

Enigmatic Code of Dutch Architecture

KEES KAAN. Architecture in NL. In Dongzhu Chu. Enigmatic Code of The Netherlands, Cities, Architecture and Design through an Architect's Vision, 2012. pp.3-7.



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The current architectural debate is characterised by the threat of a split between proponents of change and renewal as the motive and motor of progress and the advocates of the tried and tested, and therefore timeless, skills and qualities in architecture.

But is it not the case that progress is found precisely in the equal recognition of change and constancy? In the equivalence of research and knowledge?

Planning paradise

In the course of time it became clear to me that architects in our country operate in an exceptionally professional context. This professionalism determines the development of architecture and the role of the architect.

The Netherlands has a strong tradition in spatial planning, infrastructure, urban development, and architecture. Each and every square metre in the Netherlands is planned, designed, and drawn up. 'Rijkswaterstaat' – an agency of the Ministry of Transportation and Water Management – celebrated its 200-year anniversary in 1998 and in 2001 the Housing Act was 100 years old. The 20th Century has produced a series of memoranda by the government on the issue of spatial planning.

Until recently, the design of the Netherlands was part of the government's agenda, something we considered to be entirely normal. From this a huge planning industry emanated, a sector comprised of institutes and companies that are engaged in the planning of the Netherlands. Architecture has become a mass-produced article that attracts broad societal attention.

This may be called curious, to say the least. Especially at a time when the role of the architect and the urban planner changes continuously in the building process due to external factors, when the role of the architect and urban planner can no longer be unequivocally defined – precisely at such a time the interest in architecture and the attractiveness of the architectural profession is at an unprecedented height.

Architects are divided amongst themselves as to the role and tasks of the architect. The interpretations of the profession vary from those who see themselves as the innovators of concepts concentrating on taking the initiative and on the preliminary design – consciously choosing not to play a role in the building process other than guarding the concept -, to those who take on the part of the master builder, play the confidant of the client, and manage the entire project from start to finish but without paying particular attention to the opportunities provided by the initiative phase.

Not being familiar with the role and tasks of the architect is perhaps due to the differences in interpretation of the profession among architects themselves, but maybe even more due to the image of the creative genius who has appropriated the profession where copyright plays an important role.

Ever since the Renaissance authorship has been recovered in Western culture. After the period of anonymity of the master builders of the Middle Ages the person and individual vision of the architect has gained in importance. Over time, the image of the architect developed from being the master carpenter, to being an intellectual, artist, and engineer. The architect is the designer of the totality of the building. This status reached its apex during the modernist period when the architect appropriated complete control over the building.

20th Century

The Netherlands has a dominant middle-class culture. For centuries power has been in the hands of farmers and traders. Our cities and polders have been designed by engineers in order to serve agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade. The architectural artist who served an educated elite is alien to this country. The Beaux Arts are hardly known here. The massive industrial development of the 19th Century that brought with it large-scale urbanisation in Europe, more or less passed us by.

Due to the Housing Act and the laws on Spatial Planning the last century saw a complete and planned reorganisation of the country. For many years, the authorities played an intensive role in realising the production of homes and public housing/the provision of housing for the population became the core competence of Dutch architecture and thus of the building industry. Not only are building techniques and materials completely tailored to this form of standardised house building – which is dictated by minimum requirements as imposed by the authorities - but so are knowledge and skills. The result is that the architecture of public buildings struggles to surpass the quality of public housing.

The change

All this changes at the end of the 20th Century. Suddenly, the government changes its tack. Various responsibilities are left to the market in the name of deregulation and liberalisation. The previously operative morality of reconstruction - a morality of equality and rationality – turned out to be an ethical and cultural model that no longer met the increasing dynamics brought about by European market forces. Finally the government puts a stop to its guiding and governing role through the Memorandum on Space, decentralising almost all government policies. The image of the state dominating the building industry changed rapidly in favour of private enterprise. This retrenchment goes hand in hand with the demise of shared points of reference, based on rationality and equality, and of identity providing values. The Netherlands loses this protection mechanism and thus its unique position in the field of spatial planning.

Architecture Competitions

Around the same time (2004) an obligatory procedure for European tenders for all government projects was introduced. This procedure, which is meant to stimulate market mechanisms and prevent unfair competition, has also been made obligatory for the selection of service providers, i.e. architects, absurdly enough. As a result they have to take part time and again in competitions and selection processes.

The considerate and careful architect, who made comparative assessments based on humanistic principles, is being

replaced by the market-oriented designer. The latter attempts – be it alone or in cooperation with clients, mostly project developers – to realise the dreams and ambitions of local politicians and the public. This ‘competition for dreams’ leads to excesses where the emphasis in architecture and town planning is shifting to originality and iconographic effect, the commercialisation of architecture as a product. Intrinsic architecture is replaced by the image. This iconic trend brings about a strong urge to break all ties to tradition and context. Since the super-position of the architectonic image aims to seduce and to distinguish itself it has no choice but to distance itself from its environment. Thus, the architectonic object becomes isolated, alienated from its physical environment.

The exclusive concentration of designers on the architectural object leads to the excessive regard for just one sensory quality aimed at getting attention. Whereas previous generations of Dutch architects attempted to approach and rationalise their design from the existing reality, culture, and context, new experiments are just as solitary as they are isolated.

The architect generates the concepts that local and sub-local politicians, the market, and public opinion will have to embrace. Until now, the government had set the tasks, had defined the target audience, the starting points, and the qualities, and the architect could concentrate on the design. In the current system market parties and designers determine the choices.

The competition system, that only wants to select a design, definitively undermines the relationship to the client. The competition encourages the architect to act all by himself. Without a dialogue with the client or user the project lacks in depth. It is precisely the client who should have the ambition and the will to invest in the quality of the project and who will continue to back the project even in difficult moments. In contrast to an academic model, an architectural project cannot be carried by the author in practice.

For instance, in the design-phases in which the master builder is not yet present the designs will have to be self-evident and understandable to such an extent that the lack of a master builder is less of a problem. The design has to be of a clarity that seems to indicate that it has been created to explain itself, not just to the panel of judges but also to the user, to the client, and to the public.

What never changes

The field covered by architecture seems to be without boundaries. Architecture is present everywhere and in spades, and as a result the subject of public debate. The profession has a long tradition. Depending on the stance taken by the observer either this tradition or the latest fashion in building is dominant. It remains a fact, however, that commissions emerge from the societal desire to build.

In practice, an architect uses his personal interpretation of his profession but within the framework of the commissions and the societal context that is a direct reflection of the political culture. In the Netherlands the latter for a long time had been based on the search for consensus.

It is very tempting – especially given the developments in the practice – to label oneself as an architect with a specific trademark or speciality. The use of an extreme style makes you more easily recognisable as an expert or an extravagant designer. Deriving such a trademark from a discipline in the periphery seems innocent and obvious enough but it leads us further away from the core business of our profession and our own building culture.

Architects like to see themselves as boosters of innovation. This is the most inappropriate self-image of our profession. Since our profession is among the slowest developing possible, trendsetting or being ahead of social changes is a *contradictio in terminis*. The time required by a building project – from the initial contact between client and architect until final occupation – is long. By its very nature architecture is a slow profession.

Time is a constant - always present. Time puts everything in its place.

There is an unbreakable bond between the material from which the building was made and the time that is enclosed within it. But in time the object can liberate itself from the idea from which it emanated. After all, the idea was just the cause, a means to the end of having a building, the circumstances in which the building emerged change, the spaces and bricks remain and – in their turn – may harbour new activities or give cause to new events. I consider its ability to be generous in this respect and to be able to cut itself free from its lead position, to be the essential aspect of architecture. In the end of the day a building is nothing but a tool facilitating human activity. The quality of a building is measured by its conveniences, durability, ergonomics, and functionality. Contrary to what happens to society, the physical reality and thus the fundamental requirements of human life hardly change.

I once asked myself how one creates architecture. Now I know it cannot be created. One can only build keeping this image in mind. Perhaps the building will be considered as an example of architecture later.