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Dirty Minimalism

The Liberation of Unimportance in Recent Dutch Architecture
by **Wouter Vanstiphout**

We Dutch architects have always expected a lot from the reality that surrounds us. During our most ethnographic episodes, as we described in breathless words obscure parts of our geography, weren't we always looking for seeds of imminent revolution? We looked at the most banal expressions of lower- or middle-class leisure culture and turned these into arguments for megalomaniacal upheavals of the landscape. One person flying a kite in the port of Rotterdam was to us the beginning of a mega-leisure-delta-supercity combining ecology, heavy infrastructure, and permanent vacations. Two truck drivers eating steaks in a restaurant on the highway at three o'clock in the morning led us to believe in twenty-four hour megastucture-cities exploding upward from spaghetti junctions. Three decades of ministers of planning presenting spatial planning policies — carefully stylized versions of the unplanned spatial developments that were already going on — convinced us that the landscape and the cities could be planned, designed, and programmed top-down. And our ideas — our brilliant ideas, our lovely, beautiful, unique ideas — could be realized, if only we could get the ministers to listen to us, just to us. And listen

they did, to every damn one of us.

Well, that's over now. Nobody listens to architects anymore. If we scan contemporary Holland for points of departure for important design-driven transformations, we do not see a pretty picture. The government and the local councils have stopped commissioning experimental design and research, are making serious cutbacks on subsidies, and are turning more and more power over to private developers and housing corporations. The big national planning bills have withered into a wafer-thin edict turning over the responsibility for national planning to local authorities. While many corporate design firms are doing very well because of this by just building, the internationally known experimental architects who embody Holland's tradition of permanent spatial revolution are being ignored.

The atmosphere of disenchantment is palpable; the SuperDutch are spreading over the world building, teaching, lecturing, publishing, distancing themselves from each other and from Dutchness and becoming famous in their own right. There is a sharp distinction between the lucky bastards working on the crest of the wave, profiting as a group from the revolutionary reputation of an entire nation,

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and the poor sods who have just missed the boat, and whose work will automatically be associated with a tired architectural and political trend: *Holland*. Nobody outside Holland knows a Dutch architect who was invisible during the heroic '20s but started out in the '30s, just as no one will be interested in a Dutch architect starting out in the '00s. It happened then, and it is happening now, as if it is a natural cycle, unavoidable.

But is this a bad thing? Shouldn't it be incredibly liberating for the current generation of architects to be ignored? Finally they can just look at the world around them, instead of being asked to join up, be brilliant, and reinvent it. They have the chance to observe a society that's going through transformations that have very little to do with the intuitions of architects and planners. They might learn something new.

Somehow Rotterdam is the laboratory for the kinds of transformations Holland is going through. Before 2002, Rotterdam was the main metaphor for the worldwide acknowledged brilliance of the SuperDutch generation: The seemingly unavoidably social-democrat city of the Modernist housing projects of the '20s and the reconstruction in the '50s were just stepping stones toward the apotheosis of Dutch architecture later in the century. In the '90s Rotterdam became world famous again for the grand manner in which it planted huge cultural institutions of national or even international value in the city, involving large amounts of work for very famous architects. The city succeeded in getting the national architecture institute to move from Amsterdam to Rotterdam by offering it a free location in its middle. An international competition was organized, resulting in the famous NAI building by Jo Coenen. Rem Koolhaas was then asked to design a huge Kunsthall (artshed) and a museum park. The neo-baroque British superstar architect Will Alsop designed an enormous development around Rotterdam's central station. But it was also in this city that the neo-liberal populist movement of Pim Fortuijn was born and where he swept to victory in the city council elections of 2002. (The abandon-

ment of Will Alsop's project, when it was ready to be built, was one of the first actions of the Pim Fortuijn people when they took power in 2002.) It is also this city that was used time after time by Fortuijn to illustrate the problems that Dutch society was going through and that were being ignored by the government in The Hague. Rotterdam has become the main political metaphor for Dutch society. This holds as true for the supporters of the Fortuijn revolution as for its most bitter detractors. From being architecture's main tabernacle, this city has become its butcher's block.

Two spatial-political phenomena are developing in Rotterdam that should be studied by the architecture and planning community. The first phenomenon we could dramatically call the dissolution, in several ways, of urban planning. To start there is the literal dissolution of some of the most potent urban tissue built in this century: the postwar neighborhoods and satellite towns around Rotterdam. These starkly humanist compositions of slabs and voids are fifty years old and used by people completely different from those they were planned for. Therefore these precisely programmed settlements are being inhabited by immigrants for whom they were not designed, who use them in ways never foreseen by the planners, and develop neighborhoods with a totally different atmosphere and economy than those originally intended. The way these neighborhoods have veered away from their original path is seen by the housing corporations, the planners and the local administrations as a big societal problem that needs to be addressed in the most aggressive way: by demolition and redevelopment. This process is in full swing right now and the Modernist urban tissue is being replaced by a tissue of larger houses with more and larger gardens, more space for parking, and a lot less public space. Collective spaces and buildings are the first to go. Urban planning as a profession plays a minor role in this process, which is determined by land prices and rent levels. Architectural offices are involved in detailing the housing projects, and at the very end the urban planning department comes in and

designs what is left of the public space. Underneath the dissolution of urban planning lies a deeper dissolution: that of urban governance.

The largest part of the city's housing stock is owned by housing corporations. These started out as local, not-for-profit institutions subsidized by the government and mandated to rent out social housing. They built most of the walk-up flats that make up the postwar ring of neighborhoods and satellite towns around Rotterdam. In the late '80s these corporations were privatized. Their subsidies were abolished, but they kept their colossal stock of houses. From the moment they became commercial developers, they started to define long-term strategies to safeguard their capital, much as banks would do. First they began a series of mergers. The housing corporations now cover territories that far exceed those of the cities. This means that decisions about the housing stock of Rotterdam are not being made as part of a political or business strategy for the city but as part of a strategy of the corporation, for whom place has become irrelevant. Of course cities play an active role in this, but purely as a local financial partner. Paradoxically, from the point of view of city government, to reach targets and fulfill election promises it is easier to devolve executive power to the private sector than to try and reform the sclerotic local bureaucracy.

The second Rotterdam phenomenon we can pretentiously name the inversion of cultural politics. The City Council has asked for entries for what it calls ten *Groeibriljanten*, literally "growing diamonds." The people of Rotterdam have been called to submit projects that would strengthen their neighborhoods. These have to be feasible without subsidies, they have to involve local entrepreneurs, they have to have broad support among the locals, and they have to have serious business plans. Rotterdam people were asked to vote for one of the projects. A fascinating crusade followed involving brochures, Internet-campaigns, old-fashioned canvassing, and vans driving around town broadcasting with loud-speakers. Every team wanted to get as

many popular votes as possible to influence the final choice. If awarded the status of *Groeibriljant*, they are given 50% of the budget, political support, and professional assistance from the city department of public works.

After the first call for ideas, forty or fifty projects were entered, ranging from a small neighborhood restaurant to a huge park for all the leisure activities of one of Rotterdam's isolated satellite towns. Some were entered by local inhabitants, others by shopkeepers or artists and curators. The philosophy behind this project is unequivocal: A.) to replace top-down urbanistic and cultural planning with a system provoking and rewarding bottom-up entrepreneurship; B.) to change the cultural and economic make-up of the city not through blanket master-planning, but through an "acupunctural" infusion of highly specific projects with supposedly huge spin-off effects.

The Groeibriljanten is an ostentatious symbol of the neo-liberal managerial populism of Pim Fortuijn. It works as a boot camp for the city's cultural administrators and civil servants. Instead of looking at Rotterdam from an international point of view, as a subject for constant change and architectural innovation, they are forced to lower themselves to the level of its inhabitants and work up from there. Lastly it acts as a brutal provocation of the city's artistic and architectural elite by seemingly destroying any chance for large, centrally supported cultural programs and by turning cultural and architectural innovation over to the streets.

The dissolution of urban planning and the inversion of cultural planning are also spreading over the rest of Holland. The difference is that in Rotterdam they are being pursued openly and with ideological fervor. Again: what does this mean for architects? Does it mean that they should just conform to the powers that be and work for housing corporations, limit themselves to designing public space in the wake of huge demolition and suburbanization schemes and design small, populist, pavilions and facades for local businesses and organizations of in-

habitants? Of course they should. Many are already doing exactly this. But there will always be the group of architects, sometimes called the avant-garde, for whom this is not enough. They still want to lead the way, to change the world, to do what no one wants but what they know is good anyway. What will happen to them, now that there are no powerful administrators to go along with their ideas? Traditionally, this group will start sulking, complaining that the country is going to the dogs, that it is not interested in architecture anymore, that it has become provincial and reactionary. They will retreat into private realms of theoretical design, or disappear into the stratosphere of the international star system. But what will happen to the generation that cannot afford this luxury?

They are blessed with an opportunity that the former generation did not have: to invert the relationship of architects to politics. Up till now architects sought to be as close as possible to politics, assuming that only through the parallel agendas of politicians and designers could real large-scale innovation be achieved. The current generation could this time finally come to terms with the fact that the big spatial, economic, and cultural transformations Holland constantly goes through are not planned and not even plan-able. They will develop a dialectical way of dealing with politics, corporate business, and public support. Architects will have to look very carefully and very critically at the world around them and determine what they want and are able to alter. Rather than working for the housing corporations, they could choose to work against them and design new ways of using the postwar neighborhoods, instead of designing the suburbs that replace the flats. Released from ideology-free progressive Dutch pragmatism, architects can redevelop the art of making political choices.

In a city where urban planning has dissolved, architects could try to add buildings, programs, and spaces that are exceptional because they are born out of ideas. In a city where cultural planning has been turned upside down, they have the luxury of not having to wait and lob-

by for The Big Job. They could profit from the chaos and push through their private dreams and ideologies. In a city with no discernible interest in architecture or planning, there is also no political manipulation of architecture. In a city that has sold out the whole idea of planning, there is no one planning model to which everything should conform.

This un-architectural, un-urbanistic city can become the stage for the fierce confrontation of interests and ideas. Architects will have to fight for little bits of reality. Freed from the paranoid hierarchies of SuperDutch and from the banalizing attention of the international scene, they will be able to become fighters, entrepreneurs, activists, opportunistically adding their signatures to the bizarre bazaar this country is becoming. They will find other special interest groups to form micro-coalitions aimed at the realization of one project. They will design spaces that are heaven to their users, but might disgust passers-by. Their contributions will be minute when compared to the whole city, but viscerally *there* in comparison to their surroundings. They will be called Dirty Minimalists. They will change your world. □

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