

Architecture is a matter for everyone. And for everywhere always...

Text

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Inset

Backcover of
'Designing the Netherlands'

Layout

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It was back in 2001 that Dutch architecture policy embarked on the process of total socialization. By then, people were no longer thinking about architecture in terms of buildings, and architecture became space in the broad sense of the word. Any policy concerning itself with the organization and embellishment of that space was an architecture policy. Ten years of self-confident government involvement with what people used to call the Mother of Arts has produced an impressive palette of policy instruments: a large national institute, a well-filled fund for stimulating innovative work, and much, much else. A grandiose cultural infrastructure was decked out in order to bring architecture into the focus of public attention. At first, this was done by hammering away at the quality of buildings. They were judged for their cultural value, use value and future value. The First Memorandum, 'Space for Architecture', went hand in hand with an integral concept of architecture in which quality amounted to more than external cosmetics. But the memorandum was not sufficient to transform this artistic discipline into the crowbar required for any real impact on the living environment. That is why things were taken a step further: not only could a building be termed architecture, but so could a city – and so could the landscape, and infrastructure. These things were all equally architecture, just on a rather bigger scale. It was this that started off the interference by all sorts of bodies concerned with this large scale of operations. The middle management of society came face to face with architecture. Government departments, property developers, building contractors, transport organizations – all of them now had something to say about their architectural ambitions. That was all summed up in the Second Memorandum, 'The Architecture of Space'.

The question was, what good did these memoranda do? Too little, many people thought. So an operation was set in train to tackle everything in a much grander fashion. The public at large had to be involved. Spearhead projects had to be organized. Effort was required to involve different echelons of society more fully, starting with the remaining ministerial portfolios which had not yet been stormed by the architecture policy. That is how they put it in the Third Memorandum: 'Designing the Netherlands'. It was a policy paper about architecture as everyone's business. This could be taken literally as an attempt to foster public participation. But it could also be understood figuratively as the 'public dimension' of architecture – i.e. the public realm, the zone left over between what we used to class as architecture, namely the buildings. Attention was also given to private clientage, which was so essential to architectural quality. Architecture hence turned into a direct embodiment of the time-honoured tug of war between the collective and the private sectors.

The Third Memorandum would have expired in a mass of abstractions had people not been working simultaneously on a concrete action plan in parallel with the awareness-raising policy. The 'Designing the Netherlands' paper launched no fewer than nine projects over which the government confidently held its hand on the helm. They were schemes so large that they were almost impossible

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De voltooiing van het architectuurbeleid

to tackle as projects, but labelling them as such at least gave them a place on the public agenda. Among these plans were the transformation of the Randstad into the even larger conurbation we now know as the Delta Metropolis, the construction of an ultra high speed hovertrain link between Amsterdam and Groningen, the serious and coherent development of an aesthetics of mobility, the historically correct modernization of colossal monuments like the Hollandse Waterlinie (Water Defence Line), the revitalization of the sand regions, the social integration of private patronage, and the vitality of public space. And two of the projects were actually old-fashioned schemes concerning the construction of two public institutions: the renovation and extension of the Rijksmuseum, and a joint accommodation for the State Department for the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Sites and the State Service for Archeological Investigations in the Netherlands. Even more surprising than their designation as projects, was the naming of government ministers charged with responsibility for them and the announcement of regular parliamentary monitoring of progress.

But was all this really an architecture policy? And where would the upscaling ever end – at world design? It was only a matter of time before the first international architectural charters appeared. Many European countries took a leaf out of Holland's ambitious book in those years. They too devised architecture policies, set up institutes and gave design a central part to play in major regional developments. So why not consider the whole continent as architectural space? Mobility aesthetics for high-speed train routes? Water management? Urbanization trends? These could all become architectural tasks. It was not long before the first European Commissioner for Architecture was sworn in. A question rose around the same time as to whether Space was really an adequate concept to cover all these ambitions. People began wondering whether it really was a matter of architecture, i.e. of anything like a single discipline. Wasn't what mattered, rather, a debate about the quality of our society? The architecture policy set out in the Third Memorandum had become the last bastion of faith in government intervention, a precious relic of the primacy of politics, a remnant of utopia.

Was it indeed a remnant or the start of something new? Now, of course, we already know how things turned out. Architecture became the banner around which all the forces for change gathered. It became the benchmark for political exercises that bore all the hallmarks of National Programmes. Whatever still remained of governmental self-confidence was combined and focused on architecture. It was the ideal domain in which social renewal could be formulated as a question of beauty, utility and necessity. The Architecture of Space was the magic formula people had been waiting for, which would repel the out-of-hand forces of modernization and internationalization, and which would act as a guideline for everyone from eco-activists to neo-liberals. Even though the national budget was by now in thrall to big business or subordinate to international treaties, even though agriculture, industry and services were now totally globalized, even though the lion's share of administrative competence was now in the hands of the EU and the WTO, and even though the monopoly of violence had now been delegated to rapid intervention forces, the fact was that the space of the Netherlands remained Dutch – just as the space of France remained French. It was no wonder then that all pressures for social improvement became concentrated in this space. We witnessed the revival of a virtually antique piece of wisdom: in the end, politics is always about space. The space of the Netherlands is the only level at which the country can still view itself as a sovereign state. To do the things that are necessary in this zone, an appropriate polity is thus required. Since that is nowadays only possible at a continental scale, the Fourth Memorandum on Architecture will merely be a programme for a European polity.