

The Quasi-Object

Purity and Provocation in the library of Utrecht by Wiel Arets

To better understand the world, modern science – over a period of roughly 200 years - divided our hybrid reality into two cultures. On the one hand, human sciences explores the “soft” dimensions of our existence – which social categories are projected onto an object – while the natural sciences concentrate on the intrinsic, “hard” dimensions of the object. In the human sciences, the object has no meaning as a thing; it only exists to be used as a white screen onto which society projects its ideals. For the natural sciences, the objective powers of the thing are so strong that only these are of overriding importance. It is this duality of objects that must be urgently reconsidered when we attempt to evaluate the quality of new hybrid objects such as the library in Utrecht designed by Wiel Arets Architect & Associates. Traditional architecture criticism and architecture history are concerned with form, the style in which an object is built. How the monochrome form of the library in Utrecht will colour the life of the community will always elude them. It is precisely as if, in most reflections on architecture, narratives of use are totally divorced from the diverse architectural qualities of an object. Time and again, it goes unnoticed that objects, like books and images, only acquire meaning once their cultural capital is activated by different formations of use in context and time. Things are imparted with meaning by use and perception, by touch, by looking at and being looked at, by habit and tactile appropriation, by a coincidental discovery during a walk or conversation. As theoretician Marian Fraser observed “Matter does not ‘exist’ in and of itself, outside or beyond discourse, but is rather repeatedly produced through performativity, which brings into being or enacts that which it names.”¹ The research into either the “hard” or “soft” qualities of an object are naturally applied in practice, but how these two cultures function together, form a complex whole, goes unnoticed in many cases. This is remarkable to say the least because in reality we do not make a distinction into two cultures; quite the opposite, we assume hybrid relations. For this reason, the researchers Michel Serres and Bruno Latour propose that we should cast the ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ object from our minds. It is better to talk of the quasi-object. The quasi-object equips us to develop a new model of knowledge that goes beyond dividing an object into two cultures. Rather than considering an object as a fact or a value, to see it simply as a (stylistic) form or social function, we must begin to grasp the facts/values as intrinsically inter-related wholes. “Quasi-objects are much more social” says anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, “much more fabricated, much more collective than the ‘hard’ parts of nature, but they are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society. On the other hand they are much more real, nonhuman and objective than those shapeless screens on which society – for unknown reasons – needed to be ‘projected’.”²

A mysterious black box

From a distance the library on the Uithof campus looks impenetrable. A gigantic black rectangular box snuggles mysteriously and simply between the Uithof’s countless different buildings. By revealing itself as a black mass, it creates a sense of calm and order in the rather chaotic context of the campus. Nothing reveals that what we are looking at is a

¹ Marian Fraser, “Classing Queer: Politics in Competition”, in *Performativity and Belonging*, Vikki Bell ed. Theory, Culture & society, 1999.

² Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

library. The purity and perfection of the volume surprises in the same way as the rectangular monolith that appears among the apes in the desert in the Stanley Kubrick film “2001 A Space Odyssey”. The huge black volume of the library is impressive and imposing, and raises more questions than it answers. It is not a building that slots neatly into the thinking of user or viewer nor does it conform to how the building should be read: “Look, I’m a library!” but, like a book, it is a machine that provokes one to embark upon further exploration. When you get better acquainted with the building, you understand that the black concrete houses the static book collection and that, behind the glass façade, the users go about their business. But there is more than just this functional reading – of massive clouds of books interspersed with transparent reading areas – recounts. Regimes of looking and being looked at are of immense importance in an urban planning situation. With its black skin the library in Utrecht not only creates order in the disorder of the Uithof, but also plays with the metaphorical meanings of the black box. Many writers consider a library to be a prison where knowledge is locked away - which is one way of understanding the black world of the volume in Utrecht. On the other hand, the beautiful black box in Utrecht refers to the symbolic meaning of a treasure chest. There are also black boxes which record all the moves made by an airplane. That is a black box bursting with information that enables us to reconstruct where errors occurred and how problems could have been circumvented. On the other hand, the black box refers to the black chamber of a camera where the incoming light is transformed into a new image. We do not need to know how the transformation in the black box of the camera happened – the result, the *output* is all that matters. In the abstract engine room of the black box, decisions are taken and problems solved, unseen by the outside world. There is good reason for describing some museums and theatres as a *black box* because they offer the users, curators and directors respectively an “unblemished” canvas on which they can give free expression to their play or exhibition. But the black volume of a library also refers to the divine, as described by Umberto Eco: “If you will allow me to use such a metaphor, a library is the best possible imitation, by human beings, of a divine mind, where the whole universe is viewed and understood at the same time. A person able to store in his or her mind the information provided by a great library would emulate in some way the mind of God. In other words, we have invented libraries because we know that we do not have divine powers, but we try to do our best to imitate them.”³ Whether the black volume represents “divine power” or not, it challenges us all to constantly forge new relations. What dominates is the mystery of the black box in all its simplicity. When we come nearer we see that the outer skin of the building – whether concrete or glass – is tattooed with a texture based on a close-up photo of reeds by Kim Zwart, adapted for concrete by Jan Bitter. Through the tattooing of the black skin between which sunlight and outside vista are filtered simultaneously, the naked functional body of the library, the apparently “hard” dimension, acquires a ‘soft’ dimension. The massive nature of the library suddenly becomes a giant fragile accumulation of reed stalks behind which books and people are deciphered as silhouettes.

The point of a quasi-object is that relationships are forged between values and facts by different frameworks. The skin of a building is then not just an outside, a sculpture that demands our attention in the way of Frank Gehry’s Bilbao museum, but a membrane where outside and inside meet and merge. Such a skin integrates all the milieus that play a role inside and outside, and

³ Umberto Eco, “Vegetal and mineral memory: The future of books”, Al-Ahram, weekly On-line, 20 - 26 November 2003 (Issue No. 665)

exists, just like human skin, of a variety of mixed feelings. Through “the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border, contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin” comments philosopher Michel Serres. Neither the projection on ... nor the objective fact are central in a quasi-object, but which relations and interferences are activated by the framing at different scale levels. The quasi-object must be seen as a construction to arrive at inter-subjectivity. It is an intersubjectivity whereby not only subjects intervene with each other, like pieces on a chess board, but whereby the elements of the system, the configuration itself, can also change its behaviour and mood. The whole is held together by that which agitates or constantly attempts to pull it apart and bring it back together: “This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. “We”: what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of “I.” The “I” in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariants of subjects, weave the collection... The “we” is made by the bursts and occultations of the “I.” The “we” is made by the passing of the “I.”⁴” A quasi-object then, according to Serres, is about inserting itself between this, to underline that “We live only by relations.”

A landscape of encounters

From the outside, the library appears to be a hybrid treasure chest over which a skin stretched taut not only serves a visual function but offers protection and allows it to breath. Books are safe there and are protected against sunlight and daylight. When visitors enter the building – by a stately meandering stairway on the ground floor or footbridge on the first floor – the library opens in gradual stages. On the ground floor, visitors enter a modest space, see the cafe and terrace to the left of the entrance, feels at home and is curious about what awaits them. The monumental staircase takes the visitor to the very core of the building. By entering the building a ritual unfolds that greatly resembles coming across the secret code that opens an antique treasure chest. The floor is a gleaming grey ‘carpet’ - that increasingly widens – taking the visitor to the heart of the library. Once in the nucleus of information we are confronted with an enormous void that reaches the roof. Suddenly the viewer discovers that this library is not massive at all, but open and transparent, that you move between the potent black clouds of concrete full of books. The people in this library are not pushed aside by the 90 metres of books in this library. Contrary to most libraries, this one is comprised of open spaces. What strikes us next is the enormous amount of books classified by category. In this library, there is an integrated concept of five reading rooms, 470 study places, offices, book depots, a café, and shops on the ground floor, an exhibition area annex auditorium and a reading hall where visitors and staff meet in their quest for knowledge and information. The interior of the library was designed with people in mind. Like the National library by architect Hans Sharoun in Berlin, this library incorporates an inward-oriented landscape of different platforms, voids, routes and stairways threaded together to form a colossal network of horizontal floor fields. Sometimes a floor field is no wider than a corridor or stairway. If you follow the route – in search of a book, a colleague or new love – you discover that all the narrow paths lead to the large central square in the void. On your way you can enjoy the view over the library from different balconies. Or you might decide to work alone, or together, in one of the open or closed areas at a large (or small) Joyn table by designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.

⁴ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

What the architect and principal in Utrecht have fully grasped is that, in our privatised society, it is more important than ever to focus on the classic function of the library as **a public space**. In our information age of digitisation, consumption and far-reaching individualisation, the importance of the public atmosphere is underestimated. While people attempt to re-invent public space in all manner or ways, commerce annexes and controls what was originally free public space. Most design decisions are determined by consumer behaviour and budget rather than freedoms of choice that carry weight in other areas. The library as public institution is ideally placed for offering other forms of freedom; investing in encounters that can flourish independently of profit alone. The booksellers Barnes & Noble in America have also come to realise that people want more than simply to shop. In their outlets you can browse the latest books and magazines in peace and quiet, and even take them to their coffee shop with a view of the city, or peruse them relaxing in a sofa without immediately having to make a purchase. The essence of a library is more than simply documenting and providing access to information. In a library it is about places where you can read. A library is a social centre with a multiplicity of responsibilities. If you spend your day at the computer, eyes red from staring at the screen, meet no one, rely on a costly piece of equipment that makes it impossible to sit and read in comfort, love a book's fetishistic quality, delight in discovering fresh leads, yearn to finger print, adore collecting, enjoy leafing through bookcases, take pleasure in the fact that you don't need a manual to scan a book's contents, can zap more quickly through a book than any software programme, don't risk blowing up your computer by spilling coffee on a page, then you long for a library where people and books find each other. With the library in Utrecht, our society is not only investing in an advanced distribution centre packed with digital information that flows to different private domains but also making room for a rich public domain unsullied by commercial interests. Knowledge and human interaction are at the heart of a library, not shopping.

Provocative purity

In both the library of architect Rem Koolhaas in Seattle and the library of Wiel Arets in Utrecht the books and offices of the staff are housed in secure and robustly closed boxes that seem to float in an integrated environment of open fields and routes packed with public activities and reading areas. Rem Koolhaas designs a transparent net over his massive zigzag stack of clouds. The Koolhaas library resembles a kind of diamond. Wiel Arets conceals his black book-clouds in a semi-transparent treasure chest. Both palaces of memory behave as a quasi-object; they astonish, question, and establish a dynamic presence with their unconventionality, undergoing a transformation at night. All the same, the dissemblances are pregnant. The pure minimalism of Arets is nothing like the 'Calcutta minimalism' of Rem Koolhaas. The two libraries are very different kinds of theatre. Koolhaas invites the public to take possession of the building with references to the surrealism of everyday life in the city. In Seattle you don't walk on grey carpeting as in the Arets library, but on a close-up of green grass or other photographic carpeting. Koolhaas plays with imaginary images culled from our media culture, creating mise-en-scènes that are almost complete before the users even occupy the building. Conversely, Arets opts for the intensity of emptiness. Not a surrealism informed by semantic urban images but the surrealism of the material, the way volume and structure are present in the space, are of crucial significance in the library of Utrecht. The fullness of associations in the Seattle library reminds me of Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction". The library of Arets differs in

its emphasis on emptiness familiar from the photographs of artist and photographer Thomas Demand and the film “Dogville” by van Lars von Trier where white chalk lines on black asphalt imply, abstractly and in essence, the delineations of the village. The photos of Demand are images of absence. His photographs of crime scenes show no trace of the individuals who once inhabited them. A photograph based on the lobby of a serial killer reveals only a “Corridor”; even the caption precludes any indication that the “Corridor” is that of a serial killer. The action has vanished from the image. Demand’s intriguing mysteries raise questions about things that are not themselves present in the work. It incites thought and borrows its power from the persistent uncertainties that emanate from the work. Arets’ library functions similarly to the photos of Demand. It is an architecture without side effects, it lacks human traces and augmentations. Just as in photography which requires us to find the point – what Roland Barthes calls the ‘punctum’ – which brings the story of the photo to life, the library in Utrecht only comes alive when taken possession of by books and people. The dynamism of life imbues the building with colour. The building itself is monochrome. All the horizontal fields are grey. The vertical planes are black. The ceiling is as raven as a dark star-spangled sky. Above all, the building is itself. Its monochrome purity challenges users to make it their own. The building is no completion of life, but in invitation to it. The motionless mystery of the structure makes the heart beat faster. It is a building like a blackboard that waits, in rapt anticipation of life’s traces. The building’s only colour graces the places where life and building meet, at the library’s counters. Throughout the building, the counters are fashioned of soft scarlet leather, exceptionally human in their pure, vivid hue. The building comes to life as colour finds its way into the building in the guise of book and individual.

If you look closely, you will see that the subjects of Demand’s photographs of everyday places are paper models. There is an absence of any detail that could reveal how the models have been constructed. The handrails of Arets’ library have a similar lack of detail. Just how the handrail is affixed to the floor remains invisible. Walls, windows and doors seem to fit seamlessly together without the intermediary of complicated connections. Floors and ceilings have been treated as pure planes. Cameras, cables, lighting air conditioning and other details that could disrupt the overall picture have been rendered unseeable. It is all about abstraction, purity of material, the construction and the volume, the rawness of the black, the provocation of the mystery of life.

Behind each door is another door, opening onto a new world.

In both the library of Sharoun and in the library of Koolhaas, the movement of the library’s programme is the inspiration behind the form, the material and the construction. There is every reason for both architects to wrap the façade around the programme; what stands out most is the urban fabric of books and people. The outside of Sharoun’s and Koolhaas’ library is more or less the result of the spatial organisation of the programme. It pivots about the elastic landscape of activities and not the creation of an institutional order. By contrast, Arets works with two totally different systems; on the one hand the programme as infrastructure and on the other the relative autonomous and classic architectural elements such as the monumental effect of mass and construction, the façade as skin and monochrome material and use of colour. Like architect Louis Kahn, Wiel Arets seems to draw a distinction between “served” and “servant space”. The “servant space” houses

service functions such as the staircases, lifts and air conditioning. By so doing, the “servant space” frees the “served space” for human activities. For Kahn, the “servant space” has a function other than to serve; it expresses the institutional dimensions of a building by its ordering principle. In this way, the brick chimneys of the Kahn Richards Medical Research Building in Pennsylvania are reminiscent of the fortified towers of the Italian town of San Gimignano. The symbolic meaning that Kahn expresses with his “servant space” proceeds in neutral terrain. In other words, he is searching for sustainable, collective values that, regardless of actuality, are of symbolic value. Kahn is interested in objects. Arets is fascinated by quasi-objects that challenge the viewer with their rawness, that show the institution in all its purity. The use of black and the repetition of elements and black bookcases are a clear reference to the Kafka-esque situations that abound in every library. A library holds an infinite past; behind every door is another door leading to yet another world. The search never ceases. The archive absorbs ever-more information and knowledge. You can wander through a library forever, perpetually discovering new scents, new doors that open for you. In the introvert realm of the library you can travel endlessly past words and images that our culture has noted and archived. It is this complex world that, with his quasi-object in Utrecht, Arets articulates in all its purity and provocation.

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Footnotes

¹ Marian Fraser, "Classing Queer: Politics in Competition", in *Performativity and Belonging*, Vikki Bell ed. Theory, Culture & Society, 1999.

¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993.

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