

Viewpoint

The Dutch dilemma

Tradition is tacitly acknowledged but not yet openly embraced by Dutch architects, says yearbook editor Hans van der Heijden.

So what is there to say about the current state of Dutch architecture, having compiled the 2013-14 Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook? First, having seen some 900 projects, myself and fellow editors Tom Avermaete, Linda Vlassenrood and Edwin Oostmeijer found ourselves cheerfully pushing at an open door: architecture is alive and well in the Netherlands. Second, after all the euphoria of ‘Super Dutch’ architecture, it is clear that the Netherlands has become a rather typical European country. Looking for best practice we saw a reflection of construction output that differs little from that of other countries. There is no dominant tendency in Dutch architecture anymore.

We found big icons – architecture for mayors and aldermen that expresses prosperity, self-consciousness and progress in more or less believable ways – and small icons: often rather watered-down versions of well-known exemplars. There are individual houses that bear witness to the idiosyncrasy of their clients. And there are those small commissions in the arts where the significant creative opportunities are immediately exploited. Uniqueness is a given in all these cases, but things are completely different in the larger volume sectors of the industry – the architecture of offices, housing and schools. Architects must respond to the conventions of building and dwelling, and with the collapse of urban policies and design guidance, the Dutch architect – just like those in the rest of Europe (not least post-Thatcher Britain) – has become a lonely soul. The architect has been dragged out of his comfort zone and must earn his spurs in each



project again and again.

In complicated public building, designers often apply a version of the current internationalist modernism. Its open language is useful in the manipulation of the programs that are permanently in flux, and in dealing with the ever more complicated building service technologies. In housing design, long the Dutch arena of innovation, however, we find a reorientation towards older design methods and architectonic motifs. Tacitly, the pitched roof has returned.

And this brings us to the third aspect. Among Dutch architects ‘tradition’ remains a dirty word. It is the hot potato of the Dutch design world. Here the reorientation mentioned above does not go hand-in-hand with architects explicitly declaring themselves and, as a consequence, tradition is not a subject of debate. And that is where architectural culture in the Netherlands diverges sharply from that of other European countries. Elsewhere the notion of tradition has been liberated from its negative connotations and can be used for what it actually means, namely

‘the old habits of large groups of people’. This attitude, which is prevalent for example in industrial design, would open the way for a more assertive approach to the volume building sectors, which are inevitably dictated by codes and conventions.

In Dutch architecture, however, ‘tradition’ remains a silent intellectual undercurrent. Compare that to the recent opening of the ‘Pasticcio: Continuity in European Architecture’ exhibition, curated by Caruso St John, at the Flemish Architecture Institute in Antwerp. Almost 1000 people gathered to witness robust arguments to support the colourful continuity of the European architectural tradition. The thesis was illustrated with a wide variety of projects by architects from different countries and age groups. Their shared belief seemed to be that the tradition cannot be viewed a closed belief system, but should be seen as an energetic and progressive discourse that transcends generations and borders. This notion of the traditional has surpassed all sectarianism (including, for that matter,

the dismissal of modernity). These differences were celebrated in Antwerp, to the dismay of a number of critics who didn’t know what to make of such a rich mix with no apparent boundaries.

Dutch architects define their attitudes against the tradition in which they operate on a day-to-day basis. However vital Dutch architecture may appear from abroad, it seems clear to me that a better understanding of the ‘old habits of large groups of people’ is the key to working in the harsh Dutch economy of today.

Hans van der Heijden is a founder of Rotterdam-based architect big, and visiting professor in sustainable design at the University of Cambridge. He is co-editor of the Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook 2013-14 (mai010, 184pp, £40).

The exhibition ‘Pasticcio: Continuity in European Architecture’ is at de Singel International Arts Campus in Antwerp, Belgium, to 7th June.

Above left Treebeek Centrum housing, Brunssum, Netherlands, by Jo Janssen Architecten with Wim van den Bergh.
Above right Hengelo housing, Netherlands, by Korth Tielens Architecten (ph: Stefan Muller).