

The rise and fall of Superdutch

Ole Bouman



Since the dawn of the people's capitalism, where just about everyone is tied to the ups and downs of the stock market, the concept of the bursting bubble and rapid plume of shares attaining 'a more realistic level' has become a wide-spread cultural theme. Not just in financial markets, but in many social domains, we see how certain concepts, brands, and personalities are overvalued or promoted and how, as a consequence, counter-forces oblige them to make a reality check. Hype dies, the public gets distracted, and those who were only recently the center of attention are forgotten for the next big thing.

It does not take a powerful imagination, therefore, to describe the vicissitudes of Dutch architecture over the past decade. In 1994 I published an article entitled 'Dutch Courage, Dutch Comfort'.¹ In it, I warned against getting bogged down in the then dominant and ambitious climate of dressing up various cultural institutions in order to increase quality awareness in architecture. I also argued that the work of these institutions had to be linked to the context of larger and predominant social issues such as migration, an aging population, digitalization, and multiculturalism. I put forward that a new cultural energy capable of creating something greater than merely a self-congratulatory culture could only come by incorporating these larger social issues into architectural discourse. At the same time, I noted how architecture was in the practice of zoning all available talent into a small group of pilot projects and iconic buildings that everyone spoke about, while elsewhere the lack of qualified architects was accepted as a *fait accompli*; and as long as the party of mutual acknowledgement lasted, nobody needed to worry terribly much about 'elsewhere'.

Sometimes it is quite annoying to be right, particularly when there are ample warnings. Five years ago, in the year 2000 – the peak of another bubble called the New Economy – a book appeared which took as its point of departure exactly this subject: the growing self-affirmation of Dutch architecture. The book added to this a promotional dimension. In addition to patting ourselves on the back, it became possible to launch a campaign abroad in which this self-confidence could be expressed with bravura. Despite the fact that it was a foreign publisher who took the initiative, its effect was principally a publicity offensive that facilitated Dutch architecture's conquering of the globe.² The book was written by Bart Lootsma, a relentless ambassador for certain architects,

1
Archis, No. 4, 1994,
pp. 44–51.

2
Bart Lootsma, *Superdutch*,
Princeton Architectural
Press, New York, 2000.

who gave perfect expression to the essence of the bubble by being unable to resist the temptation of the bubble title *Superdutch*. A superlative title for an entire culture, justified by the work of twelve architects within his orbit.

The influence this book and its title had and continue to have can hardly be overestimated. Dutch architects and Lootsma, a gifted speaker and tireless traveler, circled the globe and one way or another confirmed the myth. After Rem Koolhaas had come a generation busting with conceptual intelligence and blessed with a liberal, modern talent for design. As true Dutchmen they were also always quite willing to find the perfect compromise. This package is the perfect example of a successful publicity campaign: reduce your national architecture to the sum of a few talented designers, have someone summarize their work who is prepared to invest more than a little intelligence into their promotion, think up a cheeky title, and then do everything possible to get your message out: more publications, lectures, exhibitions, marketing campaigns, etc. An unparalleled success and the only question remaining is: what's the rest of the world been up to?

Well, the rest of the world has, at its best, been largely dominated by a consumer-driven neo-traditionalism which hates the hip concept architecture of the Superdutch gang. At its worst, it has seen a total dearth of any idea of style or design at all and given itself over to a jungle of outbidding, competing and isolated real estate in a privatized universe. This universe permits nothing to be super, only ordinary and predictable and human, all-too-human. This, however, is not news, of course. Neither is the way in which people who make a living in this sector sometimes express their resentment towards 'elitism'. Exit super. Back to normal.

Dutch factor What is perhaps news is that in that other universe the Dutch factor is also fading. While the government and its independent policy instruments were busy promoting a design culture described as 'typically' Dutch, diverse forces were at work seriously fiddling with what was typically Dutch. By this I do not necessarily mean forces such as 'globalization' or 'Europe', although these embody a dynamic in which the Netherlands is increasingly subsumed within larger conglomerates. There has also been a loss of sovereignty, global economic interdependence, cultural marginalization, a more ethnically mixed population (with the consequent effect upon Dutch identity) and other forms of historical identity loss. Yet in the context of this article, what was more important was that the state itself was playing an growing role in the undermining of its own historical mission. In the Netherlands the armed forces have become emergency services for supranational intervention; the educational system has shifted from teaching specific knowledge to developing general skills; English is rapidly becoming the language in which students are taught; national utilities such as public transport, telecom services, energy supplies and cable networks, have been privatized and/or majority holdings have been sold off. For this article what is of particular importance is the privatization of public housing and the shift towards providing buildings for administrative or other public functions simply by renting office space. The loss of these two exceptionally powerful policy instruments, the one quantitative and the other qualitative, to promote architectonic quality has had direct, physical consequences. It has seriously



curtailed public architectural expressive possibilities. The government no longer answers questions such as 'Who am I?' 'What do I want?' or 'Where do I want to go?' in a progressive three-dimensional way.

That said, we also have to acknowledge that during this same period, the government began to set up an unprecedented architectural policy. The government gave up power, but at least took on responsibility. Three memoranda were issued which stretched the definition of architecture and its implied claim for quality to all extremes. A National Architecture Institute, an incentive fund, and many other policies designed to ensure a high-quality architectural climate were established. In other words, civic construction was replaced by subsidized discussion with the hope and expectation that this advanced notion of quality would trickle down to the broader public of clients (developers, housing corporations, etc.) and their clients (buyers) as well as generate a much broader debate about architecture amongst lay audiences. A construction policy, embedded in a paramount market ideology, shifted its emphasis from a position of action and prescription to one of persuasion and influence.

Here we are five years later. As a source of inspiration, Superdutch is spent and today is only a tourist attraction, at best. The twelve architects and their capacity to design iconic images continue on their merry, international way, though they have silently buried their 'typically Dutch' routine. Bart Lootsma emigrated to Austria. The Social Democratic preference for architecture as a weapon of social renewal lost momentum when the Social Democrats were ousted from power. Political orphans, architecture institutes now fight tooth and nail just to survive. The tentative score thus far in this battle can be found in the Action Program Culture and Spatial Planning, a supplement to the Memorandum on Public Planning, in which governmental exemplary and supervisory functions are explicitly marginalized or delegated to local authorities who eo ipso have no vision of national interests as it is their task to consider local interest first.³

When formulated in this way, the state has a great deal to explain regarding an architecture policy it instigated, implemented and then amputated. The transformation from a public construction policy to a spatial cultural policy has been fundamental, drastic and far-reaching indeed. It undeniably made Dutch architecture more famous, though it did not necessarily improve it. If the spatial quality has been redefined - from architectural fact to subjective idea (such as 'lively climate') - then it is of crucial importance that this climate continue to receive a great deal of attention and promotion. Should things get rough, all we will be left with is the cultural shift from actor to cheerleader, which is really

3
Tjeerd de Boer and André Mol (eds), *Actieprogramma Ruimte en Cultuur. Architectuur- en Belvederebeleid 2005–2008*. Published by the Ministries of: Education, Culture and Science; Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment; Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality; Infrastructure; Economic Affairs; Defence; Foreign Affairs.

all we have now. The Dutch state is in permanent crisis regarding its legitimacy, mandate, citizen relations, and its need for new policy which takes into consideration how earlier policies should be maintained. It lacks direction and leadership. In this sense, the state is no state at all, but an example of institutional desperation doing little more than constantly reacting to daily trends.

The state has a lot to explain, should it be ready to or feel itself called upon to do so. It lacks any insight into where its own architectural policy came from and so do the ideas driving its decision to retreat from the role as client. It consequently doesn't feel guilty that the reparations policy

Some actors in the field of architectural and spatial quality in The Netherlands

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT

Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment (VROM)

- National Architect, advisor for architecture (Mels Crouwel)
- Government Buildings Agency (RGD)
- National Department for Spatial Planning (RPD)
- National Institute for Spatial Research (RPB)

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCenW)

- National advisor for the cultural heritage (Fons Asselbergs)
- Netherlands Department for Conservation (RDMZ)

Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV)

- National advisor for the landscape (Simons)

Ministry of Infrastructure (V&W)

- National advisor for the infrastructure (Jan Brouwer)

Board of National Advisors

stationed in the Atelier of the National Architect (ARBM)
It operates in the wake of three successive memoranda on architecture (formulated by the four ministries mentioned above) and the call (memorandum Belvedere) for a conscious treatment of historical values above, on and in the ground (history and archeology of the landscape). Besides the appeal on (institutional) clients for a qualitative commissioning policy, the state also initiated 10 'grand projects' as examples of quality treatment of some major themes.

Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur; advisory body to the government and parliament on culture policy; advises on structural subsidies to cultural institutions once every 4 years)

The Netherlands Architecture Fund (Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur; grants for architecture projects by legal bodies, also foreign ones)

Mondriaan Foundation (Mondriaan Stichting; grants for visual arts, design and cultural heritage projects)

Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB; grants for art/architecture/design projects by individuals)

Netherlands Institute of Spatial Planning and Housing (NIROV; independent platform for the quality of spatial development)

International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam

Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) Rotterdam Flagship of national architectural policy including the archives of the most important architects since the 19th century

Professional organisations

Royal Institute of Dutch Architects (BNA)

Dutch Professional Organization of Urban Designers and Planners (BNSP)

Netherlands Association for Landscape Architecture (NVTL)

Association of Dutch Designers (BNO)

The Architects Register (SBA)

Association of Dutch Developing Companies (Neprom; umbrella organization of the larger developers)

Aedes (umbrella organization of the housing corporations)

International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam

Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) Rotterdam Flagship of national architectural policy including the archives of the most important architects since the 19th century

DOCOMOMO Netherlands

Architecture schools

- TU Delft
- TU Eindhoven
- Academy of Architecture Amsterdam
- Academy of Architecture Rotterdam
- Academy of Architecture Groningen
- Academy of Architecture Arnhem
- Academy of Architecture Tilburg
- Academy of Architecture Maastricht
- Berlage Institute (post doc)

Websites / portals

- Archined.nl
- Architectenwerk.nl

Magazines

- De Architect (NL)
- Oase (NL+E)
- Hunch (E)
- Volume (E)
- Bouw (NL)
- S&RO (NL)
- Mark (E)
- National newspapers like NRC Handelsblad with several specialized journalists
- And many more...

International think tanks

- Archis Foundation

Local / Regional bodies

- Municipalities (much power has been delegated from national to local authority)
- District Water Boards (waterschappen; regional management of water levels, dykes etc)
- Spatial planning department of each province
- Archeology department of each province
- Nature conservation department of each province
- Amsterdam Council for Urban Planning (ARS)
- Architecture Local (Architectuur Lokaal; advice and expertise for clients and municipalities on the local level) www.arch-lokaal.nl

Local architecture centers

(united in OLA, an informal platform since 1993)

[AIA](#), Alkmaar
[CASLA](#), Almere
[CAS](#), Alphen aan den Rijn
[De Zonnehof](#), Amersfoort
[ARCAM](#), Amsterdam
[Zuiderkerk](#), (Municipal information center) Amsterdam
[Bouwhuis](#), Apeldoorn
[Arnhem Casa](#), Arnhem
[Gebouw F](#), Breda
[Delft Design](#), Delft
[Stroom](#), Den Haag
[Stichting Triade](#), Den Helder
[Architectuurcentrum Rondeel](#), Deventer
[De Stad](#), Dordrecht
[ACE](#), Eindhoven
[GRAP](#), Gouda
[Drenthe](#), Assen
[Projectwinkel Grave](#), Grave
[Platform Gras](#), Groningen
[ABC](#), Haarlem
[Podium voor Architectuur Haarlemmermeer](#), Haarlemmermeer
[Viruvianum](#), Heerlen
[Architectuur-café Helmond](#), Helmond
[Museum Hilversum](#), Hilversum
[ACH](#), Hoorn
[Tuinarchitectuurpark Makeblijde](#), Houten
[Vereniging Haerlem](#), Kennemerland
[Fries Architectuur Centrum](#), Leeuwarden
[Stichting ALS](#), Lelystad
[Stichting Architectuur Leusden](#), Leusden
[Topos](#), Maastricht
[Museum Nagele](#), Nagele
[Architectuur Centrum Nijmegen](#), Nijmegen
[RAP](#), Rijnland
[AIR](#), Rotterdam
[Archicenter](#), Rotterdam
[CAST](#), Tilburg
[ACT](#), Enschede
[Aorta](#), Utrecht
[Utrechts Architectencafé](#), Utrecht
[APVEO](#), Venlo
[Ahoi](#), Wageningen
[Stichting Architectuurlijk Weert](#), Weert
[Bale](#), Zaandam
[Het Zeeuws Gezicht](#), Middelburg
[RiA|](#), Eefde/Zutphen
[ZAP](#), Zwolle

Publishers specialised in architecture, landscape, urbanism and interior:
[010 Publishers](#), Rotterdam
[NAI Publishers](#), Rotterdam
[Uitgeverij Thoth](#), Bussum
[Episode Publishers](#), Rotterdam

developed at that time has degenerated into a kind of appendage of economic policy. In legal terms: the government cedes its responsibility in order to keep its liability manageable.

New spirit

Is it then altogether impossible to sketch a future where there is fervor and excitement in the state-architecture relationship? Must we simply accept this malaise as a *fait accompli* and wait until the state wakes up for reasons that go beyond architecture? Only if we take the state and its architecture policy as our analytic reference point. The story is in fact quite different if we look at the dynamics of current building itself, which always reflect social developments. Much more interesting than poking at the sleeping giant that is the state, is searching for those signs that indicate that there's already a lot going on. Small developments within governmental bodies, but most certainly also outside the direct reach of state influence. Then, one peculiar observation can be made: natural, not cultural, climate will tip the scales!

But let me begin with signals from within the government.

One of the institutions which continues to assert a certain authority is the *Rijksbouwmeester*, the state architect. This institutional, somewhat lost figure continues to be in a position to build bridges between the action-oriented Housing and Spatial Planning Ministry and the more verbal Ministry of Culture and so maintains a crucial position between doing and speaking. The *Rijksbouwmeester* has been growing in authority principally because of the current need, greater than ever before, for expert advice for ministers. The state architect is, dramatically put, the last remaining voice with spatial expertise at the national level with access to decision makers. For this reason he is the best instrument of relevant (and not political) influence at this level. He involves himself in diverse issues regarding space from a few large, prestigious projects to smaller, regional developments, from education of future designers, to the preservationists of past monuments.

This informal position is being further strengthened by the recent establishment of a College of National Advisors which includes not only the state architect, but also portfolios for National Heritage, Landscape, and Infrastructure. This College will do more than just distribute funds or lead large projects. It will create the conditions for spatial quality in an administrative configuration which cares increasingly less about it.⁴ Because it has a free mandate (and is also given a particularly strongly personal interpretation by its protagonists) this could indeed be the force which reverses our current culture of neglect.

In addition, the College appears to be a natural defense against the current architecture policy instrumentarium. Its government-given assignment is to investigate how current policy can be invigorated. Thus the College has nothing less than the key to the maintenance of state responsibility for creating good conditions for exceptional architecture on a macro-scale. It seems to be aware of this responsibility, given some recent announcements of its objectives. Very much will depend on the political adoption of its plans in the near future.

⁴ See for instance the Agenda 2005 of the College of National Advisors published as *College van Rijksadviseurs, Agenda 2005, The Hague, April 2005*.

Very much will depend on the political adoption of its plans in the near future.

So much for the soft forces from within. Meanwhile, hard forces from without cannot be emphasized enough. As a nation, the Netherlands has had the burden and great fortune of being united by water. No postmodern theory



is capable of explaining this fact away. Water is ultimately the only factor that must be continually defied and that has always played a specific role in the Dutch Deltaland. Water is the only force capable of causing crises now and again, something every nation needs in order to fight lethargy. Constantly threatened by water, the Netherlands has this very threat to thank for its existence. Without this enemy the Netherlands would have slowly gone under a long time ago. On water, against water, with water – it is the heart of the national ideal. Water, accursed enemy, will save us.

Identify, unite, engage

As far as water is concerned, New Orleans' lashing by hurricane Katrina is a splendid example. During the weeks after the flooding American journalists and policy makers alike came to look at the *Deltawerken* and conduct research into Dutch flood preparations.⁵ It is almost an autoreflex. When other nations suffer deluges, they naturally turn to a nation that sits below sea level and is capable of becoming a world power and one whose engineering enjoys global recognition. Isn't the Netherlands the country famous for its hydro-engineering works, its unity against the rising waters, and social pacification through the *poldermodel* after all? For a moment everyone forgot about the political murders, burning mosques and deported illegal aliens which had so recently been linked with the Netherlands. An image of ourselves found in old, post-war newsreels was rekindled.

Just as the New Orleans disaster might herald a reversal in American anti-federal sentiment and offer a wake up call for a society which has forgotten the meaning of collective responsibility, a similar reality check in the Netherlands itself is equally conceivable. In a country buried under contradictory rules, assumptions, and an excess of policy, perhaps a single disaster is not even sufficient. The 1996 floods, the Srebrenica massacre, the construction fraud affair, police corruption, the cancellation of public works after years of discussion even after construction had begun – one wonders to what degree these scandals

⁵ Evidence of the Dutch concern about water management is to be found in the activities of the Crown Prince himself. Prince Willem-Alexander has been an advocate domestically and internationally; he is Chairman of the Integrated Water Research Management Commission in the Netherlands and patron of the Global Water Partnership. Even though Dutch experts are called to disaster areas around the globe as consultants, Holland's own water issues require constant scrutiny. NL struggles with a rising sea level, sinking land levels, seasonal water shortage and water excess, all having huge spatial impacts.

and disasters have really shaken the nation awake. Perhaps we should be happy that we still have more alarm bells that are about to ring: the un-remunerative development of high-speed train lines, the total rigidity of the housing market, the consequences of decentralization according to the Public Planning Memorandum, the everlasting inviolability of the mortgage tax deduction, the exodus of pensioners to warmer climes, and following segregation, the immigrant population explosion. There are more than enough alarm clocks ticking, ready to wake us up at any moment.

Of course, this all sounds cynical. The nation can determine that this all does not have to lead to the ultimate crisis. With the right combination of leadership and sense of urgency, there is still something that can be done. If this is so, then, as so often before in history, architecture will play an important role. Design remains the instrument for large-scale order, restoration of the economy, and the recovery of self-awareness. As it was then, so shall it be again. In fact, since there is so much to do, it can begin immediately.

Water management, restoration of the construction productivity, and the reorganization of the – what used to be called – countryside. Infrastructure will also always remain a magnet for national identification, no matter how much greed and ignorance accompanies it. These tasks ultimately underscore the centrality of the state over its dissolution.

However large these ambitions already are, there are even greater arenas in which architecture can prove itself. This time it is not about facts, but about the potential to create new facts. Designers and, above all, clients must see this, and must gather the forces necessary to make ambition reality. Take our graying population. Take Europeanization: what can we contribute to the strengthening of a European identity that preserves national characteristics? Take Climate change: how can we build a future that will really endure? When so formulated, there is no reason at all for lethargy or malaise. On the contrary. It is strange that there is talk of a leadership crisis, given that there is so much work for the leaders.
