

# AMU



Essay:

# Dutch Architecture at the Crossroads

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It is an honor to introduce a special issue of this most respected magazine, which I have had the privilege to follow for many years now. As former editor of the *Archis* magazine for instance, I enjoyed an exchange subscription for more than a decade, allowing me to follow the way Japanese architectural culture has seen global architecture. *a+u* made me see western architecture with eastern eyes. A gaze I would first of all call rather aesthetical. But thinking about it more reflexively, I would perhaps call it most of all poetical. Thinking back to those moments receiving *a+u* and browsing through it, I remember the delight in perceiving architecture in the most self-confident way possible. As if no ordinary life could affect it; as if no realism could spoil it. Architecture, as the gods would have meant it. No wonder that this magazine helped so many people to keep the faith in this beloved discipline. Or even helped them to make architecture absolute.

I wonder how the current reader will understand the following pages. I expect a different sentiment to emerge. A feeling of blessed uncertainty. Presenting ten years of Dutch architecture is of course partly a play back of historical glory. Again you will encounter the abundance of talent as exemplified by built form. You will find several projects that still can claim this laconic and timeless quality throughout a very fruitful first decade of the 21st century. And through the photography they do. But slowly but surely, other energies will come to light as well. For many readers it may still come as a surprise to see Dutch architecture with lots of traditionalist features. Or with a strong focus on craftsmanship. Or as results of a very collaborative spirit. Although we still see many highly individualistic, highly conceptual and highly modernist projects, it becomes clear that this production is only part of the story of Dutch architecture today and in the recent past. Dutch architecture is rich in form, content, scope and technique in what serves the only real common denominator: the relentless pursuit of relevance. Functionally, symbolically, disciplinary. In sum, this issue presents a very productive decade, highlighting the work of a vast array of talents who achieved amazing success.

But...  
The reader will ask...  
If success is the effect, what has been the cause?

Beyond self congratulation it is, for any respectable artistic field, pivotal to understand the causes of certain practices. Understanding what you are doing is the prerequisite of any new insight. No pain, no glory. And if we achieve glory, it is always important to inflict some new pain to ensure that the glory will be continued. So the question is: are we still strong enough to endure this pain?

Naturally, the first and foremost feature of any success is the availability of talent and perseverance. It is not difficult to prove that the last 20 years of Dutch architecture have shown the abundance of design talent. Not only did we enjoy the emergence of many great designers who acquired global fame (from OMA to Droog Design, from MVRDV to Piet Oudolf), but we also witnessed the rise of a design culture in which the organization of talent became a deliberate act. Offices, big or small, became very smart in connecting with an international population of trainees, interns and project architects who, apparently, were prepared to give their best to Dutch practice. Beyond its own abundance of talent, the country benefitted from a huge brain gain.

Why did the Netherlands become disposed to pick those brains so actively? Because they could gain so much themselves. In the mid nineties it became clear that the country was heading for some bright Golden Years. The economy went well, even catapulted into high speed by the sudden rise of an almost American debt culture. Innovative startups could find venture capital very easily. Clients were all too happy to invest and experiment in risk seeking architecture in which hardly anything remained the same. The national government reached out to one more big wave of investments, in train stations, cultural institutions, parks and public spaces. And on top of all this, these were also the years of a full blown architectural policy that fostered opportunities for almost anyone involved in his or her environment. Citizens could ask for subsidies to improve neighbourhoods and clients asked for architectural advice. In design culture itself, several stimulation tools came to the fore, such as a variety of stipends, a centre of excellence, a special architecture fund, a set of big prizes and, last but not least, the full disclosure of the biggest architecture centre in the world: the Netherlands Architecture Institute, running a huge archive,

a large museum and a conference centre, next to many other facilities. How you could you NOT love this culture of faith in architecture?

Now, as anyone can imagine, in 2012 this culture is not so vital anymore. Major changes in the financial, institutional and also the disciplinary landscape are underway. Some of the changes are clearly the result of the global financial crisis that has been stifling the world economy for some years now. Other are clearly related to a certain fatigue of the kind in which glory starts to forget its causes. Whatever the reasons, the results are devastating. Joblessness has reached peak levels unseen anytime before. Clients no longer particularly like risks and start hiring the same architects for the same jobs all the time, shackling them in strict contracts for much lower fees. Schools are suffering from major budget cuts. Architectural criticism has become a very rare profession. Under these conditions one shouldn't be surprised to see architecture losing much of its self esteem.

Unless the tide can be turned.

And so, right now, as you can see in this issue, it becomes increasingly clear that Dutch designers are starting to recalibrate. Not by going back to paper architecture, as was the case many times in the past when the economy turned bad. This time it is about resetting architecture from being part of the problem to becoming part of the solution. Architects are increasingly aware of presenting their surplus value not in terms of symbolic power, but in terms of the performative power. The power to make a difference by solving what others cannot solve. Architecture, put this way does start to yield great solutions again. This is what might be called an Architecture of Consequence. This issue ends with many examples of this new emerging practice, recognizable by many other countries in the process of reinventing architecture. We hope that this issue is also inspirational to them.

**Ole Bouman** is the director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, globally the largest institute of its kind. Prior to this appointment he was the editor-in-chief of *Volume*, the independent magazine for architecture, for pushing its limits and finding new roles in society. *Volume* is a project of the Archis Foundation, the think tank AMO and the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation of Columbia University. He also was the director of the Archis Foundation, active in publishing, consultancy and, as an NGO, establishing connections between local design communities in need of expertise and the Archis global knowledge network.



*The Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam, 1993, Jo Coenen. Renovation and extension in 2010–2011 by Jo Coenen & Co. Photo by Carel van Hees.*

オランダ建築協会、ロッテルダム、1993年、ヨー・クネン設計。2010～2011年に増改築された。