

The architecture of suspicion

This editorial was written at a moment of national upheaval, on the eve of national elections, and just after the assassination of a highly controversial politician who was thereafter rapidly transfigured into a popular hero. What happened on 6 May in Hilversum's Media Park, and on the day of Pim Fortuyn's funeral in Mathenesserlaan, Rotterdam, not to mention the many spontaneous expressions of grief and rancour throughout the country, all point to a major level of disgruntlement with contemporary Dutch culture that cannot be ignored by any social or cultural field, least of all by architecture which not only provides the setting for the new polarization of society but is increasingly the actual subject of that polarization. Let's start with the setting. The producer of the radio show in which Pim Fortuyn had appeared just moments before the fatal shooting, delivered his eyewitness report against the backdrop of MVRDV's Villa VPRO, one of the most discussed new buildings of recent years in terms of consulting the users versus following the client's wishes. As such it was a fitting symbol of the current clash between demands for a better 'quality of life' (the rallying cry of the Fortuyn camp) and the condescending 'we know best' posture of the political establishment (the modern equivalent of the Golden Age Regents). Fortuyn's funeral took place in a traditionalist Catholic church from where his cortège set off along the once fashionable Mathenesserlaan, to a chorus of 'Action not Words' and 'Down with the Left!'. With its necklace of smart town houses, Mathenesserlaan was an apt setting for the funeral of a man who was only too happy to open his own equally stylish private residence to public scrutiny via the media.

But it is not just a matter of setting. Architecture is also more directly involved in the clash, as the obituaries make clear, time and time again. The deceased was a man who dared to rise above political correctness, who was not afraid to speak his mind. And his most arresting statement, the one whose expression aroused the most passionate reaction, was that 'Holland is full'. True or not, many people found this a liberating statement. The point is that the controversy was expressed in spatial terms. In that sense it was about architecture, about the furnishing of the Netherlands, about creating a design for the nation which would make everything less crowded and calmer. Pim Fortuyn wanted to give the Netherlands back to the people, in much the same way as Carel Weeber, with his dream of a deregulated house construction market (Wilde Wonen) has been campaigning for some time now to give architecture back to the people. Perhaps that is why Fortuyn promoted Weeber as a likely alderman for the Rotterdam municipal council; he saw him as a companion in arms against the high-handed state, and its state architecture. (In the event, Weeber declined the honour.)

There is much more architectural meat in the controversy about the Netherlands being 'full'. It concerns increasingly vocal dissatisfaction with the mosques appearing here and there, with the changing look of city streets, with the tendency for domestic life to spill out into the public domain in older parts of town, with alien visual elements in the city; and also with the 'annexation' of old monumental buildings to house asylum seekers and the construction of 'chic' and hence expensive 'registration centres'. In other words, a considerable amount of dissatisfaction is expressed through architecture. And not only in the Netherlands. I have previously argued in this column that worldwide aggression is likely to be vented increasingly on cities and buildings, rather than on the people inside them. Be it skyscrapers, the Pentagon, or the dwellings of alleged terrorists,

it is no longer the people who are attacked, but their homes. Today's battlefield is not a field but the city. The great themes of these times are thus automatically architectural ones.

Beneath this complex of events, there lies a much less tangible complex of sentiments. The dominant sentiment is fear. The causes of this are very hard to pinpoint. Some blame the sensationalism of the media, others point to a growing awareness of the real meaning of a multicultural society. Some see crime statistics as a manifestation of societal decline, while others turn their gaze to sliding share prices and the sharp practices of corporate managers and consultants. The explanations are legion. A whole cavalcade of arguments for the widespread feeling that society is falling apart marches past us daily. Vague though the causes may be, the consequences are highly concrete – for example, the interest in comprehensive, omnipresent security measures. Where life is threatened, measures will be taken. It's as simple as that.

Which brings us back to architecture again, indeed to one of its core tasks. The strange thing, though, is that hardly any attention has been paid to this rapidly developing dimension of the architectural task. For most building designs, security is an add-on provided by specialists, not an essential part of the design itself. Security measures for public and private domains are not in the hands of designers. And the bizarre fact is that, at the very moment the architectural discourse is ready to embrace 'shopping', a building task long viewed with disdain because it concerns not a creative activity but a consumptive one, the task of supplying security seems to be passing architecture by. Could it really be that when all the cities, streets, houses and main roads have been fortified, someone will publish a book in which architecture boldly waves adieu to its Modernist principles of openness, clarity and transparency, and a cry will go up for thick walls, small windows, and interior access through corridors and lobbies? At long last, a new job for real architects! What is architecture about, after all, if not about erecting sturdy boundaries? Rather than waiting to be overtaken by these kinds of events, Archis set out to explore this new task. Now.

Ole Bouman



Action stations in the replica 'training village' of Marnehuizen (Groningen), used to train soldiers for operations in residential areas.