

The return of politics

Sometimes you have to make a bold prediction, and here's mine: architecture is turning political again. Not in the same way as 30 years ago, as an illustration of the power of capital or – the opposite – as proof of ideological correctness. Nor like 15 years ago, as a lever for urban renewal operations or as an instrument of city hall socialism. The political in architecture today means the explicit awareness that architectural space is the primary domain in which conflicts of social outlook are made public, defined and ultimately fought out. Architecture has become an arena for the struggle for power, and people are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact – of architecture as politics. Now that architecture is no longer seen merely as the beauty of the individual building but as the spatial dimension of our existence, the time is ripe for the architectural debate to re-embrace the polarization appropriate to that dimension. More and more people are getting involved and that is a sure-fire recipe for trouble.

A quick example. *Archis* spent a while following the decision-making process for the renovation of the Ministries of Justice and the Interior in The Hague from the inside. It is a complicated project, full of interest from the point of view of programme, urban situation and architecture. A major state commission of this kind is effectively a litmus test of self-assured government. Within mere months, as it turned out, the project was bogged down in a political quagmire, no longer a matter of architectural quality but of power, nostalgia, social involvement, efficiency requirements, process control techniques and political interference at the highest level (see p. 70 of this issue).

And there are dozens of similar instances of architecture in the broad sense turning into a platform for political fencing. The semi-privatization of the public realm, the claim laid on space by the modernization of transport infrastructure, the individualization of housing: you see it all around you. But the major social processes also throw up architectural questions: an aging population, multiculturalism and new safety demands are all trends that have consequences for the organization and shaping of space.

What it comes down to is that architecture no longer figures as a marginal frill on a national culture policy, nor as a bee in some lone individual's political bonnet, but it becomes the focus of the most energetic of political ambitions. Political struggles are no longer fought out over abstractions but over the space of here and now. It is little wonder therefore that we are bombarded with policy papers. Governments all around the world are busily promulgating architectural policies. It would be naive to think that all this attention was due to an increased interest in architecture as an artistic discipline. Architecture is no longer safe from political abuse – but, the question is, is that really such a bad thing?

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London's Docklands: a model of redevelopment. F1/01/4447 MAR 2001.