

Architecture

Life After Rotterdam

Dutch Architecture Edges Its Way out of Crisis

2014 was Rotterdam's year. The city spent decades rediscovering itself after the reconstruction, in search of a pleasant city atmosphere. Sixty years on, that process seemed complete. The new station was opened by the Queen of the Netherlands in 2014 - with a majestic lobby designed by Jan Benthem of Benthem Crouwel Architects as its crowning glory. This was followed by the largest office building in the Netherlands, De Rotterdam, by Rem Koolhaas, who also contributed the Stadstimmerhuis in 2015 to house municipal services. The cherry on the cake, however, was unveiled on 1 October 2014: the Markthal by MVRDV, a colourful gateway or vault, where the Queen received the exuberant kisses of market vendors. All these buildings were labelled architectural highlights, and not only in the Netherlands. So what's all this about a crisis in Dutch architecture? Or among Dutch architects? The fact that Rotterdam can now be declared complete as a figurehead of urban planning is in fact an ominous sign. What next?

Dutch architecture is reaping what it has sown over the last twenty-five years, its quality praised to the skies at home and abroad. After the previous crisis in the 1980s an unprecedented period of boom took place, fuelled not least by government measures, including an architectural institute and fund, both also based in Rotterdam, and Architectuur Lokaal, a centre of expertise for local initiatives. The time was ripe for it too. In 1991 the 'Vinex operation' started up, with the aim of building as many as 634,000 houses on the outskirts of the cities, new residential districts with surprisingly diverse architecture to meet a changed need: that of flexible, spacious housing in beautiful suburban surroundings.

The current architectonic crisis is different from that of thirty years ago, as it is caused by a surplus of residential buildings as well as utilities, offices and shops. Architects are affected by concurrent movements, such as the closing of care homes and



The Markthal in Rotterdam by MVRDV © scagliobrakkee

nursing homes, mergers of municipal authorities and in particular the inexorable demise of the office market. Business parks no longer pay off, and are largely left vacant without prospect of improvement. Rem Koolhaas's celebrated building De Rotterdam was planned fifteen years ago (called the MAB tower at the time). The colossus, uniting offices, a hotel and leisure facilities, is finally finished, but leaves behind the towers where the municipal authorities have been housed until now.

Another paradise for architects is entering a transitional phase. After three decades of build-up, Almere - the new city in the province of Flevoland - is having its doubts about making the leap to becoming a true big city. Population growth has slowed. The only remedy comes in the form of self-build plots in the new district of Poort. Self-builds are like lifebelts for architects, although the architect's task is reduced to that of an intermediary between municipal government, banks and suppliers, involving more advice than design. A new form of consultancy is born. Standardisation has made way for individualisation and buyers decide what they will have. People are no longer interested in terraced houses, preferring a detached *notariswoning*, with its classic features and hipped roof, a 1930s villa or a farmhouse, none of which require an architect.

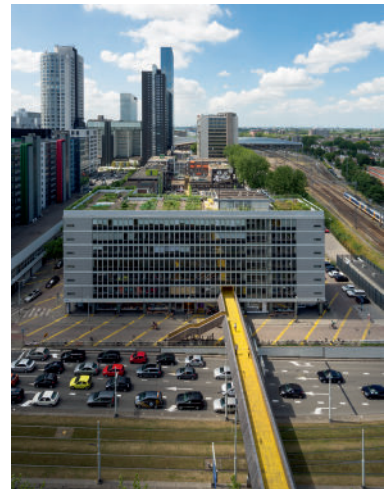
For sixty years Rotterdam was a Valhalla for developers and urban planners, a laboratory, operating differently from The Hague or Amsterdam. Architects were able to design new cities almost from scratch. At the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014 the Dutch pavilion looked back on this utopia, designed by Jaap Bakema (1914-1981). He was responsible for the first shopping promenade in Europe, the Lijnbaan. Countless architects have had

the opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of the destroyed city. Many of them began their careers here, including Mecanoo, Rem Koolhaas, Jo Coenen, MVRDV, Ben van Berkel and before them Maaskant, J.J.P. Oud (1890-1963), Willem van Tijen (1894-1974), Brinkman & Van der Vlugt and Wim Quist. The city also became the international base for many Dutch architects, who set off in droves to China, Qatar, Germany and Spain. What was their secret? It was their new twist on modernism, no longer as dogmatic as Jaap Bakema with his Lijnbaan, but playful, perhaps even ironic. They were open to new symbols which were particularly welcome in rising economies.

One of the unique qualifications of Dutch architecture of the last twenty years has been its public domain roots. Rem Koolhaas can be seen as an ambassador of Dutch architecture, possibly surpassed by Adriaan Geuze of West8, who has transformed urban areas from Copenhagen to Madrid and was responsible for the pleasant square and park in front of Rotterdam Station.

Over the past five years architects' firms have frequently remarked that there will never be a time like this again. Apart from the odd Markthal, 'iconic' buildings are things of the past, now seen as an inappropriate form of self-congratulatory architecture. Instead, converted industrial heritage has become relevant, for instance creating cultural clusters showcasing the raw traces of the past, as in the Energiehuis in Dordrecht and the ENCI power station in Roermond in the province of Limburg.

The country is also teeming with small-scale initiatives. The 3D Print Canal House in Amsterdam-Noord and the Schieblock in Rotterdam particularly spring to mind. The former is a building gradually emerging from a 3D printer, based on a design by DUS Architects. The Schieblock is a feat of repurposing based on a property from the 1970s, previously presumed a lost cause, on the edge of Rotterdam's Hofplein. It has been turned inside out, with a roof garden for drinking beer and exercising. For a while a city farmer operated on the roof and it has acquired a wooden bridge con-



The Schieblock in Rotterdam by DUS Architects
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necting it to the old Hofplein station, the Luchtsingel or 'air canal'. The money was cobbled together from crowdfunding. Once again it is not a case of inspiring architecture; aesthetics is the last means of expression. The architecture, by architect firm ZUS, sprang from dissatisfaction with the emptiness of the building while it awaited demolition and rebuilding. That could take another decade, the architects thought, and meanwhile nothing would happen. Unused premises at the edge of the city centre are like open wounds, detracting from the quality of life.

It is reassuring to see that architecture is temporary and that this gives it significance. The demolition of 1980s office colossi in and around city centres has had a serious impact, with disruption from the large quantities of building waste and disturbance to living standards lasting years. Temporary architecture circumvents this danger. Dutch architecture has wrestled its way through the crisis with small-scale projects which impress in a different way from those of twenty years ago. They are as colourful as a bouquet of wild flowers, while avoiding being purely cosmetic or trying too hard to attract admiration. It will take some getting used to, but in the end they might just give new meaning to the concept of architecture.

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Translated by Anna Asbury