Mart Stam's Trousers

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I have always been fascinated by what in communist ideology is called self-criticism. This is a procedure whereby intellectuals are periodically forced to publicly confess their failings. After, I can only assume, a highly unpleasant trial and often with the worst possible outcome. While it would surely never reach such extremes in our country, or in our civilization, the procedure is quite unknown here. What I mean is, that when asking “How modern is Dutch architecture?” I in no way wish to exclude our own work at OMA from the critical undertone discernible in this question. More than that – something I myself would like to confess – that question has to me become acute with respect to IJ-plein, a project we began in 1980 and finished nine years later, and a component of it given the code name Oost III (East III). A project that was perhaps “courageous” at the beginning of the eighties, researching as it did the whole repertoire of modern urbanistic forms, synthesizing a hybrid and projecting this on to IJ-plein. The underlying supposition here was that a great deal has already been discovered or invented this century and it is unnecessary to rediscover or reinvent such elements as are successful and work well. On the contrary, it was essential to use intelligence and creativity to give the last two to five per cent a certain twist or revision so that those elements could function again in the present age and the present context. That was, or is, the theory.

But in the mid eighties, we at OMA were more or less confronted with a crisis. It was then that the socialist ideology began to crumble, which in the case of IJ-plein was symbolized by a succession of events. First, Amsterdam was split up into submunicipalities, one of the first to be formed being Amsterdam-Noord (North Amsterdam, where IJ-plein is sited). At that moment a paradox obtained, in that a submunicipal council
seemingly dedicated to socialist tenets was the first to complain about the socialist principles (i.e. waterfront social housing) put into practice there by the central city and whose instrument was us.

This council made a number of supremely clownish but at the same time infuriating trips to America, armed with camcorders and other state-of-the-art gear to see how it could be done differently, and this council discovered, particularly in Baltimore and San Francisco, the vision as it should have been discovered for IJ-plein, and should have been implemented.

For us that moment represented a crisis, inasmuch as whatever we found and thought, we were faced with the hard fact that the IJ-plein situation no longer gelled and failed to tie in with a development that had manifested and established itself en masse only three years after; in other words, from a number of quite objective events we could plainly conclude that the layout and concept of IJ-plein were out of date. Which didn't mean, though, that we ourselves acquiesced and agreed that it would indeed be better if it looked like Baltimore. All the same, it was a painfully clear and thought-provoking signal.

Parallel to this, something similar happened to the architecture we designed for IJ-plein. This made explicit reference to pre-war modernism, though updating or revising it in accordance with our own ideas so that this architecture of ours could continue functioning at maximum potential until century's end. At the same time that visual language had become so prevalent in Holland – a triumphalist and ubiquitous cliché, even – that we were beset with serious doubts on this matter too. These doubts can best be described as follows.

How is it possible for Christ's sake that in a century informed entirely by instability and change, in the art form best equipped to reflect society, and in a language, that of architecture, celebrated especially for its capacity for transformation – that despite all this, buildings ranging over a hundred-year period still look so much alike? This, then, is what prompted the self-criticism.

I should say at this point that my feelings of unease not only have to do with the triumphalism of modernism in this country during the eighties, but with the quality of Dutch Modernism as such, and by this I mean the Dutch Modernism of the twenties and thirties. Time once again for an aside: why is it that for me the stations of Modernism are Moscow, Berlin and New York, and that I'm quite unable to relate to that mysterious subway in Utrecht?

I can remember a visit to the Rietveld-Schröder house with Gerrit Oorthuys when Madame Schröder-Schräder was still alive. It was undeniably impressive, moving, still-
ing. But it wasn't long before I couldn't help seeing the Schröder house as a lot less imposing when compared with the houses of Mies van der Rohe. Mies, where voluptuous sofas lie beside sandblasted windows, where obscene red plush curtains hang next to onyx, where nothing is always placed next to something, where heavy rubs shoulders with floating.

You can see the Schröder house as sublime, but you can also read it as an overfull seventeenth-century genre piece. For the Schröder house is full. Full of discoveries, full of intentions big and small, full of wishes, full of things, full of color or at least paint; it is full of abstracted odds and subdued ends, the garden seat, the teapot, the spoons, the lamps. You might wonder whether it all really is as liberating as the myth of Dutch Modernism would have it. You could also say it suffocates with other means. Perhaps the question that best voices the difference between Gerrit Rietveld and Mies, is this: is there such a thing as freedom that fixes and, conversely, a fixing agent that frees? The first would be Rietveld, the second Mies. Perhaps—and this is putting it in the most negative terms—I should confess that with a bit of bad will I can read the Schröder house as the most suffocated version of the gypsy caravan.

Fixing, naming, inflating, not being able to leave empty, or not wanting to—these are all hallmarks of Dutch modernity, whether it's Rietveld, Van Eyck, or Van Velsen. If modernity is a tug-of-war between submitting and standing firm, submitting to the maelstrom of modernization, or standing firm against that maelstrom, then Dutch architecture, even before the war, has done a minimum of submitting and a maximum of standing firm.

In a wider context we see that the explosive impulse at the beginning of this century took a single decade to change course entirely. Take Cornelis van Eesteren, who, as we all know, managed to design a handful of stunning villas with Theo van Doesburg, where everything that had been blown outwards in the initial blast now shot back towards the centre. You might say in his case that the caricature of the Dutch Modernist became an oxymoron, namely the Modernist as controller, an oxymoron found all over Holland. What I distrust most about Dutch Modernism is that there is not a jot of futurism there with all its enthusiasm for dangerous phenomena like war, not a jot of constructivism with its enthusiasm for dangerous phenomena like mise en scène, not a jot of materialism in it as there is in America with all its dangerous things like capitalist exploitation. The only true and authentic product of Dutch Modernism is space, the unutterable as an alibi.

The pinnacle of modern architecture for me is still—and I apologize for introducing it so personally—Malevich's Arkhitetkonica. These are impenetrable even today—in the sense that they are literally solid—and rightly so. You can't go into them. At most you can get on to them, on to a platform finished in felt and asphalt, and look at the rest of the world. There is a major stream in modernity that has no concern for people, that isn't humanistic, seeing itself as a part of a whirlwind that spares nothing. This is a modernity that we in Holland have never embraced. In this country, the cowardice of resolve is pitted against the recklessness of a kind of Nietzschean frivolity. This is what makes me most hesitant about the nature of Dutch Modernism.

Then there is another phenomenon that is supremely Dutch, something that has been hoodwinking us Dutch architects for a century. Dutch architecture is like playing a piano on which only the right half of the keyboard works. In Holland, grandeur and architecture have, it seems, been unhitched for all time and it is the Dutch architect who is first to applaud this move, living as he does in a straitjacket of self-effacement.

I think that's a problem that comes clearly to the fore when we compare Dutch architecture of the moment with, say, French or American, where, I should add, there's a lot to be critical about too. Still, the metaphor of the piano with half its keys out of action then becomes clear, and I'm alluding in particular to the deep, resonant half. Only the squeaky upper register works. I think this is a serious matter, precisely because there's no danger involved. Without grandeur, of course, there is no mythology, unless it's the mythology of being normal.

When I received the Rotterdam Maaskant prize some years back, I outlined the contours of a reconstruction program for the architect's mythology, because I had a
kind of intuition that it would be important in Holland, and that the absence of a mythology is like a brake which, if we fail to construct it in this country, will doom us eternally to being a kind of executing tool and will make it everlastingly impossible for us to take up such initiatives. Van Eyck is the only Dutch architect who has dared to appeal to that status of myth, though he later got out of it easily by setting himself up as a Jeremiah, and by all too obviously enjoying his exclusive right to this position.

As a third subject I would like to speak about the triumph, or triumphalism, of Modernism today. I live in London. Every Friday evening I travel there by plane from Rotterdam. While taking to the skies each week, and after initially enthusing over the straight line of white urban villas with which Delft braves itself against Rotterdam—a row of houses by Mecanoo or one of their clones, I believe—I find myself possessed with a swelling enthusiasm for the Tanthof (a newish residential district in south-west Delft). I think it's possible that over twenty years we can make the Tanthof an attraction as they do in French cities like Amiens, Saint Eglise or Saint Pernasse, armed with the following slogan: the Tanthof, its chaos, its vitality, its vibrancy, its choice, its flashy intentions, the Tanthof, in the Nietzschean sense, in all its frivolity. Holland is getting fuller all the time with buildings that at most command respect, no longer even trying to elicit enthusiasm. This half-baked ode to correctness articulated by many an architect half the age of Richard Meier, is taking on ever more dangerous forms. Just as Robert Musil wrote of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (the man without qualities), so we might speak of Dutch architecture today as an architecture without intentions, a triumphalist Modernism, utterly non-dangerous, toothless, sterile. It won't keep anyone awake at night, or get anyone's back up. I think this must certainly have something to do with an incapacity and lack of articulation among architects in this country. Whatever the case, at the moment it is producing some truly absurd situations such as the one at IJ-plein, where an amalgam of Renzo Piano and Helmut Jahn led by Government Architect Tjeerd Dijkstra are to work on this prime-quality boulevard with a left-wing eco-councillor. I see this as a sort of critical point, one that shows that a particular vision is absolutely impossible in Holland. Another example is the preposterous, not to say nauseating selling out and frittering away of all peripheral areas with sub-architecture, the sub-architecture of business centers and business districts—take the so-called Brainpark near the Brienenoord Bridge in Rotterdam—all of which (and this is important) lean on a Modernistic vocabulary, business parks as down-and-out Weissenhofsa and Architectonica in three stories.

To end on a slightly more positive note and not to confine myself to criticism alone, I think we should find out what we can do, what is needed and what immediate provocation there could be, to arrive at some kind of reconsideration, a revamping of the profession, or escalation of ambition irrevocably proceeding in concert with an escalation of self-criticism. I think what we need is a gigantic revision of the Dutch concept, the concept of Holland, a new territorial revision to prevent the downfall of Europe. This European dimension is so important to rediscovering the Dutch concept. It is absolutely essential, I feel, to abandon the myth of a country with a bunch of sympathetic historical cities and planning to stay that way, and relegating the rest to all kinds of crap. I think it's absolutely essential too—and I utterly fail to understand why it hasn't happened yet in some way or other—that there should be an ideological response to the sudden disappearance of socialism, which in almost all cases has latently nourished and provided the justification for our modern architecture, whether we are open about it or not.

I would like to illustrate this with an example that I saw recently in Japan; an example that, for me, most clearly gives a possible answer to such questions. The building known as "Il Pallazzo" stands in the Japanese city of Fukuoka on a small channel of sorts in a typically Japanese part of town, meaning a single, supremely chaotic story of bamboo. Out of this rises a building by Aldo Rossi enthroned on a socle, eight stories high and so actually quite low, but detailed to the point of intimidation with a front facade of red travertine panels and amazingly complicated round columns. In this building, a truly staggering density of social elements has been brought about. There are, I believe, twelve bars, each by a different celebrity architect, that have completely hollowed out Rossi's
building, and a lobby by Rossi himself, a parody à la Alessandro Mendini of an English gentlemen’s club. Though shocking and not particularly attractive, still I have yet to see another recent building that makes such astounding and ingenious use of the cultural and technical potential of a given moment. It ties together every kind of information, an amazingly creative and clever synthesis of a whole host of impossibilities. Despite the ambivalent feelings I have towards it, I can safely say that on going into the building one really feels for the first time in recent years one is entering a new condition. A hybrid, synthetic condition that exploits today’s possibilities in a disarming fashion, surrendering itself and in so doing making a capture.

What we need in Holland, I think, is an investigation, or a eleventh-hour confession, of such explosive sides of Modernism. Modernism as a descent into this century’s maelstrom whose fury even at the century’s end is evidently increasing to take part in or at all events to reflect on – the explosion of scale, the explosion of artificiality, the explosion of context and the explosion of control.

Translated by John Kirkpatrick

This lecture was given in 1990 during the symposium *Hoe modern is de Nederlandse architectuur?* (How Modern is Dutch Architecture?) which was organized by the Technical University of Delft to mark the conclusion of the two-year professorship of Rem Koolhaas. It first appeared in: Bernard Leupen, Wouter Deen and Christoph Grafe (eds.), *Hoe modern is de Nederlandse architectuur?*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1990.