

photo: Bert Beelen/ Hollandse Hoogte.



Dutch freak show

The Netherlands in the international press: from Hollanditis to Dutch Miracle. From Calvinism to coffee shop. From over-organized Mondrian landscape to Volendam and Enschede. From going Dutch to Rem Koolhaas. A country that shines on the Plaza de Mayo, but not in Srebrenica. And all the while the tulips go on flowering, the windmills turn and the wooden clogs dance. As if history has stood still there.

History does not stand still. The Netherlands, famous for its social cohesiveness and tolerance, has changed. Or rather, is in the process of rediscovering another typical trait. Moralizing finger wagging. There's no shortage of targets at the present moment. Suddenly there are countless examples of moral decline for people to get worked up about: politicians who cling tenaciously to office even while penning confidential memos to the effect that they don't believe in their own policy, company directors who reward themselves with extended share options and golden handshakes or even perpetrate a fraud so huge that it bankrupts their company. Construction companies that form covert monopolies so that they can charge whatever they like – and do so, with stagnation as the result. A new currency that is misused here and there to push up prices. A government that only resigns when it no longer matters. And, of course, The Murder in the name of nothing, but committed, so we are constantly reminded, by an environmental activist. The country is turning into a freak show presented in and by countless media. The standard injunction to 'act your normal crazy self' has lost its punch. There's no limit to the craziness nowadays. Corruption, incompetence, short-sightedness, greed, nepotism, take your pick. Every day on every page of every newspaper. No sense of standards, no notion of public duty and no self-criticism. It conjures up farcical visions of more and more investigative committees with more and more scandals to investigate. One thing's for certain, if things go on like this, we're going to run out of committee members.

The freak show's ground plan is called The New Map of the Netherlands. This map shows what all this means in terms of demands on space. It is becoming increasingly clear that the so-called polder model of recent years, the consensus-seeking game in which all parties could at least have their say, was merely a smokescreen for what was really going on. The emphasis on procedures obscured our view of reality. For years people have been talking about the content, reach and implementation of a Fifth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning. All the big guns were rolled out to say their piece on the subject. And just at the very moment when a decision was to have been taken, the electorate made a very different decision. Voters punished the foot-dragging and may in turn themselves be punished before very long when it becomes apparent just how much scope for private initiatives the present interregnum has spawned. Then that map really will be the Full-up Map of the Netherlands.

The task for the coming years is huge. That is to say, there is an awful lot to be done, and an awful lot to be left undone. The latter requires if possible even more effort, insight and design ingenuity. The polder model generated an explosion of innovative concepts, ingenious studies, large-scale plans and a great deal of debate. In architecture it also led to a wealth of forms with which a new generation has been able to prove itself. But in responding to the task on the scale at which it must be formulated, everything is still up for grabs. The only problem is that this task has yet to be named.

Ole Bouman

There are several magazines named after a country. Most are little more than glorified travel brochures. But there is only one magazine named after a nationality: *Dutch*. An appropriate source of inspiration for the graphic design of an *Archis* issue devoted to the current state of affairs in the Netherlands. Imitation, as they say, is the sincerest form of flattery...

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