

The 'Laugh-or-I'll-Shoot' Architecture of Zaandam

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[J A A P H U I S M A N]

It was a striking article in the paper: Dubai is going to build a replica of the Taj Mahal, but bigger, and not as a sacred place but as a shopping mall. In this instance, the Taj Mahal would be part of a park also containing copies of the Eiffel Tower and the leaning Tower of Pisa. This is a sample of the reinterpretation of classic icons that actually no longer surprises anyone.

Making copies is obviously one of man's primal necessities, since it happens not only in Dubai, but also in Japan, Las Vegas and many other places in the United States. And the copyists go for the greatest hits of Western architecture every time. We come across buildings reminiscent of Palladio's villas, Greek temples and French chateaux all over the world. And it's quite understandable – if you don't have the money to come to Europe, let Europe come to you. For Americans it's also part of their upbringing. Europe! Paris! London! You have to have seen them.

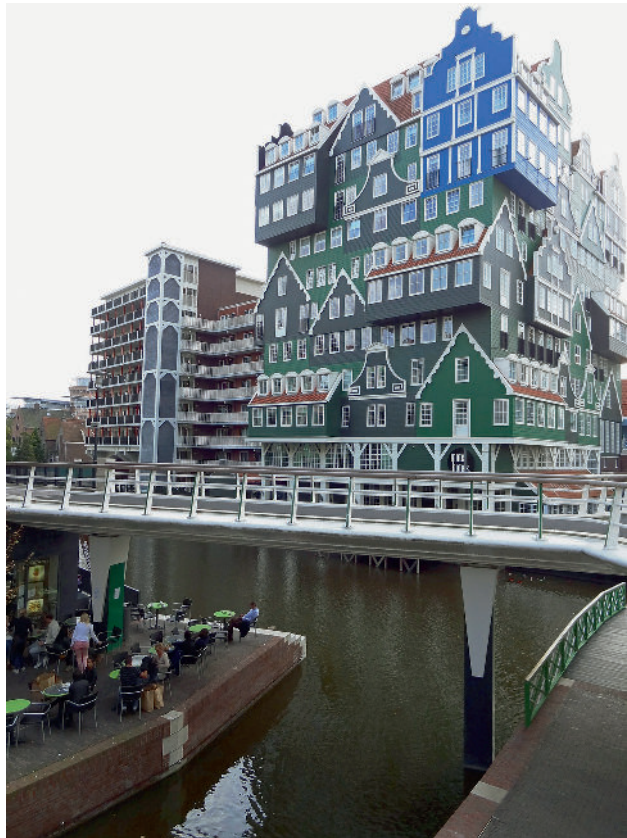
In Washington State I visited a small place called Lynden, whose population is made up largely of Dutch émigrés. They profess a strict version of Protestantism and at the same time keep up several Dutch traditions, such as the clog dance and a procession with floats. In the shopping area you will find a baker that makes fresh bread and there are old-fashioned Dutch delicacies on sale too. But the most striking thing is these emigrants' need for a Dutch backdrop. So we find a windmill (housing a restaurant serving 'poffertjes', or tiny pancakes), a small canal covered in duckweed, and imitation canal-side houses. As is frequently the case in the United States, these are cardboard facades on standard houses. And Lynden is not the only example. Ten kilometres down the road we find a replica of a Swiss mountain village and on the ocean Norwegians have settled down in a fishing community that makes them feel at home too. Seeing the Dutch archetypes in Lynden one becomes very much aware of what the icons of low-country architecture are, as they are imitated over and over again. One finds them in the form of a gin miniature on KLM planes and also as an amusement park in China. Mills, liftbridges, canals and stepped gables.



Call in the 'city surgeon'

It is notable that this sort of archetype only appears in distant foreign countries, never in one's own land. No one would ever consider building copies of the quaysides of Ghent or the palaces of Brussels in Belgium. For a long time it was a taboo in the Netherlands too: the ring of canals in Amsterdam was a one-off urban planning exercise. It was time, in the 20th century, for Modernism. The motto was: just act normally, that's crazy enough. But times change. Now the Modernist *diktat* has gone, space has been made for canals and imitation canal-side houses at several places in the Netherlands (specifically in the 'Vinex' districts, sites for new building on a massive scale, often on the outskirts of cities). This too is understandable. Because there is a lack of points of recognition in newly built areas in the peat bogs. Since their residents work elsewhere, there is a need for a recognisable home, a glimpse of the past. The imitation canal-side houses and farmsteads satisfy the needs of nostalgia.

Inntell Hotel. Zaandam



The Zaan house is another icon. This is a wooden house, painted blue or green, in the Zaan region (in the province of North Holland, a stone's throw from Amsterdam), where the soil is so boggy that heavy building is impossible. Driving piles into the marshes around the River Zaan is out of the question: most of the houses stand on a concrete slab (and in the past on cow hides). The area round the town of Zaandam is the oldest industrial region in the Netherlands, with rice-husking plants, cacao factories and sawmills. When he stayed in the Zaan region in the 18th century, Tsar Peter the Great was so taken with this centre of industry and the architecture that went with it that it inspired him to build St Petersburg, which was in fact one of the first replicas of the ring of canals.

Zaandam has lost a lot of its charm as a result of the uncaring treatment of its town centre in the 1960s and 1970s. Canals were filled in, factories closed down and newly opened traffic routes disrupted the layout of the streets. The few remaining wooden houses looked like a silly reminder of past glories, but paled into insignificance alongside the colossal concrete office blocks of the *Albert Heijn* supermarket chain and *Rabobank*. In this respect, Zaandam is like other post-industrial towns such as Tilburg (in the south of the Netherlands) and Enschede (in the east), which are uncertain what to do with the legacy of abandoned industries. Empty spaces around the inner city create an inhospitable atmosphere.

It is therefore understandable that Zaandam town council has called on the Netherlands' prime 'city surgeon' for help: Sjoerd Soeters of the bureau Soeters and Van Eldonk Architects. This firm has made a name for itself by mending ruined inner cities and city centres with growing pains. This firm won several prizes for breaking open *Mariënborg* in Nijmegen and thereby creating an intelligent and agreeable connection between a forgotten square on the east side of the centre and a busy shopping street. The town of Nootdorp near The Hague asked Soeters to transform the former racecourse and trotting track into a shopping centre with homes on a raised indoor street above it. In both cases the architecture is given a historical look and is striking for its fine details. Embroidery patterns in the masonry, carefully designed facades and other elements are intended to give the residents the feeling they had lost in the formation of the city.

An XL transformation

Since Zaandam seemed to have lost its identity, Soeters came up with a brilliant plan. He suggested lining the walls of the pedestrian area between the station and the *Dam* (the central square) with Zaan-style houses. Not the tiny houses as in Peter the Great's day, but ten times bigger. Zaandam town council needed no persuading.



A Zaan House

Urban planning and architecture were to merge into one another and make for cohesion in the transformed *Gedempte Gracht* ('filled-in canal'). This canal has been opened up again so that the buildings are reflected in the water. As Amsterdam and Bruges demonstrate, this is a requirement for a spacious and picturesque effect. The architects were held strictly to Soeters' masterplan. They did not have to copy the Zaan-style houses literally, only keep to their spirit, and preferably in identical materials and colours: in wood, and in blue and green.

The climax of this acknowledgement of the past is the *Inntel* hotel by Winfried van Winden, which has probably surpassed the *Zaanse Schans* (a picturesque neighbourhood) in popularity. Van Winden has assembled all the Zaan building styles and forms of decoration into a mass of wood that makes the nearby *Rabobank* melt away like a Japanese nuclear power station. Hordes of foreign tourists flock in, and those who have the time stay in one of the hotel's period rooms, which were also inspired by Zaan interiors. This includes flowery curtains, a box bed (of course) and crocheted valances over the windows to ward off the curious. In fact all Van Winden has done is to stack up a dozen overlapping Zaan houses. We recognise the wooden joinery of course, and the ridge boards with their swans and weathervanes.

The brutalist station from the high-tech period of the 1980s is camouflaged by giant houses with ridge roofs. Once again they have red tiled roofs that contrast sharply with the vivid green. Criticism might be levelled not so much at the size of the buildings as at the cladding. Plastic planks have a flattening effect, unlike wood. Of course they are more easily maintained because no painting is needed, but there is no grain to catch the light with its fine texture.

Gedempte Gracht
(‘filled-in canal’). Zaandam



Soeters' most important change was in the traffic situation. On leaving the station, one descends by a gentle slope towards the centre. In this way no one has to wait any longer for the traffic lights on the provincial trunk road that passes in front of the station. And the *Gedempte Gracht* has been transformed into a pleasant pedestrian area thanks to a proper relationship between public space and buildings.

Proud of the town again

Whatever else though, the architecture of Zaandam can be put in the 'laugh-or-I'll-shoot' category, based on the pursuit of quick effects as seen in soaps. How long does a joke remain funny? In Dubai or Las Vegas it does not really matter, because the settlements are in the sand, where visitors come only to be entertained. The Taj Mahal and the previously built pyramid in Dubai are there for no other purpose. It's different when you allow the copies, enlarged to giant proportions, in a historical town like Zaandam. They will soon become an irritation. The laugh gradually fades once you have grasped the double meaning in the joke.

Yet one can in a certain sense be positive about the changes. They have polished up the town's image and brought new life to its centre. The inhabitants can be proud of their town once again (to prove this, they are flaunting the biggest *HEMA* shop in the Netherlands, which has occupied one of the retail premises). One will have to get used to the idea that a centre is built for 30 years – and no longer – and after that will be renovated or changed. It's not necessary in cities like Amsterdam and Bruges, because they have been cherished and pampered for centuries. For new and spoiled inner cities there is no other way: an XL transformation, but one with character. ■