

The emptiness of substance

Anyone wanting to know which norms and values motivate the biggest political, economic and military power on earth would be well advised to consult the official web site of the US government from time to time. Here they will find a series of articles explaining why the US government acts as it does and occasionally something is posted there that can be regarded as an ethical reference point, the philosophical motives as it were of world leadership. As you would expect from a representative body, these are almost always motives that no one could object to, not even a Muslim, Hindu or Zen Buddhist. For example, it recently featured an uncopyrighted article by Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that was duly reprinted in many international newspapers. In it Rice explains what motivates the US in its international war against terrorism. Her argument can be summed up by a string of key concepts: commitment to democracy, rule of law, market economy, free trade. The United States, Rice claims, is fighting all over the world for prosperity and freedom, and against poverty, disease and oppression. It defends the 'non-negotiable demands of human dignity' such as freedom of expression, equality before the law, respect for women, religious tolerance, and limits on the power of the state. At the end of all this is a great ideal: 'to forge a 21st century that lives up to our hopes and not down to our fear'; a world 'that is not only safer, but better'.

You don't have to be anti-American to see that this has little connection with actual political practice. It is a short, concise summary of a rhetoric of progress that has been in existence for some 250 years. It recalls the speeches of the Marquis de Condorcet in the French National Assembly, or Charlie Chaplin at the end of *The Great Dictator*. It is an appeal to the Enlightenment as the historical phenomenon that produced our universal values. And to be sure, now more than ever before perhaps, these values could form a guiding principle. And to be sure, no one is really opposed to that - with the possible exception of actual political practice, that is, where these values form no kind of a guiding principle. Indeed, they no longer have any connection with practice at all. It would not be too difficult to name a gross violation of each of these values in US practice.

But this reality is not confined to the US global empire; many countries present a similar picture. In the Netherlands, for example, the year 2002 was marked by a farewell to social democracy and the rise of a movement that propagated 'giving politics back to the people'. Both this farewell and the rise of political newcomer Pim Fortuyn as the leader of that movement were accompanied by a revival of what has come to be known as 'plain speaking'. The liberal-socialist coalition headed by Wim Kok resigned because it wanted to assume 'responsibility' for the Dutch army's ignominious performance in Srebrenica. Fortuyn spoke his mind and insisted that he would do what he said. And although his murder prevented him from putting that principle into practice, his political heirs followed his lead and assumed seats in a cabinet that presented its credentials in the spirit of Fortuyn. That translated as decisiveness and clarity, values and norms, decency, accepting responsibility, being judged on the basis of results; in other words, politics was once again linked to Substance, a notion that has been on everybody's lips for months. If you didn't know any better, you might easily imagine yourself in the middle of a Calvinist revival in which a serious attitude towards life, a personal conscience and hard work are once again the order of the day. And once again, nobody could be opposed to this. Nobody? Well, with the exception of political

practice that is. And we know where such incongruity leads: to political chaos and cynicism.

Whether it concerns a country or the world, the powers that be have taken refuge in the most precious notions of our civilization. Yet far from serving as a 'moral reference point' these notions are in fact the final straw in an ocean of resentment and machiavellianism. The time is not far off when these words will mean nothing at all. No one is bound by them. Not a single plan is based on them. There is no strong arm any more, nor inner compass to maintain those values. People are waking up from the dream of cultural relativism and clamouring for a return to those old absolute values, only to discover that relativism was not a temporary option but an insidious process that can no longer be denied. The Enlightenment notions no longer bring enlightenment for they have themselves become obscure, which is to say arbitrary and subjective. If there is such a gaping abyss between the beauty of the word and the banality of the deed, then language itself has become a New Economy - a Fata Morgana, a bubble - whose demise is just a matter of time.

Politics is everywhere the talk of the town - everywhere except in architecture, that is. This magazine is primarily concerned with the challenge of spatial design, but within the framework of the situation outlined above, that is no sinecure. It is not that we do not the extent of the demand for space; in fact, we know it pretty accurately. The real question is what else can be expressed in satisfying this demand that goes beyond that immediate need. In other words: which ideals?

Architecture played a key role in the Enlightenment tradition. It was a rhetorical instrument comparable to the core concepts of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Thorbecke's constitution, or Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. It was the guide on the road to a better world, an icon of Progress. Architecture was the domain of hope, of joyful expectation; it paved the way for the future. Architecture was the medium of a New World.

We know that this has long since ceased to be the case. While at one time 'idealistic architecture' was a pleonasm, today it is almost a contradiction. There are no answers or solutions forthcoming from architectural theory. Architects with a philosophical bent and the few critics who ventured to rise above the level of the monograph devoted themselves to the question of what architecture after Modernism might look like. Idealism had been too closely identified with that Modernism to be able to survive this relativistic fervour. Now that this subversive project has not only been completed, but is also rapidly starting to look highly dubious in the harsh light of social dynamics, we find ourselves wondering whether architecture will manage to come up with a new and hopeful creative motive; whether it will simply carry on a bit longer with verbal palliatives; or whether its role as a cultural factor of substance has finally been played out. We hope, needless to say, for the first.

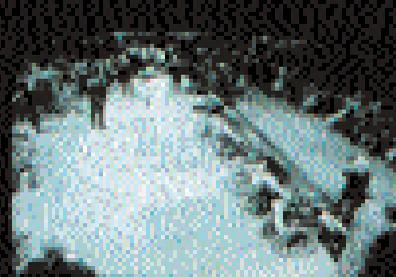
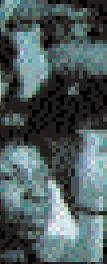
Ole Bouman

Archis 6

Text Ole Bouman
Photography René Clement/
Hollandse Hoogte
American television evangelists.

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4 Editorial



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