

An Architect with a Social Agenda

Liesbeth van der Pol

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[M A R I E K E V A N R O O Y]

A couple of years ago, the office of Chief Government Architect in the Netherlands celebrated its bicentenary with an exhibition at the Netherlands Architecture Institute and a series of television programmes. Although in Flanders the office was created only recently, it has existed in the Netherlands since the French architect Thibault was shoehorned in as 'Architect to the King' by King Louis Napoleon. Initially the government architects concentrated mainly on designing government buildings, but today there is greater emphasis on advising on national architecture policy. The Chief Government Architect combines his or her private practice with work for the government.

Amsterdam architect Liesbeth van der Pol was appointed to the office in August 2008 for a period of three years. Van der Pol is the first female architect in the Netherlands to hold the post, and her appointment is therefore unique. Her architectural oeuvre is varied, ranging from housing to shop interiors and public buildings. It is evident from her CV, however, that she was not appointed solely on the basis of the work she has produced. Van der Pol has also won several prizes, including the Charlotte Köhler Prize (1992) and the Maaskant Prize for Young Architects (1993), and over the years she has sat on many committees, juries and advisory bodies.

Her first commission was for an apartment block in Amsterdam. Since she was a young architect at the time, she was permitted to seek assistance from an experienced colleague. She chose Herman Zeinstra, a decision that was to have enduring consequences for the future. They became partners in life as well as work and set up an architecture firm together: Zeinstra en Van der Pol. Some years ago the firm merged with the recently established firm Blue Architects to become *dok architecten*. In this new form, the firm moved into former industrial premises in the east of Amsterdam.

Buildings as sculptures

Van der Pol is not an architect who designs imposing buildings and complex infrastructure works, unlike her predecessor Mels Crowel, for example. The word perhaps most adequate for describing her work is 'sculpturality'. Her



buildings stand as autonomous objects in their surroundings, with characters of their own. In an interview in the *Volkscrant* (20/2/2003) following the publication of her monograph, she expressed this as follows: *'I want to make buildings that deliberately stand out in their surroundings'*. Often, therefore, she talks in metaphors. Buildings are given names that appeal to the imagination, such as *Rooie Donders* (Red Rascals), *Onderzeeër* (Submarine) or *Indisch Dorp* (Indian Village). The highly imaginative qualities that she imparts to her buildings provide the basis for the colourful watercolours that she develops in the design phase, and which reveal the architect's artistic qualities. This sets her apart from many of her peers, who use pencil and paper less and less and create their designs mainly on a computer. Van der Pol is an architect who is not afraid to speak of classical concepts and values in architecture such as 'beauty', 'imagination' and 'truth'. In the interview mentioned above she puts it like this: *'What is architecture about, for me? If you have to summarise it very briefly, it's about creating buildings that on the one hand are highly stimulating, and on the other have a sort of self-evident quality about them; the building derives its beauty from itself.'*

Rooie Donders, Almere.
Photo by Rob 't Hart.



Architecture and environment

Rooie Donders, Almere.
Photo by Rob 't Hart.

For Van der Pol, any commission and any context can give rise to an unexpected design. Although in general she is guided by the specific conditions of a location, this does not mean that she regards architecture as subservient to the function or the direct tie-in with the surroundings. She often seeks confrontation through an unusual use of colour, materials or form. She finds a *tabula rasa* just as interesting as a place with a weighty historical context. She made a name for herself with three urban tower blocks on the edge of Almere that she christened the *Rooie Donders* ('Red Rascals', 1998). The buildings, which can be seen from the motorway at a considerable distance, mark the transition from the urban area to the empty polder. There is an industrial look to them, due to their form, which is suggestive of grain silos, and the materials used – the buildings are clad entirely in red steel. They stand as a landmark in this empty area that has no history.

But Van der Pol is equally at home with inner-city locations that are steeped in history. At Entrepotdok, not very far from her office, Van der Pol designed the sturdy industrial Aquartis loft apartments (2001) on the site of a former coal depot designed by Berlage. The design makes full use of the plot, which follows the building lines of the original structure. The building gradually increases in height. Its front and rear walls are entirely of glass, while the sides are of dark brick. The supporting wall of the original building has been preserved and incorporated in the plinth. The effect is one of alienation. As a passer-by, you almost wonder whether the building is new or whether it has always been there.

Another residential development that has been integrated into the existing urban landscape in an interesting way is the housing development at Meerhuizenplein in the Rivierenbuurt district of Amsterdam. Much of this area is in the style of the Amsterdam School – the social-democratic expressive housing architecture of the early decades of the twentieth century – or a later variant. This includes the Meerhuizenplein which has, among other things, a



Aquartis, Amsterdam.
Photo by Arjen Schmitz.

Meerhuizenplein,
Amsterdam. Photo by Arjen
Schmitz.



residential building from 1923 designed by Michel de Klerk, one of the most prominent architects of the Amsterdam School. Van der Pol has added new housing that is clearly contemporary in design but blends subtly into the existing surroundings by means of various details such as the way in which the brick is used, the curves in the facade and the horizontal windows that refer to the style of the Amsterdam School. These buildings show how Van der Pol is always in search of a contemporary variant on an old theme. However, she manages to avoid clichés by not staying too close to the original architecture – as neo-traditional architects do tend to – but evoking the old character through the new.

The most notable structure in Van der Pol's oeuvre to date is the storage building for the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam (2001). At first sight, a commission for a storage facility would seem to be a thankless task, but it came as a welcome change to Van der Pol after the many housing projects she had designed. The building had to be constructed on the adjacent naval complex and therefore had to present a closed appearance. The structure is a 'box within a box'. The storage spaces are located in a concrete box, which is enclosed in a shell containing the pipes, cables and systems. The site, which is located in the centre of Amsterdam with no access for the public, is bounded by a brick wall. Three windowless protrusions encased in titanium are now visible above this wall. They follow the contours of the installations and give the impression of a glistening monster hunched behind the wall. Precisely because of the constraints imposed by this sensitive location, with this building Van der Pol has succeeded in creating a real pearl in Amsterdam's urban landscape.

Van der Pol once was interested in urban planning, but in view of the 'stuffy' image of local-authority town planners she opted for architecture instead. Nevertheless, since she began practising as an architect she has also been in-

National Maritime Museum,
Amsterdam. Photo courtesy
of dok architecten.



involved in urban planning. One such project is the master plan for the Waalfront in Nijmegen, which she has designed in collaboration with the landscape architect Lodewijk Baljon. This master plan, which is to transform a former industrial site into a mixed residential and business area, will extend over 25 years. During the public consultation residents said they would like to have a dance



hall, as they had in the past, and Van der Pol duly took account of this. She has not confined herself to feelings of nostalgia, though; the plan also incorporates high-rise buildings – something that today often provokes resistance in residential locations. But Van der Pol is convinced that if high-rise structures are properly integrated into the development plan, it is possible to create desirable housing for many people in a unique location.

Master plan for the Waalfront, Nijmegen. Photo courtesy of dok architecten.

Social agenda

Since the economic crisis took hold the construction sector has been hit disproportionately hard: a random sample by the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects (BNA) in February 2009 showed that 70% of architecture firms in the Netherlands were suffering considerable problems because of it. This being so, together with the other Government Advisors (for Infrastructure and the Countryside) Van der Pol seized the opportunity to strengthen the government's role as the initiator of and investor in a number of strategic projects, the government taking on most of the responsibility. She said in an interview in the weekly *Vrij Nederland* (30/8/2008): *'A great deal has been achieved in the recent good years, but that meant there was less time to think about certain things. Now we have the time, and we must make use of it.'* Priority is being given to a number of large infrastructure projects and to tackling the *krachtwijken* or 'places of power'. In

2008, the then Cabinet decided to improve the forty most deprived neighbourhoods in the Netherlands. On the one hand this involves a social agenda, while on the other there is a physical aspect that can be approached in various ways. (1) Since taking up her appointment, Van der Pol has regarded her involvement in this programme as an important part of her job, and is considering what role architecture could play in it. She is doing this through five pilot projects in which a design team from the Chief Government Architect's Office, together with the local authority, property developers and any other parties involved – look at the existing proposal for refurbishing the designated neighbourhoods. The idea is not that the design team queries everything and puts forward a new plan of its own, but rather for it to serve as an independent sounding-board. As Van der Pol says on her official website (www.rijksbouwmeester.nl): *'My aim with the pilot projects is to focus attention on an integrated approach for the 'places of power' and on the role of designers in that context. For me design, spatial quality and beauty are key concepts.'*

Van der Pol also wishes to direct attention to slightly smaller projects, such as the redevelopment of former churches, monastic buildings and vacant Ministry of Defence sites. She also wants more investment in care complexes and schools. It is clear from these last two points that Van der Pol sees the agenda of the Chief Government Architect as a social agenda, something that was less important to her predecessors. In July she issued advice on primary school buildings. As an architect she was involved with the development of the multifunctional school in Osdorp, for which she was awarded the Amsterdam Architecture Prize in 2008. Her recommendations focused on improving the schools' indoor climate, which is below standard in most cases. To this end she is working on changing the regulations, improving procedures and providing better information and support to clients.

Finally, she is concerned about recently qualified architects, who can no longer be certain of finding work as soon as they graduate. Van der Pol has already labelled these young graduates 'the lost generation'. In order not to abandon this group, a rescue plan has been devised which takes the form of a Research Lab. Without losing their social security benefits, two hundred researchers can work on specific design issues in the Netherlands such as inner-city densification, redevelopment and the aforementioned *krachtwijken*. Over a period of three months, the researchers spend two days at each of a number of existing architecture firms. This initiative is part of *Nederland wordt anders* ('The Netherlands is Changing', www.Nederlandwordtanders.nl), for which the following assignments have been formulated: the redevelopment of the Jaarbeurs Exhibition Centre in Utrecht, the design of street furniture in the green zones of the 'places of power' and a plan for the future of the village of Nagele – the high point of post-war modernism. Not everyone is enthusiastic about this 'social action' by the government. Following the publication of a critical article about the government initiative a discussion was launched on the Dutch architecture website Archined (www.archined.nl). According to the critics, the design profession is not being taken seriously because architects are in fact having to work as volunteers. The design assignments that have been formulated are genuine projects for which architects would normally receive a fee. Instead of an incentive scheme, this could be seen as the financial erosion of the design profession, and also as a devaluation of the status of the architect and town planner.

No doubt the government meant well when it set up the Research Lab, but one does wonder why such concrete assignments were selected. Why not invest the money in projects that enable a new generation to think on a slightly more abstract level about space and architecture in the Netherlands? Be that as it may, Chief Government Architect Van der Pol is above all a pragmatic designer rather than a meditative visionary, an approach that seems to fit in with Dutch planning policy in the 'Noughties', which is determined less by utopian philosophy than by setting concrete objectives. Perhaps, with a return of greater financial flexibility and hope for a positive future, there will once again be scope and a place for dreams and wishes on the Netherlands' planning agenda, as has often been the case in the past in the world of Dutch architecture. ■

www.rijksbouwmeester.nl

www.dokarchitecten.nl

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1. See my article: *From Squalor to 'Beauty'. The Dutch Approach to Deprived Areas*, in: *The Low Countries. Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands*, 17, 2009, pp. 70-77.