

## Architecture must burn

And flow, and blow and above all else stand its ground. Architecture as an art, as a form of poetry, must animate, inspire, enlighten, elevate and move. Conversely, if a work does not have effects like these, it does not deserve the designation architecture. Architecture is the cultural surplus of building.

This is an almost classical conception of architecture, and it is a beautiful conception. It opens up the possibility of drawing distinctions, of becoming enthusiastic about quality. It motivates us to travel, to voice our appreciation, to formulate policies. And it will also undoubtedly provide the motivation for running the largest architecture institute in the world; for organizing incendiary exhibitions and furious debates, for letting a fresh breeze blow through institutional and professional parochialism. And, with all this, for reinforcing the position of an institute that ministers to a discipline in turmoil.

*Architecture Must Burn* is the title of the latest book by Aaron Betsky, published just before he took up his post as director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute. It is a manifesto for an architecture that aims to become a spiritual focus in a world that is an archipelago of fragments – an architecture that is a passionate compound of strength, creativity, insight, grace, revelation, durability, respect, experience, genius, humanity, hope, testimony, permanent revolution, imagination and, finally, redemption; and these in ever changing combinations. Weighty words – very weighty indeed – fill the book from beginning to end. ‘Architecture can make sense of the world as much as it makes us at home in its confusion.’ ‘Architecture can be a beacon of coherence.’ ‘We need architecture to build our humanity in a world of sprawl.’ In the face of all the prevailing relativism and pragmatism, these are the words of someone with an unshakable faith in the potency of architecture. The title may be borrowed (from Coop Himmelb(l)au), but *Architecture Must Burn* is a prose poem about the ‘flickering flame that illuminates our cities’. What can the poet expect to encounter in the country where he will now be working? There is another book we can consult for that: *Architecture in the Netherlands*:



Aaron Betsky, Erik Adigard, *Architecture Must Burn*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2000, ISBN 1 5842 3030 4.

*Yearbook 2000>01*. This yearly review of top Dutch architecture is compiled by a broad editorial team. In an ideal world, the book would be a follow-my-leader of architectural fireworks, a blaze of all those qualities that Betsky avows. Considering that Betsky himself draws over twenty percent of his illustrative examples from the Netherlands, that shouldn't have been too tall an order. Apparently it was. Dutch architecture presents on the whole a rather frozen picture. The yearbook demonstrates as always the icy precision of the technical camera wielded under clear skies. But the architecture it records does not burn, or blow, or flow. Instead it floats imperviously in a universe of calm. This is not an answer to sprawl. This is itself sprawl, a sprawl of arbitrary quality.

But what exacerbates the tension between Betsky's ideals and the architecture he will encounter in the Netherlands is the analysis provided by the yearbook's editorial team. Not one of his poetic values has a place in their vocabulary. They emphasize instead the shamelessness with which prosperity and ostentation are flaunted in the Netherlands nowadays. There is no drama here, no battleground, just polder propriety and a Porsche at the front door. The project designs are typified by extreme correctness, calculated down to the last detail and executed with perfect taste. The book concludes with a lengthy analysis of the feast of images, celebrating the success of this combination to the point of tedium.

The Netherlands: will the party grind on indefinitely, or will it finally catch fire – that is the question. Or perhaps the fire is the real banquet that awaits us?



Anne Hoogewoning et al. (eds), *Architecture in the Netherlands: Yearbook 2000>01*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2001, ISBN 90 5662 202 1.

Can a peat bog burn?  
How long does a fire in the polder last?