

# Architecture

## The Benedictine Monk Who Showed Us How to Build

Dom Hans van der Laan

Dom Hans van der Laan's (1904-1991) architectural realisations are limited. As a teacher, this peculiar Dutch Benedictine monk advised his students on all kinds of projects, but his own main achievements are four convents and a house. He did not even have a proper architectural office, but worked from his own personal abbey cell. Nevertheless, Van der Laan is recognised as one of the most significant architects of the twentieth century.

Thanks to prominent architectural photographers like Frans de la Cousine, Friederike von Rauch, Hélène Binet and David Grandorge, images of his buildings are widely disseminated and have become part of architecture's collective memory. St. Benedictusberg Abbey in Vaals (The Netherlands, 1960-1982) and Roosenberg Abbey in Waasmunster (Flanders, 1975) are pilgrimage sites, intensely frequented by travelling architects and visitors who indulge in its elementary and austere architecture. As a contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk, these abbeys provide an aesthetic experience through purity of form.

St. Benedictusberg Abbey and Roosenberg Abbey can be considered as examples of the fundamental house, where each space has its designated function. With all the furniture and objects equally designed by Van der Laan, every action becomes part of a ritual. Movement from one space to another is orchestrated as an intense and contemplative experience, as if one is travelling outside of time and space. This effect is achieved through the use of classical architectural themes: series of colonnades and repetitive window openings, distinct rhythms of thick walls and austere building blocks with a rough materiality, a grey colour palette and minimum detailing. The series of openings create a changing light play, which is the only ornamentation. The composition of these classical themes is utterly modern. There is no symmetry and, despite the heaviness of the walls, the space seems to float because of the dynamic compositions.



Van der Laan's uniqueness goes beyond the experience of his architecture. The Benedictine monk regards his own realisations as 'specimens', practical testing fields that serve as a tangible and concrete background for his architectural doctrine. The abbeys are composed through a mathematical framework that is embedded within a larger philosophy of perception and space. In 1977, Van der Laan described this framework in *Architectonic Space, Fifteen Lessons on the Disposition of the Human Habitat*, both a manifesto and a design manual on how to build.

Van der Laan's starting points are the correlations between nature and architecture, inside and outside, mass and space, open and closed. Then he proceeds from classical systematics such as symmetry and eurhythmy to the scales of walls, houses and cities. Everything is linked through Van der Laan's systematic proportional series of the *Plastic Number*, the ratio 3 : 4.

Through this, he wants to create an order that directly relates to our abstract rational understanding of space. For Dom van der Laan, architecture has to create an order, a measurable and intelligible 'inside' within an unknowable 'outside'. Architecture makes the chaos of nature readable and understandable. The movement from the outside to the inside of a building is also a slow mental process of interiorization. This process of understanding, of creating an order, is closely linked to human cognition. On an intuitive level, we are constantly relating and assessing everything around us, constantly defining our position. We are measuring, counting and rounding up to parameters that we can rationally understand and name clearly. Architecture's main function is to be expressive through its order, and as such it imitates the process of cognition itself.

Likewise, architecture needs to mediate between intuition and rational understanding. One

needs to be able to relate to architecture through its human scale and clarity. A house facilitates this process of counting and measuring in the best possible manner. Through a clear hierarchical order of whole numbers, everything in the house is interrelated; from the smallest building stone to the rhythm of the galleries and window series, to the overall spaces, the building site, and eventually the city.

With his theories on space, Dom van der Laan follows the classical tradition of building with numeric proportions. Series of robust columns and elementary window rows are organised according to repetitive bay rhythms. Spaces interrelate hierarchically through numeric proportions, such as 1:2, 2:3, 3:4...

However, the dynamics that are so typical of Van der Laan's architecture, are not simply the result of this proportional system as such. For Van der Laan, that system is merely an instrument, like the keys of a piano. He realises these highly unusual dynamics by the way in which he uses his tool to make compositions: interlacing spaces with one another into one narrative, like he is making music. The series of columns in Van der Laan's buildings all have different rhythms that create a spatial dialogue. Window frames, open porticos and doors are not placed following any central axe. They are carefully positioned near corners and always shifted towards each other, creating diagonal and continuous perspectives through successive spaces. This architecture is built as in-between space: the buildings come alive through the interchange between the material of their surfaces and the light.

Within a world of abundant imagery that overcharges our senses, Van der Laan's architecture inspires today's architects through its elementary stillness and austere simplicity.

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[www.vanderlaanstichting.nl/en/home](http://www.vanderlaanstichting.nl/en/home)

Caroline Voet. *Dom Hans van der Laan. A House for the Mind. A Design Manual on Roosenberg Abbey*, Flanders Architecture Institute, Antwerp, 2017, 224 p.

## Fashion

### The Successful Balance Between the Commercial and the Creative

Dries Van Noten

Born in 1958, fashion designer Dries Van Noten has passed the milestone of a hundred fashion shows and is celebrating the event with a two-part book. This monumental publication renders the universe of the designer with photographs and video stills. Anyone wishing to familiarise themselves with his style, would do best to view the images from his 100th collection. The show was an anthology of Van Noten's oeuvre: young and old models displayed simple, smartly cut pieces that formed a feast of colours, prints and embroideries. Urban sounds could be heard in the background, a dash of Louis Armstrong, a pinch of David Bowie, a little Pina Bausch and the music from Pedro Almodóvar films. This soundtrack demonstrates the wide range of sources that inspired this Belgian designer. The discerning viewer can spot hints of other cultures. Still the presence of ethnic influences is not as explicit as in collections from a few years back.

At the time Van Noten made much more literal references to kimonos, saris, or Moroccan traditional attire. It is much more difficult to do that in the current politically sensitive climate. A Peruvian sweater with an alpaca motif (the alpaca is a South American mountain llama, which is kept as a pet in the Andes) was subject to major criticism on his Instagram account. Van Noten is quoted as saying in an interview with *The Business of Fashion*: 'If you follow that logic I should only be allowed to be inspired by Belgian folklore'. Nonetheless, he toned down his explicit cultural influences. But his pieces still travel all around the world before they end up on the store racks. A shirt can be dyed in Asia, embroidered in India, dyed again in Africa and sewn together in Belgium.

Still, having been born and raised in Antwerp, Van Noten is no globetrotter. A fascination for other cultures may have stemmed from early childhood. His parents owned a boutique called Nussou's in Essen (a small town north of Antwerp) and later Van Noten Couture in Antwerp itself. As a young boy he travelled with his father to foreign countries