

Another firm working on numerous projects in China is *de Architekten Cie*. In 2008, their design for the new DSM offices in Shanghai earned them the coveted international LEED certification for energy-conscious building design. *De Architekten Cie* also designed a spectacular expansion plan for the port city of Tianjin in North China, and recently won the competition for the Tianjin Urban Planning Museum. Closer to home, the firm is also working on major plans, including the new residential district *Giustianino Imperatore* in Rome and *Casa Nova* in Bolzano.

Even closer to home, in Antwerp, *Neutelings-Riedijk* is building the City Museum, which is due to open soon. This firm is also working on a large shopping mall at *Porte de la Villette* in Paris and an urban complex with opera and concert facilities in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana.

Several Dutch architectural firms are at work in the Middle East too. OMA has a large-scale masterplan for Waterfront City in Dubai, which is currently under construction.

One of the few landscape-architecture firms with internationally renowned plans is *West 8*, Adriaan Geuze's Rotterdam-based firm, which is currently building in London, New York, Toronto, Singapore and the former Soviet Union.

Dozens of other examples could be added to this selection of internationally active firms. It is clear that Dutch avant-garde designers are highly competent in marketing their architecture as an export product. A few exceptions aside, the common denominator of these design products is their radical nature and iconic visual language.

A younger generation, driven by the crisis, will have to find opportunities to radically change the face of architecture, for example with 'green' building or 'tailor-made' inner-city projects. The key question is whether this new generation can also cause an international stir with such work.

Harry den Hartog

*Translated by Yvette Mead*

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## **A Neighbourhood Rises from the Ashes: Roombeek**

On 13 May 2000, the city of Enschede in the eastern Netherlands was shaken by a catastrophic fireworks disaster. A storage facility owned by the company *S.E. Fireworks* had caught fire, resulting in a chain of explosions. The warehouse was located in the middle of Roombeek, a densely populated, working-class neighbourhood, but miraculously 'only' 23 people were killed, including four fire-fighters. Approximately 950 people were wounded and about 200 homes were destroyed. More than 4,000 people suddenly found themselves homeless. The horrifying images of the disaster's aftermath were seen around the world. It was as if the city had become the target of a violent bomb attack.

Anyone strolling through the streets of Roombeek today with no awareness of what took place less than ten years ago would be hard put to imagine that the neighbourhood had been literally blown back in time. Soon after the disaster a development plan was drawn up under the direction of urban planner and architect Pi de Bruijn. About two-thirds of the physical plan has now been implemented, the main features of which are fully discernible. Yet it will be another five years before everything is in place.

When the government began thinking about how to rebuild the area, it found itself facing a great deal of pent-up rage and repressed emotions from the former residents, as well as considerable distrust of any form of 'top-down' policymaking. So the decision was made to involve the population as much as possible in the planning process. Many meetings were held at which everyone was given a chance to voice his or her opinion. This participation was then organised at various levels, from the general development plan as a whole down to the individual houses. A proposal was made – and accepted – to make Roombeek a diversified, socially open neighbourhood comprising 'ordinary' houses as well as a few more upmarket ones.

Local participation is one of the principles that have put the new Roombeek at odds with recent urban planning policy in the Netherlands. A highly vis-



Roombeek a few days after the fireworks disaster.

ible result of that policy over the past few decades are the VINEX neighbourhoods, an acronym for '*Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra*', literally the Fourth Policy Document on Physical Planning-Plus. VINEX neighbourhoods are new or redeveloped residential districts which are often boring and monotonous and can be found in several large Dutch cities. Many of the residents of Roombeek pointed out that before the disaster their neighbourhood was very cluttered, partly owing to old industrial structures. That clutter was something the residents actually valued. By communicating directly with the residents, Pi de Bruijn saw an unexpected opportunity to create what by Dutch standards was an unorthodox, heterogeneous bit of the city. Because Roombeek lies squarely in the middle of the urban fabric, the monofunctionality of a VINEX neighbourhood had to be avoided. The original network of streets was more or less maintained but was made 'much more lively and daring'. The remains of former factories were kept as bridges to the past. Visitors to Roombeek in the year 2010 see a rich palette - a small residential street, a little park, a complex containing a museum, then an arcade with shops beneath it and part of a former textile factory.



A new road under construction  
© Pi de Bruijn – *de Architecten Cie.*

Another strikingly un-Dutch aspect of the Roombeek reconstruction was that government permission from the authorities was not required for every single detail. Pi de Bruijn believes that the Netherlands should get rid of its requirement that all housing plans first be run through a wringer. Even the type of roof tiles that may be used is stipulated. When Roombeek was rebuilt, however, the spaces were divided into three categories. First there are the main spaces, which are important for creating an overall impression. Architects were selected for those spaces. Then there are areas that are also important in which Pi de Bruijn, as supervisor, asked to see the plans before the building was started. But there are also areas in which people can just do as they please. The zoning runs erratically through rich and poor areas alike. There are 'poor' areas that are the focus of much attention and 'rich' areas that are being built without screening.

In 2007 Roombeek won the 'Golden Pyramid', the annual Dutch state prize for excellence in commissioning work in architecture. Roombeek received this prestigious distinction because of the meticulousness, decisiveness and ambition with which such a large-scale task was undertaken. People began ask-

## Theatre

ing whether Roombeek's success could be replicated in other cities. Pi de Bruijn seems to think so, although he doesn't believe it will happen soon. One problem, he notes, is the laziness of many city councils. Aldermen have to be re-elected and are not inclined to take big risks. Even more problematic is the enormous impact that major project developers have on Dutch urban development policy. If you give them too much leeway, you shouldn't count on the typical refinements that can still be seen in the older Dutch cities. Project developers don't earn enough money on diversified neighbourhoods like Roombeek and they don't have the patience for them, either. They'd rather sell 800 houses at a stroke, divided into types A, B and C. But Pi de Bruijn is hopeful: 'anything is possible,' he says, 'if you want it badly enough.'

Harry den Hartog

*Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier*

### **New Dance Steps at the Royal Ballet of Flanders**

Dusting off your reputation as you dance – is such a thing possible? But that's what the Royal Ballet of Flanders has been doing since the arrival of its new artistic director, the Australian Kathryn Bennetts, at the start of the 2005-2006 season. Her work received its just reward in the Spring of 2009 when the company won the Laurence Olivier Award, a sort of British Oscar for dance. After all, for some four years the company had been getting rave reviews in the foreign press, while in Flanders government reaction to the work of Bennett and her group of dancers was lukewarm, to judge by the limited resources they must make do with compared to foreign companies. It is time this changed, because it cannot be down to the quality of the work. The gulf between internationally renowned Flemish contemporary dance companies, such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's Rosas, Wim Vandekeybus' Ultima, Alain Patel's Les Ballets C. de la B. and the one and only ballet company is still too great. The reason for this lies in the Royal Ballet's past history. Before Bennetts arrived on the scene it took too few risks and often delivered mediocre performances. For years all the attention in Flanders had focused on the ground-breaking work of the contemporary dance choreographers. Now in 2010 the Royal Ballet, which celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year, deserves a place in the spotlight as well.

The company performs classics like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake* with the requisite respect for the language of dance, but also with a fresh approach to the production. It also performs contemporary work with great virtuosity. This makes for a unique cross-over among the dancers. At the end of 2005 They put the Royal Ballet on the world map with *Impressing the Czar*, a twenty-year-old (but still relevant) work by the famous choreographer William Forsythe in which classical ballet and contemporary dance confront each other. Forsythe took the linearity out of both story and movement. The audience can use their own imagination as they look at this fragmented, fairy-tale world. With this production Bennetts and her dancers showed