Rijksmuseum debate

OLE BOUMAN

AMSTERDAM • Museumplein – a burgeoning cultural centrepiece. First of all there was the extension to the Concertgebouw. Then the Van Gogh Museum received attention. After that the great public square was upgraded into a 'Museum Park'. Now the remodelling of the Stedelijk Museum is under way, and, finally, it is the turn of the Rijksmuseum.

At first sight these are all just a collection of institutions arranged around a large open space, but as an entity they amount to a cultural forum for which an integral strategy is needed. Or was needed, rather. This scene could have been shaped long ago into a *grand projet*, an integral plan doing justice to the increasingly accepted idea that culture can no longer be dismissed as a marginal sector of society, but is an important booster for the market, the city, the local community and society as a whole. The Museumplein area could have won its spurs for this by a wide margin.

Although a sum of 445 million guilders has now been earmarked for the renovation project, the scale on which people speak of a New Rijksmuseum suggests that they still view it as an autonomous cultural institution. The intense flurry of debate around the project, both public and private, has done little to help. This debate has been so widespread that it is impossible to distil any guiding principles out of it. However, it does throw light on a few aspects of this spearhead of Dutch architectural policy.

The first thing that emerges is just how impassioned people are regarding the various proposed courses of action. These options range from restoring Cuypers' original design, as in the 'Ruijssenaars Plan', to demolishing the museum altogether or stripping it down to its shell. People seem to be blessed with absolute certainty as to whether the courtyards should or should not be refurbished, whether cycle routes should or should not be preserved, and whether the main shape of this Neo-Catholic monument may or may not be changed. Their vehemence stands in curious contrast to the extent to which a clear programme has been formulated for the project. While seven architects are busy working on a solution in a limited competition, the task to be fulfilled remains as hazy as ever.

The task has itself naturally been subject to widespread discussion, and in the process a diversity of views have surfaced about the use and necessity of the museum. Should the museum exhibitions be object-centred, or should they concern themselves with the social contexts in which the art was made? Is painting enough, or should a range of other art forms be covered too? Is the history of the elite all that matters, or should the darker sides of the Dutch past receive an airing? Should the museum cater for art only, or for history too? Should the Rijksmuseum retain its old treasure-house function, or should it become a peep-show, or a broom cupboard? Is it a national institution or an art institution? These are dilemmas that, for decades, have cropped up time and time again in connection with every project concerning the museum. But in their polarity, they fail to recognize that developments are taking place in cultural politics through which the relevance of these questions is rapidly disappearing.

The investment required for this project exceeds the whole country's annual budget for culture. It is an essential investment for the modernization of one of the Dutch tourist industry's biggest attractions. While people from all echelons of culture speak as though a substantial sum has been budgeted for cultural purposes so that they are now free to fight over its application, the macro-economic aspect tends to be ignored. There is an impression that the cultural sector has failed to notice how the 'culture' dimension is currently making impressive advances within the social spectrum; how it increasingly occupies a key position in the knowledge economy and forms a crucial factor in decisions on enterprise location. The above-mentioned dilemmas have to be viewed in the light of an international trend in which culture is no longer the antithesis of business but has claimed a position at its very heart.

Opportunities continue to be missed. It is evidently too late for the Museum Quarter as a whole, but not yet for the Rijksmuseum. The investment concerned is on a scale that warrants a more encompassing vision than a bicycle underpass (which incidentally does not link city districts as some would claim but terminates at a pond) or the social context of a Jan Steen domestic interior. The question at stake is how do you successfully pilot concepts like the 'nation' (the 'Rijks' in Rijksmuseum), 'history', 'art' and the 'museum' into an age of cultural/commercial theme parks. These are not matters that give and bend according to institutional or architectural parameters, but they are connected with the way we choose our values to be upheld, the way we draw cultural borderlines and the way we keep the past alive.

P.J.H. Cuypers, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, competition entry. Coll. Netherlands Architecture Institute

Official info from:
Inside information from:
Send comments on to:
Beware of:

Name:
Date:
Address:
Telephone: