

From the State as Client to the Client State

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There are few cultural concepts that call forth feelings of loyalty and connectedness more strongly than the nation. Perhaps only the family as a social model has more power than the nation, organized as a state. The form of government is hardly important. Whether an oligarchy as in Russia, a one-party system as in China, a two-party system as in the United States, a constitutional monarchy as in the Netherlands or a theocracy as in Iran, when the chips are down all disputes within the system are set aside and everyone lines up behind the nation. Global events such as sports competitions and cultural gatherings channel and cultivate these feelings. Then we have the United Nations where debates take place via state intervention accompanied by the inevitable little flags and banners. Annual OESO reports analyze the economic status of every nation. Without exception states with a strong sense of coherence rely upon a rich past, a legacy that largely consists of monuments, historical cityscapes, temples of public affairs, squares for the people to congregate and celebrate that they are a single people. Architecture is the state's means of expression par excellence. Architecture is acknowledgement and mutual recognition. Architecture forms the background against which we share our lives with our compatriots. One might say: where there are states, architects are requisite. Or the other way around: nation-building can take place only where there are good architects. Their power to organize the space in which we live and to give expression to our values is an engine of national identity. For this reason states love architects; they nourish and endow the best of them with the weighty task of defining each generation.

But how tenable is this system? Perhaps asking about the tenability of the model described above is itself totally out of date. It sounds as if we must only now deal with an erosion, with a premonition that everything could

all be over in the not too distant future. But wasn't it over a long time ago? Hasn't the state-architecture relationship mediated as it is by widely-held notions of construction's goals become akin to the lame working with the blind? The state, blind because it has no clear ideas about where it wants to go, and the architect, lame without a clear mandate to further a public cause, continue to speak to each other. Can this conversation yield anything to serve as an example, to enrich our spirits and nourish our optimism? Can architecture bestow self-confidence upon the state again?

This periodical has been a forum for debates on the crisis of architecture as an expression of collective and public values and ideas for a great many years. Architecture has fallen prey to the privatization of public patronage. It has been reduced on one side to the work of about 25 famous architects, who care only for their personal style, and on the other to anonymous construction, in which only serviceability and production count. It is either art or property and nothing in between. In that debate one might indeed ask what kind of national consciousness must also be present in architecture and how it can cultivate social loyalty. Yet one might just as well speak of the disintegration of the state. How it resolves into greater geopolitical constellations; how it manages without leadership; how it is led by single-issue politicians whose main aim is to win; how it is eroded by institutional corruption and incompetence; how it has lost contact with the common man; how it continually finds itself making wrong decisions, living by luck, suffering from a compulsion to fix problems with new policies and, somehow, just keeps going.

Both sides are concerned with the degradation of legitimacy. If we are witnessing the enfeeblement of the state's legitimacy then the question is immediately raised how architecture can embody something more than itself or the client's current fancy. If we ascertain that architecture has lost its ability to reach the citizen (rather than the consumer), we must then wonder how such a culture would build a nation. Yet the idea that there must be a pact between design and institution, between architecture and state has not been entirely abandoned. Many still harbor the hope that governments, seeing their collective mission, will also be able to contribute to a collective meaning of what is to be built. Simultaneously, however, there is an increasing sense that hope alone is not enough; deeds are also required.

In this supplement we deal with the fate of three states, France, Great Britain and The Netherlands, and their architecture. All three states boast a rich architectural inheritance with cities drenched in great historical practice and architectonic refinement. No future architect will ever be able to escape their influence. Yet these three states struggle with their imperial legacies as former representatives of the mightiest nations on the planet who once ruled over colonies and oceans. People nowadays continue to profit from that rich legacy. Yet at the same time these populations are growing older and increasingly scared and irresolute regarding their place in the great historical developments which continue unremittingly: globalization, digitalization, mobilization, migration. While the architectonic assignment is to be found everywhere, namely finding micro-answers to these macro-developments, we are still missing essential vigor and enthusiasm to strike out on a clear path. Thus it increasingly appears as if progress is no longer conceivable and that the present, or even worse, the past is most easily imagined. If it comes to that, what shall become of architecture?