

Foto door/Photo by
Christian Richters



Buitenpost Outpost

Archis 1
Layout Domus

Text Ole Bouman

Outpost



Tekst door/Text by Ole Bouman

The only thing about the new Dutch embassy in Berlin that suggests the Netherlands as a sovereign state is the bronze coat of arms with the Dutch Lion at the beginning of the driveway. Here against a background of intimidating steel is the old motto of Willem of Orange: *Je Maintiendrai* (I shall uphold). Anyone at all familiar with the national history of the Netherlands knows that this coat of arms represents the nation's indomitability against their Spanish oppressors, which later came to symbolise all national pride. In the past you saw the motto everywhere – on government buildings, banknotes, schools, police stations, anywhere the state felt it was necessary to assert its authority. At the heart of the heraldic display was the fact

that it represented a value system which by definition would never date. The Kingdom of the Netherlands was a timeless fact, the lion a timeless symbol. Does that not seem a long time ago? In the meantime the state as a symbolic order has withdrawn a long way. At best, the national emblem is but a logo. But also the Netherlands itself is not what it once was. Like so many other nations it has conceded much of its sovereignty, its nationalistic and patriotic sentiments have diminished, it outsources typical affairs of state, it has privatised and deregulated and increasingly built up a self-image as a flexibly run company. I say this as a neutral fact. That is the way it is. And you can substitute any other Western country for the

Netherlands, certainly when it does not have the power and authority that by virtue necessitate the propagation of national pomp. The question here is, what does it really mean given such a cultural and geopolitical context when such a country decides to build a new embassy in a large neighbouring country with a new capital? To what extent is it then still an act of state presentation? Or is it chiefly one of state representation in which you can ask yourself what form of expression this state apparently had in mind for itself. Well, in this case it is a magic lantern. When the sky above Berlin loses its colour and dusk sets in, then you can really see how the Netherlands is represented in the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany.

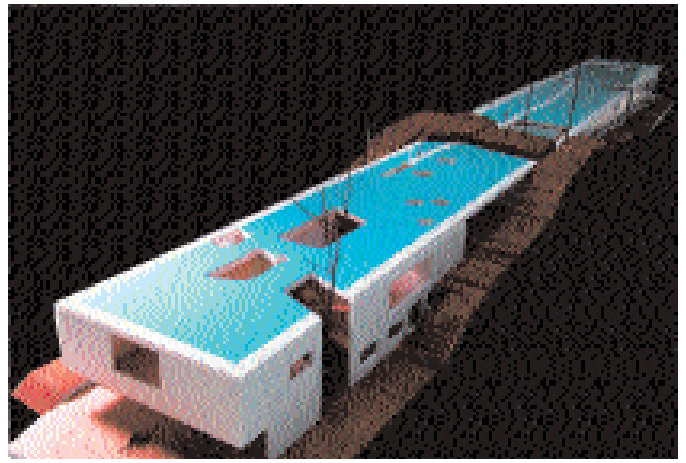
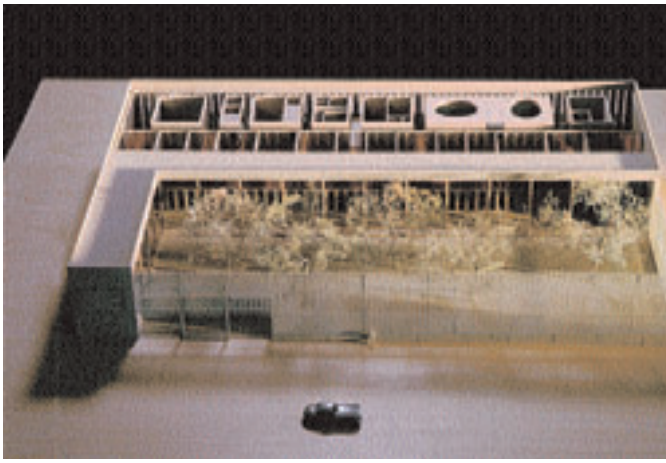
Buitenpost Outpost

Perhaps not with power, but amply compensated by architecture. The new embassy is not a protected stronghold, not a leased office, not a prestigious palace or an out-of-the-way villa. This is a building from a standard work about architecture or from a cultural guide. While there is little to experience of a shared national feeling, there is that much more to experience from a building that absorbs the street and the city, that makes movement the core of its formula, that restores openness and transparency to guiding principles again rather than clichés, and that occupies the liberated mental space with spatial and material spectacle. How far this gesture is removed from the time when the Netherlands preferred to be

represented by cultural attachés who dragged around boxes of Delft Blue and platters of cheese. The country on the North Sea may have been a factor of political importance, but with tulips and clogs it certainly was not a country of cultural significance. But now a new wind is blowing in which no sentimental pictures are handed out, but architectural concepts are actually being built. Ambassadors and attachés are becoming individuals in their own right with cultural self-awareness. Not only in Berlin but in an entire series of capital cities where new outposts are being built as real works of architecture. In a short space of time, and after Rem Koolhaas, who once saw his design for the House of Commons thrown out for

being too controversial, embassies by eight architects including Hubert Jan Henket, Bjarne Mastenbroek and Erick van Egeraat have been built. Buildings in the first instance from designers, icons of a confident architectural and cultural policy with which the Netherlands can display itself. Yet this is also perhaps the rub with this parade of architectural excellence. The Netherlands finally seems ready to entrust its representation in foreign parts to real architecture at a point when the country itself is fading from existence. The growth in understanding of cultural standards seems in inverse proportion to the country's declining influence. Would it be possible to draw a graph of the work of an ambassador who, on the one hand, pre-

sents his/her country and, on the other, represents it? Is there a link between diplomats who work on behalf of Foreign Affairs, or who promote Interior Affairs across the border? The trend is not quite clear as yet, but one thing is certain: with the declining relevance of small nation-states on the world stage, their embassies seem fated to a reputation of national pavilions at the world fair we used to call reality.



upper left Dutch embassy in Maputo, Mozambique. Architect: Claus en Kaan Architecten. Realisation 2004. Photo Tom Croes

middle left Dutch chancellery in Bangkok, Thailand. Architect: Hubert-Jan Henket architecten. Realisation 2004.

lower left Dutch chancellery in Kiev, Ukrain. Architect: Atelier Pro. Realisation 2001. Photo Hans van Beek

upper right Chancellery and residence in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. Architect: De Architectengroep; design: Bjarne Mastenbroek (presently Search) & Dick van Gameren. Under construction.

middle right Dutch embassy in Cairo, Egypt. Architect: Atelier Dutch (formerly TKA). Realisation 2002.

lower right Chancellery and residence in Warsaw, Poland. Architect: Erick van Egeraat associated architects.