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Disneyland with Euthanasia. The Vicissitudes of the New Welfare State

Matthijs Bouw and Joost Meuwissen

As Dutch architects, we are perfectly happy to plunder the Netherlands' past century of architectural achievements, from Henk Berlage to, of course and most importantly, Rem Koolhaas. Of course, everyone, Dutch and otherwise, cribs from Rem nowadays. This leaves us with the lingering question: Why does everybody in the Netherlands deny copying Rem? In the Netherlands, welfare is no longer taxpayers' money allocated to the poor. It has become a way of living and one of the main assets for national economic growth. For architects in the new welfare state, Rem equals welfare. He is the subsidy to which everyone feels he has a right. Still, it's better to keep quiet while exercising this right, because the amount of welfare received is considered a matter of privacy.

Ten years ago, the now ruling social-democrats – along with many other political parties that are considered closet socialists – discovered that the welfare state could stimulate economic growth only if its services transformed into real markets by means of privatization. The amazing result of this liberalization of the welfare state is that everything that was negative, forbidden or too expensive is no longer considered a general problem. Rather, it became a product available in the National Shopping Mall, where everybody, while shopping, is happy. Socialism became realized as the better market economy. If the former version of the welfare state had night school (i.e. social improvement) at its core, today's version has the shopping mall.

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A market was created for everything, and everything became a possible market. There are markets for sex, for crime, for drugs (called coffee shops), for death (called euthanasia), for money (called subsidies), for nostalgia (called history), and for architecture (called Rem Koolhaas). By exploiting the existing welfare services as a national asset rather than handling them as burdensome expenses, the Netherlands has achieved greater economic growth than other European countries in the past few years and is now a role model – "The Dutch Healing Process," as a German newspaper recently called it.

These new socialist welfare services are seminal for Rem's S,M book, or rather, the vastness, the Bigness of the S,M book, let's say the L,XL part of the S,M book. [i] It's a product of the so-called "individual subsidy for architecture". In the state-sponsored brochure and advertisement campaign four years ago, architects, urban planners, and landscape planners were strongly urged to apply for "individual subsidies," or, rather, to enter the newly created subsidy market, where subsidies were dedicated to the specific wishes of the individual, in this case the individual called Rem.

S,M,L,XL is realized socialism and looks that way: it is thick and gray. According to Rem the book mimics the gray of "built socialism" – large Amsterdam housing quarters of the 1960s, expressions of monotony and collectivity, "frozen, collective vomit," as he put it in *Delirious New York*. [ii] The big difference between then and now is that the S,M book, while thick and gray, is also shiny! It has the shininess of the stainless steel sink that was the pride of your grandmother 30 years ago (as Jeff Koons might put it), when socialism slowly began to turn from an esthetic of production (smoking factories) toward an esthetic of consumption (happy people).

Delirious New York, Rem's first book, was not as readily consumable as his second one. It followed a closed historical narrative (on Manhattan). Its cover showed two famous skyscrapers making love in bed, the presence of a condom guaranteeing that the sex was real. A cover meant to shock in 1978 unexpectedly – and in spite of itself – became completely politically correct only a few years later.

S,M,L,XL, on the other hand, breaks with the closed narrative. No condom necessary.

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The title is borrowed from a department store, and the book is subdivided like a department store. It is to be used as a department store. It hardly comes as a surprise that people, even architects, like to take what's in there.

Reference: OMA

Making architecture in Holland, in the bright shadow of Rem Koolhaas, is fun. Even older architects such as Herman Hertzberger have turned their envy of Rem Koolhaas into an obsessive copying, as if to prove they can do it better.

In an exhibition called *Reference: O.M.A.*, about some of the former collaborators and pupils of Rem Koolhaas, shown at the Netherlands Architecture Institute at the end of 1995, each architect was described as being different from the now mythical Rem, instead of being influenced by him. Perversely, the “Reference” show lacked references. The accompanying catalog contained a chapter on the sources that influenced Rem. Conspicuously absent was any acknowledgement that Rem himself might exert a certain influence, except for some naive and unproven psychological fantasies, taken up in REM sleep, declaring that he has a “Faustian personality” – which is simply not true. With this insight the authors merely demonstrated that they attended high school some 20 years ago.

With *Reference: OMA* the Dutch architectural establishment participated in an even more sublime form of Rem-bashing than any that preceded it in the past two decades. Dutch architects borrowing from Rem generally suffer acute amnesia after the fact. In the early 1980s Herman de Kovel, promoting a “modernism freed from ideology,” categorically denied he was under the influence. At the same time, Arnest Boender stated that for the young architects of those days, Rolf Jensen's *Cities of Vision* (1974) was a far more important source than *Delirious New York*.^[iii] At this same moment, Marc a Campo asked everybody if they knew any reading matter on the critical-paranoid method, as if Rem had not precisely described it in his book. The three of them had participated in the legendary Bijlmerstrip project, which Rem taught with Gerrit Oorthuys in Delft in 1977.

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People from the Netherlands argue that such a denial of Rem's presence is typically Dutch. Working in the shadow of such a great architect, they tend to think that their brightness comes from their own minds, rather than from *Delirious New York*. While traveling in packs, it is vital to assert individuality within the group. Yet, in the end, these and other *Reference: O.M.A.* people, as their works show, slowly but inevitably tend to be right; for them, O.M.A. is not a reference at all.

The happy individuals of the new welfare state have not completely forgotten the old welfare state. State-enforced humanism and the persistent myth of the Dutch architect as its helpful friend have since the 1920s created generation upon generation of architects that will not do anything to distort the harmony. Within the well-established framework of do's and don'ts (quite a lot of don'ts), their sole purpose in practice seems to be to generate dumb little differences, little things which can be called “individual” without too many ideas or too much depth.

Upon closer inspection of a *Reference: O.M.A.* design, we are reminded of Herman Hertzberger: small-scale humanism, a display of helpless coziness, desperately wanting to be loved, rather than Rem's wanting to love and graceful empiricism.

Under such conditions, the most amoral of architects and the champion of different indifference, Sjoerd Soeters, can become a favorite of social-democratic politicians. Shopping mall plus behaviorism equals blissful ignorance. Rem's interest in dealing with the “organizational depth” of the welfare state has consistently been misunderstood and taken as an insult to good intentions. It might be argued that all the great Dutch architects of the century, all architects that really tried to deal empirically and pragmatically with society's “organizational depth,” had no followers. With a few exceptions, Wim Dudok, J.J.P. (Bob) Oud, and Hugh Maaskant did not gain a following. They were all considered too idiosyncratic to be of any real influence.

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Dudokkio

In his 1970 memoirs, Willem van Tijen, the champion of Dutch Moral Modernism and the Walter Gropius of Dutch social housing, confessed that he admired Dudok despite

his “expressionism,” which Van Tijen considered an ineffective and fake approach to architecture. “Luckily,” Van Tijen said, “Dudok has no followers at all.”

Of course Dudok had a lot of followers – mostly from countries where a Moral Modernist or socialist viewpoint held little sway (like Britain, the United States, and the former Dutch East Indies) – and even lent his name to the clearly defined style of Dudoky, Dudokkio, or Cinema House. But all this was eagerly forgotten in his home country.

Style clogged the eyes of the more doctrinaire members of the Dutch architectural establishment, as well as, in Oud's case, the advocates of the International Style. Since hard-core modernists conveniently left the city out of their theories, they failed to notice that Dudok's and Oud's early work already showed a keen interest in the developing city.

demanded an architecture that could measure up directly to the scale of the city. Dudok's Bijenkorf department store (1929-30) in Rotterdam and Oud's Shell Building (1938-46) in The Hague did not develop for stylistic reasons but as a result of an empirical approach toward the changing city.

Both buildings are precise visual formulations of its specific urbanity, the Bijenkorf in terms of volume and plane, the Shell Building in terms of ornament. Dudok's visualization of the indeterminate volume of a 19th-century building block – with its Camillo Sitte-like street vistas and its depressing collective perspectivism – is more outspoken in the city of Rotterdam than in his home village of Hilversum. He turned the block into a composition of planes, or flat volumes, each of which defines a completely different element within the composition, thus avoiding any presupposed spatiality. It culminates in a pointed tower – a Punctum – that transforms the building block into a deterritorializing point building, signifying its singularity. The Bijenkorf was one of a handful of buildings to survive the German bombing of the inner city – only to be eagerly demolished in 1957, when Rotterdam city planners argued that the site was better suited for a large intersection.

In The Hague, Oud gave expression to the Shell Building's inner typology on the side facade by means of protruding glass staircases, which tell us that each floor has a central corridor. Thus there was no need to express the building's inner system on the front façade as well. Completely flat and symmetrical, the front façade has its own depth, called ornament. This ornament, though fundamentally different in character from the historical applied decoration, so effectively tabooed by the International Style, had no empirical basis. Not surprisingly, Oud was vigorously bashed by International Style adherents at *Architectural Record*.

In the 1940s, Dudok and Oud had a hard time explaining the precision and empiricism behind their designs, which were subjected to constant attack for their presumed estheticism. People refused to believe that an urban scheme could simultaneously be beautiful and visualize a precise definition of a particular city.

The empiricism of these and other architects (such as Rem's uncle Dirk Roosenburg,

architect of the now-demolished Ajax stadium De Meer) was misunderstood as overly estheticized, expressionistic, or even old-fashioned. According to its detractors, this architecture was not adapted to what really happened – or should happen – according to holistic theories of total control, in which all that was not controllable was called emotion. “I am a rationalist,” Willem van Tijen said, “but there is more to the world than that.” Yet by refusing approaches like Dudok's, which dealt with the empiricism of this “more,” no architectural impulse was left for developing a theory on how to handle the world of “more.”

Maaskant the Martyr

In the absence of theories of architectural empiricism, Oud, Dudok, and others were obliged to devise their own empiricism as artlike individualism or, as it was later called, “methodological individualism;” always struggling with a hostile environment. “I am a martyr type of architect,” Hugh Maaskant said in 1972, “I am a very quiet man.” And: “There are a lot of theories in our trade, which are discussed at length, but as soon as you start building, they are completely forgotten.”

But there was no theory of architectural empiricism. In the 1970s, it was discovered in the Netherlands that psychoanalysis was the perfect vehicle for this. As with every discovery, this one was made twice, simultaneously but in different ways and independently of each other. They had one element in common: an interest in Truth. As psychoanalysis is in the first place a way of doing rather than a way of theorizing, theories of architectural empiricism could be developed without being constrained by too many theoretical problems.

Shrinks

While Rem Koolhaas was dissecting New York through the Freudian eyes of the Spanish painter Salvador Dali, Aldo van Eyck's collaborators at Delft University, Peter Gonggrijp and Michiel Polak started to analyze buildings and student's projects, even whole landscapes: Gonggrijp on the basis of Melanie Klein's child psychology, Polak on the basis of

an even more obscure source, delving into prenatal experiences by the prenatal analyst Maarten Peerbolte from The Hague.

That the three architects relied on obscure sources and stayed away from the main debate on meaning, semiotics, and the symbolic structure of reality going on at the time is as remarkable as it was misunderstood. Bernard Tschumi, for example, in his review of *Delirious New York* in the *International Architect*, complained that Rem's descriptive analysis of Manhattan was old-fashioned.^[iv] "By psychoanalyzing Manhattan," Tschumi says, "Rem discloses its plural meanings to a certain extent, yet he does not seem to care about the symbolic structure of the description itself." Since Rem offers criticism but no "criticism of criticism," Tschumi doubts the empirical truth of Rem's investigation. For him, Rem might have told the same story without Manhattan, without a subject or even with another subject.

What was at stake, though, was exactly the empiricism, not the symbolic structure. Today, no one cares about symbolic structure. Gilles Deleuze writes with indignation how Melanie Klein, the least symbolic and least structuralist shrink of all, became angry when her patient, a child, refused even to try to understand that the faucet was his father and the sink his mother. The only aspect of this story of interest today, though, is what at the time was called the analytical situation: a woman and a child carefully looking together at a water basin for quite a long time, without washing or having even the slightest inclination to wash. The analytical situation is a mere pretext for establishing an empiricism which would not have occurred otherwise.

The construction of a heightened or, as Rem calls it in *Delirious New York*, "unnatural" empiricism proved to be the only escape from the lack of empiricism most architectural theories, including phenomenology, had offered. This was also the only theory-based alternative to the predominant conviction of the 1970s that reality itself was structured as a language.

One might argue, as Jacques Lacan did, that since language was the vehicle of psycho-analysis, analytical reality in itself is structured as a language. Applied to buildings, however, there is no logical ground for such an assumption.

On the other hand, there was no logic to the idea that buildings are completely outside language either. Peter Eisenman and others considered architecture to be an independent category because in architecture, sign and signified would always coincide. In comparison to this and other well-known lines of thought, Peter Gonggrijp's far less influential methods of analysis still contain a valid theory of architectural empiricism.

Considering Melanie Klein's "distinctive features," such as male-female, large-small, etc., Gonggrijp discovered that by applying such a distinctive feature to reality, no language will come forward, not only because empirical reality, in all its complexity, resists analysis, but also because there is no established connection between the various distinctive features themselves. They are present in language as well as in reality, but not in the same way. The result is that each distinctive feature should be able to cover the whole of reality.

A distinctive feature, whether in language or in reality, is always false in itself. It might only be seen as a formal device if it contained all of the possibilities of an open society. A distinctive feature would act both as difference and indifference, as interrelation and reversal, dialectic and its synthesis. It should develop simultaneously present distinctions, as if a whole utopian discourse on a better, open society were condensed into a single building or landscape. Large and small, for instance, would not be devised as a size related phenomenon. Rather, large and small could be seen as difference, not a difference of size but of life, not a condition to be solved but to be lived.

When a landscape or a building did not respond to the possibility of such heightened empiricism, as Gonggrijp showed in his brilliant analysis of Albert Speer's buildings, a small problem might lead to a large solution. When the distinction of large and small does not develop into indifference, reversal, or synthesis, when it is not possible to think large and small, a small problem such as ventilation for the Nuremberg stadium might be solved by the monstrously large solution of the whole volume of the building type. On the other hand, when reality adapted to heightened empiricism, like the parceling of farms and farmhouses in the Dutch landscape of the early nineteenth century – Gonggrijp's thesis – other parts of the same landscape, like the soil structure, twentieth-

century city extensions, or highways intersecting the landscape mostly did not fit into this heightened empiricism. These were consequently left out of his cartographic images.

These landscape analyses painstakingly demonstrated an astonishing level of empiricism nobody had noticed before. Cornelis van Eesteren (former collaborator of Theo van Doesburg, prewar president of CIAM and the former head of

Amsterdam town planning) came to Gonggrijp's graduation at Delft University, in May 1969, in order to proclaim rather solemnly that this was the most important event happening in urbanism since Cornelis van Eesteren. But the problem of relating the heightened empiricism of one landscape element – historical settlements – to a possible and quite different empiricism of other landscape elements, such as highways, was never solved. Today's Dutch landscape planners consider Gonggrijp's maps to be quite unempirical.

Refusing any form of phenomenology, there was no possibility of even assuming that a

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landscape as a whole might have an “organizational depth” that would include all kinds of empiricism in the way we would approach it today. Consequently, Gonggrijp could only defend the heightened empiricism of landscapes and cities from the past against the normal empiricisms of later developments, including the reconstruction after World War II of Middelburg, a medieval city in the southwest of the Netherlands that was not reconstructed on the basis of heightened empirical research but embroidered along a formalist interpretation of nostalgic images of the historic cityscape. In this way, Gonggrijp became a critic of formalism.

Like Michiel Polak, Gonggrijp considered heightened empiricism to be a general value that individuals should adopt, not a program that had been adopted in the past or might be adopted in the future. The latter possibility was explored in *Delirious New York* when Rem took normal empiricism, for instance the valueless plans of a Manhattan skyscraper, in order to show the unexpected, heightened empiricism hidden behind the normal image (which eventually became the far more normal psychoanalytical approach).

Excluding language from the analysis was one thing; discerning what subjects to analyze and what subjects not to analyze was another, practical matter. For with both Michiel Polak and Rem Koolhaas, the subject therefore became transparent. Polak, whose teaching most resembled the traditional psychoanalytical situation, excluded language as a category in two ways: first, by relating to experiences before the student was born, which were thought of as being real in themselves – a sort of reconstruction of a prelingual situation by means of feelings coming from direct impressions of images from within a building or design – and, second, by reducing a building or design to a disintermediated interface, maintaining the idea that there was no difference between designing a specific building and others' experience of the completed building: architecture was always as direct as it was retroactive.

Yet, such a direct image was only possible as the result of appearing as an image. Such an image has to appear from chaos, so to say, not from a presupposed system or structure. The conception of appearance of the image ought to be that it was overdetermined

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from the situation as it was before chaos, as something that was so strong that it successfully resisted chaos.

With Rem's paranoid-critical method, the possibility of a heightened, direct, disintermediated, “unnatural” empiricism without the interference of language served only as a hypothesis for handling “normal,” language-bound empiricism. In *Delirious New York* it is called a false fact, a spy, which by looking normal, can disrupt or destroy the system of normality. After that, everything still looks normal, but there is no longer any system mediating normality.

In a world in which the architectural debate focused on meaning and symbolism in architecture, these discoveries of a direct and disintermediated way to think architecture were an invention that is still underrated. While Gonggrijp and Polak's approach moved in an entirely different direction than Koolhaas's, both were extremely important for later developments in Dutch architecture.

Gonggrijp and Polak's approach effectively removed the visual from their architectural thinking, making room for an individual behaviorism. The visual is no longer part of their empiricism. It is merely a side-effect of other good intentions. Rem's directness, however, has developed a strong and empirical visual component, which places him very much in the tradition of Oud, Dudok, and Maaskant.

However distinct, both these approaches are mixed up in Dutch architecture: from Rem, the paranoia; from Gonggrijp and Polak, the lack of intensive visuality and the good intentions. What's missing is the empiricism.

In Holland, Rem's paranoid method returns in what the firm MVRDV calls the “architectural one-liner.” The young architects frantically search for that particular component within the programmatic requirements, building codes, or urbanistic conditions that they can extrapolate and enlarge in order to give reason and meaning to their designs. Much less demanding than Carel Weeber's perversion of all programmatic requirements resulting in a tough and precise project, this method leaves room for the quintessential Dutch harmony to persist.

The paranoid-critical method ricochets brilliantly in Herman Hertzberger's Chassé

Theater in Breda. Hertzberger, who frequently wakes up in the middle of the night bathed in sweat and asks his wife for assurance that Jean Nouvel is not a better architect, has turned his paranoid hatred toward Rem Koolhaas into an obsessive copying, as if to show that he can do it better. In the theater, Rem's CongrExpo esthetic is copied without the lack of perspective, without the lack of composition, without the lack of proportion systems and without the brutal detailing. The result – a humanized, behaviorist, small and cozy version of what could have been – was heralded by the press as the most important Dutch building since Berlage's Stock Exchange. Smoking factory social-democracy once more triumphs over Rem's brutal newness and intensity.

In the Amsterdam development of the Bijlmer, the urban planner with PC rhetoric and an Indian name, Ashok Bhalotra, designs middle-class housing in what he calls a “Street of 1,000 Cultures” at a site where presently stands a to-be-demolished high-rise

in which about 110 different cultures really live: illegal immigrants from Ghana, poor people from the Antilles, and junkies from the city. Multiculturalism is reduced to an ideologically motivated metaphor, thus preventing architects from having to deal with a multicultural reality.

The self-censoring Dutch pragmatism can hardly be called empirical because real issues are excluded. In the Netherlands, reality is a subjective issue. In our national shopping mall, everything on the shelves has to pass the ideological consensus test before being allowed in. This is the problem with architectural one-liners and metaphors. They communicate too well: their singularity makes it procedurally easy to get by the slings and arrows of architectural practice. But that same singularity, that lack of danger and love and song, makes it impossible for these designs to entice a dance. The behaviorism sticks. In their weak intensification of one part of reality, of one particle of the entire organizational depth, the designs underline and accept the ideology of coziness, ordinariness, and harmony in Dutch society.

At a time when the future of architecture and urbanism resides in an object-oriented design with no predetermined systems or overall structures, it is precisely the generative power of a graceful empiricism that is vital.

[i] Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*. Edited by Jennifer Sigler. Photography by Hans Werlemann (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers – New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995).

[ii] Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1994).

[iii] Rolf Jensen, *Cities of Vision* (London: Applied Science Publishers, 1974).

[iv] Bernard Tschumi, 'On Delirious New York: A Critique of Critiques. Review', *International Architect*. An international review of architectural projects, theory, practice and criticism, Number 3/Volume 1/issue 3/1980 (London: Fumehurst Limited, 1980), 68-69.

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