neighbourhoods like castles with golf links as landscapes in between – and Rob Krier is building more neo-historical housing complexes than anywhere else in the world, they are realizing what the philosopher Frederic Jameson has called a 'nostalgia for the present'. A world is 'reconstructed'

¹ It is only very recently that architecture critics, the state architect and the press have turned their attention to the decline of the Netherlands. The warnings issued by the editorial team of the yearbook were hardly taken seriously in the Netherlands or abroad. See *Architecture in the Netherlands: yearbooks 2000 till 2005*, edited by Anne Hoogewoning, Roemer van Toorn, Piet Vollaard and Arthur Wortmann.

² http://www.haverleij.nl/index_1.htm

which we never actually lost. It may look like the past, but in reality it is nothing other than nostalgia without memory. They idealize a world that never existed.

Ikea Populism

Today in 2007 zombie categories form the basis of thinking, acting and designing. For instance, if you visit the many private plots where residents are invited to build their own dream home in the Netherlands, you can experience what I call Ikea Populism. What predominates is not so much a postmodern architecture à la Seaside (as featured in the film *The Truman Show*, or what Charles Jencks propagated with his Postmodernism), but rather what we could call 'Ikea Populism'. Ikea Populism is not imposed from above, as was the case with Modern Architecture. It is the vast, unrestricted choice of affordable lifestyles which is of overriding importance: 'To offer customers the widest possible range of well-designed functional home furnishing items at such low prices that as many people as possible are able to buy these items.' Ikea is not for the rich; rather it seeks to improve the lives of everyone. It is not about a luxurious élitist style, but rather pragmatic, practical and stylish designs for in and around the home. Ikea brings the modern dream of comfort, fashion and good taste into people's homes. It is not for nothing that the new middle classes in China are delighted with Ikea. Whereas Modernism, with organizations such as the Stichting Goed Wonen (the Good Housing Foundation), educated people in 'modern living', we are now as residents connoisseurs of our own lifestyle. The problem with Ikea Populism, however, is that the idea of the city seems to be disappearing in an endless accumulation of individual lifestyles. If we examine Ikea's store layout, we arrive at a good definition of the collapse of the existing city. The blue and yellow Ikea boxes full of individual modernist lifestyles are situated in desolate locations on the city's periphery, on excellent link roads. Ikea is always easily accessible, you can park there for free, you can eat a cheap and sensible Swedish snack, and fill your car with do-it-yourself furniture kits. While Ikea's infrastructure is extremely modern, witness the infrastructural, seemingly endless roof of connections and the underground world of incoming and outgoing streams (learning from Mies?), shopping itself unfolds deliberately in a cluttered rhizomic labyrinth of bargains from which it is difficult to escape. We have here two types of management efficiency: that of a cold, businesslike, linear infrastructure, which leads you efficiently to the Mecca of lifestyles, and that of the maze full of tempting items (including the ball pit for children). The success of today's Vinex housing developments in the Netherlands, with a greater variety of architectural styles than ever previously realized in twentieth-century residential districts, has many similarities with Ikea's success formula. But what has really happened to the city? Is the public interest now nothing more than an endless accumulation of individual and commercial desires, a series of delectable design objects displayed on shelves and served up on trays? Must we learn to accept the diffuse city, the efficient infrastructure of access and exit roads, gated communities, lifestyles and building for next to nothing? Or can a different idea of the city be developed by means of architecture?

Redefining what it means to be Modern

The paradox of modernization today is that we are facing a modernization that is driven by nostalgia. We build a past – or hold on to a certain past – that never existed. On top of that we celebrate a kind of populism inspired by ratings: instead of *becoming* popular, the market produces experiences that *are* popular in box office terms, while as public intellectuals architects should strive for another kind of populism in our global mass culture.

For most of us, the concept of populism has a negative connotation. Populism is seen not only as anti-élitist, but also as cheap, irrational, common, dangerous and superficial. However, what we share as a group is of essential importance for every society.

Whatever political system we choose, from democracy to dictatorship, they all have to do with how a certain idea of the city becomes a guiding and successful principle for the population. It is therefore not so much a question of whether populism should be approved or disapproved of, but rather of what sort of political idea of citizenship is to be realized in a society.

In short, the essential question – in opposition to banal cosmopolitanization – is what it could mean to be modern when confronting Ikea Populism and the nostalgia of the present.

Transnationalism

From a propagandist perspective it is very tempting to emphasise the differences between a typically Italian or Dutch approach to architecture. Reality, however, is different. It is more interesting to consider what – in our transnational society – the cross-fertilisations between the different cultures generate given all kinds of urgent local and global social changes. Especially the youngest firms presented in this exhibition are the result of a complex intertwining and interaction of Italian, Dutch and other influences. Various teams of architects are also the product of encounters at the Berlage Institute. The Rotterdam-based Dogma, for instance, consists of Italian, Dutch and Belgian architects. They are trained as architects during the success of the Superdutch generation that sets its sights on the datascares of the Second Modernity. It was precisely against this background – an endless landscape of wonderful Design incidents – that the legacy of Aldo Rossi on the idea of the city became more topical. Likewise many Italian architects were inspired by the programmatic dimension of Dutch architecture; an attention for the Modernist everyday and the event. For instance, the Italian team Gruppo A12 was invited to put on an exhibition in the Kröller Müller Museum. In short, it was partly by following the example of the international success of Dutch architecture that many young Italian architects managed to shake off the yoke of history and the plea for autonomous architecture. After all, the everyday landscape outside the old Italian cities was changing rapidly under the influence of neoliberal modernisation, and the Italian architects did not know how to respond to that. But in the Netherlands they developed methods, techniques and forms to tackle this large-scale everyday culture.

Of course, we could stop to focus on this cultural cross-fertilisation, which is an interesting subject in itself, but what I am concerned with here is how both 'Italian' and 'Dutch' architects – the various teams also include Danes, French, Germans and other nationalities – tackle a specific cosmopolitan issue on different scale levels: the home, the pavilion, the context, the infrastructure and the city. It is also interesting to see to what extent the different firms share the same approach or take different views. The article does not claim to be a definitive analysis nor does it launch a new paradigm. Instead, I hope to open a debate on how the selected 'Italian' and 'Dutch' architects flesh out a new idea of civilisation through operating in a cosmopolitan way from villa to city.

De-individualize

In his introduction to the book *Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault wrote: 'Do not demand of politics that it restore the "rights" of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to "de-individualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization.' In my opinion, both the Dutch Powerhouse Company and the Italian Benjamino Servino design homes that escape from the glorification of the individual. The neoliberal sprawl terrorism of the gated communities is certainly not prolonged in these projects. At the same time, the

differences between these two architects are great. Not only is the Two-Family House in Pozzotevere situated in a rural but urban setting while Villa 1 in Benekom is located in Dutch woodlands; Villa 1 has a form which pays attention to the view of the natural surroundings and how they enter the building – or how the domestic programme is given every opportunity to unfold itself in all openness –, while the Two-Family House in Italy is particularly interested in the ‘urban’ look and the representative quality of the volume. Villa 1 frames life – the villa is literally a colossal frame, a huge platform – without sacrificing the different individual functions for a moment to a lifestyle; indeed, they confront one another. In fact they form a single large roof beneath which private life can unfold as a landscape of meetings at the different supporting furniture elements. The ground plan of the Two-Family House behaves in a neutral way and the architect concentrates on the archetypal element of the wall, which is fabulously detailed like an urban wall with subtle openings. It is as though the natural stone volume confers on the prototypical idea of the house its materiality (including the sloping roof), while the windows and window fronts – as well as the white grid that intersects many dark stones – give expression to modern life. Another striking feature is the shiny metal rain pipe and eaves, which come to an abrupt halt at the side of the building. While the Powerhouse Company goes for the programme, Servino opts for the collective memory of the urban form with a wink at modern life at window level. Servino’s irony may be subtle, but he will never make use of wild forms as the Powerhouse Company does. Historically rooted forms are diametrically opposed to the everyday forms of Powerhouse, which are at home in the world of design and commerce. In short, the main difference between these two firms lies in how the theatre of life is accommodated. The Powerhouse Company likes humour, as you can see from their strange buildings such as the design for the Flood House or the Spiral House. Servino, on the other hand, seems to prefer tranquility in his Two-Family House – a tranquility that the unique medium of the architecture in particular can convey so well in its details.

Estrangement

In the light of the Dutch and Italian villas, we might conclude that Italian architecture is about form and Dutch architecture about programme, but that would be a premature and above all polemical conclusion. The Italian Gruppo A12, for example – who presented an open-air exhibition in the Kröller Müller park near Arnhem – does not like archetypal forms at all. It draws inspiration from everyday materials that have not been deliberately designed, such as the walls consisting of wooden planks that are temporarily propped up. They are interested in designing spaces that both express the change of life and enable these transformations. The work of the Dutch firm Kempe Thill, originally from East Germany, seems to be almost Italian. They use simple and pure forms, but without the historical connotations that the Italians evoke. What Gruppo A12 with their labyrinthine exhibition and Kempe Thill with their Light Building have in common is the use of everyday material: a sort of recycling of material. I localise in these projects a cosmopolitan praxis – like the aspect of de-individualism that cropped up in connection with the Powerhouse Company and Servino – that bears witness to a certain dissonance through which the user and/or spectator is challenged in one way or another to make something of it, or to use it as he or she chooses. Both designs are unfinished because they include a certain measure of estrangement without the user/spectator’s familiar world of experience being overthrown, as is often the case with totally unfamiliar forms. It is precisely the use of everyday materials in a strange or abstract *mise-en-scène* (scenario) that creates scope for dialogue between the object and the spectator/user in the space. Estrangement is less an end in itself than a means of enabling mediation. The question is, of course, whether the museum-like space of these pavilions with their unusual material and labyrinthine space can break through the museumification of life. If I compare these two pavilions with Rietveld’s Sonsbeek

pavilion in Arnhem, I think that Rietveld is better able to go beyond the object than this young generation of architects. Kempe Thill is wild about crate walls and Gruppo A12 loves wooden walls propped up in the grass, reminiscent of Aldo Rossi's fascinating Teatro del mondo. Of course Gruppo A12 is closer to Rietveld than Kempe Thill in terms of mentality, but only Rietveld really shows how you can evade the museumification of the architectural object itself. Only Rietveld gives all space to art and the surroundings in a multitiered way in his Sonsbeek pavilion.

Convention and Difference

Two firms of architects in this exhibition make deliberate use of dogmas. Like Lars von Trier and his fellow film directors, Onix campaigns against the superficiality of Hollywood. Architecture should be concerned with the essence of the discipline and maintain a distance from conventional building practice. A number of the rules that Onix laid down in their 10 Dogma points are: No computer, but drawings done by hand. The design and the detail are made on location for each specific site. Façades are designed in relation to the ground plans, et cetera. The Italian firm Dogma, which is based in Rotterdam, drew up the same number of rules, but on the scale of the city (see also ~~the~~ their plan for Korea present in this exhibition). What strikes me about both Baukuh – one of their members was taught by the Italian Dogma group – and Onix is that they demarcate the limits of architecture very precisely. Architecture cannot engage in politics, it cannot assume that responsibility, but through its unique architectural properties it can develop a spatial vision of the city and landscape. Both Baukuh and Onix like tradition; their plans are full of conventions. Take the farmhouse typology of the Onix plan, or the new patio homes in the existing Bakema plan by Baukuh. It is not so much a nostalgia historicising lifestyles that are respected – à la Sjoerd Soeters or Rob Krier – as typologies informed and found on a particular location. At the same time they are tackled drastically and turned into something entirely new. I would not like to call it Critical Regionalism. It gives much more forceful expression to what is found in a particular region. You could call it a form of 'quotation'. People recognise these types because they are easy to 'quote'. This form of 'quotation' offers people a key to understanding how it is organised, what it is, before proceeding further with their exploration. Convention and difference are combined in these projects. A high density and accumulation of patio homes turn the Bakema plan into a real city. And through such devices as the repetition of roofs, the farmhouse typology turns a small unit under one roof into a mini-city.

Dirty Realism

It was already happening in practice, but Adriaan Geuze was the first to see the landscape of our urban culture with all its motorways, cars and other artificial and highly absurd characteristics as an essential part of the design practice of the architect. The artificial landscape and its beauty form a part of the architect's vocabulary and determine the enjoyment of *homo urbanus*. You can enjoy the motorway as you drive in your car. The car is not by definition bad, but an inextricable part of our society. Instead of turning a blind eye to cars – as a necessary evil, or as infrastructure for getting from A to B – we should take these urban conditions seriously as a site of being and encounter. The banal landscape of everyday life should be taken seriously; after all, it has many qualities, and we spend many hours each day in it. The good thing about the plans by NL architects and Ian+ is that they both manage to turn a space – beneath a motorway in one case, a garage in the other – into an urban event. They do not ignore the extremes in our society – that is what traditional architectural criticism does: it hates cars and motorways – but look for ways of turning these non-places into genuine cosmopolitan locations, precisely by exploiting their schizophrenic and abstract reality to the full. The spaces that they offer are thus not made picturesque by means of all kinds of elegant

benches, decorative plants, etc. Instead, NL and Ian+ play with the suburban material – the quality of the non-place or *terrain vague* – in order to arrive at new public spaces. It is noteworthy that NL invests much more than Ian+ in programme rather than in attractive forms.

The public sphere

Crimson works with residents in the Hoogvliet neighbourhood of Rotterdam. Hoogvliet is due for cleaning up and renovation. Dogma designed a totally new city for Korea that proposes a permanent and unchanging structure to counterbalance the changeability of everyday life: an architecture against the regularities of the market and the excesses of far-reaching individualism. You may not have noticed, but both Crimson and Dogma use architecture as a political instrument. For Crimson, however, engaging in politics is primarily something that concerns the public. It is a question of talking with the residents, of letting the public vote on internet which city model is to be implemented, of developing projects together with the residents, and more of those kinds of participatory activities. Dogma is not interested in residents any more than Crimson is interested in the monumentality of the city. We here run up against the polemical opposition between form (representation) and programme (life itself). Or what Svetlana Alpers has argued about seventeenth century Dutch painting constituting an art of describing as opposed to the narrative art of Italy, Svetlana Alpers writes that: “The aim of Dutch painters was to capture on a surface a great range of knowledge and information about the world. (...) Theirs was not a window in the Italian model of art but rather, like a map, a surface on which is laid out an assemblage of the world.”³ It is as Robert Somol⁴ has written a privileging of *seeing* over *reading*: “The form of contemporary architectural culture that has come to be identified with the Netherlands has taken the greatest advantage of this liberation from meaning. After passing of history and theory as external rationalizations for architecture, it is a form of global tourism or reportage that has practically subsumed the category of ‘research’, one that characterized by a polymorphous opportunism. It is a form of practice that combines ‘an ease with boundaries’ and an ‘anxiety to define’.”⁵ Crimson believes in dialogue with the politicians and the authorities in consultation with the residents. That can turn a city into a success and lead to new forms of building. It is not for nothing that Crimson got Fat (Fashion Architecture Taste) architects from London to build the clubhouse. Learning from Las Vegas is their motto. It is not about *becoming* popular, but about *being* popular: ‘main street is almost alright’. Dogma rejects anything that reeks of spectacle or being popular. Architecture should resist vulgarity by not giving in to it. It is in that opposition that its strength lies; it can give expression to the essence of the idea of the city: the unchangeable: a form without style, peaceful and anonymous. Crimson sees architecture as nothing but a means of being human, and it must be filled with everyday experiences. Vernacular architecture is a means of arriving at recognition and happiness. Dogma sees nothing in this and prefers to advocate the intrinsic potential of architecture as a medium. What remains, both in Dogma’s monumental approach of representing *meaning* and in Crimson’s programmatic methodology of *describing*, is that they both work on building the city, in other words they invest in the public interest that can give a city its cosmopolitan character. The question remains – and in this respect they are both extremists – whether only the image (the abstract form of representation), on the one hand, or only the programme (the everyday events), on the other hand, can really determine the public sphere of the city.

³ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, 1983.

⁴ R.E. Somol, in the article “Nothing to Declare”, the Berlage report Hunch 8 Double Dutch edited by Penelope Dean, 2004.

⁵ See Alpers’s account of the Dutch artists in *The Art of Describing*.

Although they will bitterly contest the assertion, in fact Crimson and Dogma badly need one another. If we ask Crimson to organise the changing life and Dogma the permanent infrastructure, we have the solution. Or does this combination only lead to cosmopolitan trade instead of cosmopolitan praxis? The fact is that Programme and Form cannot be considered independently of one another.

All of the 'Italian' and 'Dutch' architects in this exhibition bear witness to a resistance to the individualisation of our culture under the influence of neoliberalism. I think that they can thus all agree with Henry Miller's statement: 'We must die as egos and be born again in the swarm, not separate and self-hypnotized, but individual and related.'

Roemer van Toorn