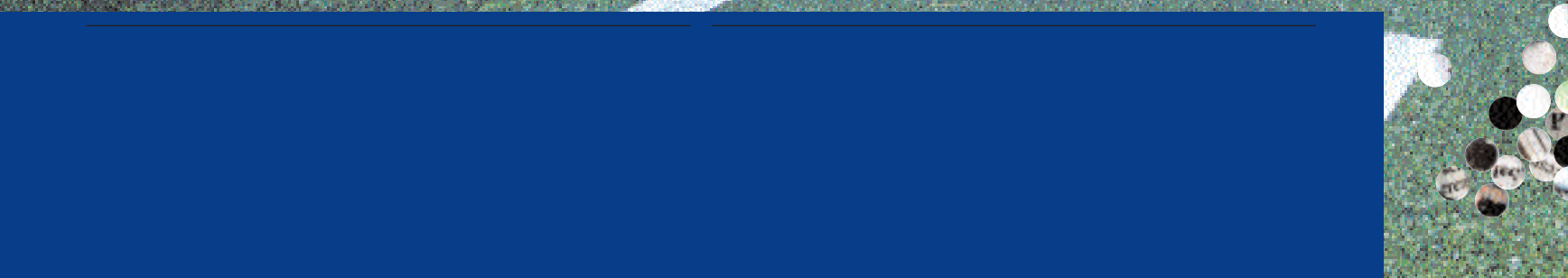
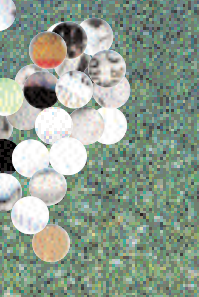




Dorst, 13 January 2002. To prevent cars from entering the wood, the road narrows at this point to cycle-path width.
photo: Mischa Keijser / Hollandse Hoogte





the architectural dimension of culture

by Ole Bouman

When the contours of a national architectural policy were being drawn up ten years ago, there was a concept that was served up as a panacea for the over-rationalized building industry: the cultural dimension of architecture. It had made its first appearance during the urban renewal campaign of the 1970s and from there went on to star in an unprecedented architectural policy, resulting in a cultural infrastructure the successes of which are now consumed worldwide. Architecture was culture and was vigorously propagated as such. It became an essential part of the cultural sector, with all the publicity that entails. Architects, their buildings and their books; institutes, their conferences and their exhibitions; an endless stream of activities, overfull diaries and bulging portfolios and trophy-cabinets. The world looked on in amazement and then hesitantly followed suit. Now the success of Dutch architecture has resulted in a genuine brand name: *Superdutch*. A number of architects were presented as official representatives of this brand and their work is now, as behoves genuine brands, being shamelessly plagiarized and marketed as the real thing: *Dutch regulars*. There are even architectural practices where you can get all the regulars at the same time.

The social relevance of architecture in the Netherlands during the last ten years has consisted in catering to a desire for diversity and individuality (under the guise or motto of the dissemination of culture) in a society that had persistently denied and suppressed this desire. As a result, architecture was highly visible and omnipresent. Many Dutch architects responded to the new market situation by drastically revising their approach, office organization, concepts and products. But did their problem-solving prowess also extend to the identification of problems, given that the old architectural ambition to intervene directly in society has been mothballed these many decades? Scarcely. The big debates about the tasks confronting this country, this region and this world – migration, mobility, ageing, congestion, new lifestyles, depletion of natural resources, digitalization, biotechnology and the like – even though they all have serious spatial implications, have had to make do without much input from architecture. Which is why architecture has been largely oblivious to the growing dissatisfaction in Dutch society. Architecture did not act as an interpreter for all those who responded to the big ‘State of the Nation’ survey (carried out by the associated press service, GPD, at the end of 2001) with a litany of complaints about safety, education, transport, health care and other public sectors. On the contrary, if it represented anyone, it tended to be those who had been insufficiently receptive to the growing disgruntlement.

In other words, architecture is pretty good at borrowing from culture, but has so far not done much in return. For a country that has scored so many successes by virtue of its design, that is a paradoxical, and in the long run unsatisfactory, state of affairs.



projects by the Mlll architectural office, Rijswijk.