

What Do You Want: Some Hope or Just Difference?

Ole Bouman

Architecture has a long tradition of giving birth to the future. For many – not the least of whom were architects – it was once the realm of hope, the domain of expectations, the facilitator of the world-to-come. It provided us with a forecast of tomorrowland, which would be, by definition, a better place. Architecture was the herald of the Next World.

We all know that this ambition has long crumbled. Where “idealist architecture” was once almost a pleonasm, it is now considered more an oxymoron. As for architectural theory, faith in architecture’s redemptive power has disappeared, and idealism is a suspect mode of mental activity.

But there is always a “next.” We can simply extrapolate from existing forces and tendencies to anticipate future happenings. We can predict that if we have Architectural Talent “A,” or Ambitious Client “B,” we will have interesting designs being built. And if this talent or client is famous, we expect the building to be excellent. Or to be more precise: different.

The problem is: a vision always makes a difference, but a difference does not necessarily imply a vision. This reversal of categories lies at the core of the present stasis in top architecture. What comes next has nothing to do with what gives hope. To hope is to risk; in contrast there is always a ticket to next. And it is the next that tends to be celebrated, not hope.

We witness a premature declaration of the Masterpiece. The consequence is an architecture of credit, capitalizing on expectations, cashing in on fame, a true phenomenon of the New Economy. When will this bubble burst?

It is not difficult to see how the proposed image of the genius-architect belongs to what remains to architecture today. This image is not endowed with the responsibility to guide us. What is left is a select group of winners-take-all who are doing the most prestigious projects in the world, but are also representing a lost ambition; no longer are architects prepared to respond to the questions: What is important today? What can architecture do to understand this world, to cope with its dynamics, and to intervene? And on top of that: What can architecture as a discipline enact, if architecture as a material order increasingly becomes part of the iconography of hate in the emerging clash of civilizations and its course to urban warfare?

A few years ago these questions would have been received as completely obsolete – as an echo of a forlorn innocence. Today however, they seem to re-emerge rapidly as being pivotal to a constructive reality check of architecture as a medium of culture, and to the self-esteem of architecture as a professional discipline. In the wake of repolarizations in a variety of social realms, architecture can no longer refrain from engaging with the strong, radical facts of our present society: migration, aging, mobility, fundamentalism, violence, globalization, and digitization. After two decades of debate on architecture and transgression, we can no longer avoid doing exactly that: transgressing. We need an architecture that transcends its engagements with these facts simply as sophisticated metaphors. What will architecture be if it finally becomes a civic medium for speech and action?

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Bouman

Ole Bouman (1960) is editor-in-chief of *Archis* – a Dutch magazine about architecture, the city, and visual culture – and author of *The Invisible in Architecture* (with Roemer van Toorn, 1994), *Rotterdam 2045* (1995), *Architecture on the Edge of Two Millennia* (1998), and *Time Wars* (2003). Bouman teaches architectural history and design internationally. He has curated many exhibitions including “RealSpace in QuickTimes,” the Dutch entry to the XIX Milan Triennale, “Egotecture” for the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam (1997), and “Freeze***” for *Arti et Amicitiae*, Amsterdam (2000). Bouman also co-curated *Manifesta 3*, an European art biennale in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2000.