

Ikea Populism and the idea of the city

Playing with the diffuse city

The traditional idea of the city – that of Amsterdam's canals and later Berlage's Plan Zuid, but also the modern idea of the city as became manifest in the Bijlmermeer – no longer exists. Under pressure from the market economy, the idea that architecture can serve the public interest has been undermined. Economic and private interests are rated more highly than cultural and collective values. Not only does the economic logic of property developers and investors determine the city's landscape, the city council, too, acts as property developer and investor. In so doing, the government follows the market regime and the public task becomes a derivative of market-orientated thinking. While the Modern Movement sought to improve the world with its architecture primarily from a social perspective, today it is about plans that attempt to give the city a better competitive position vis-à-vis other cities in the world. And superarchitects – preferably with star status – are engaged in order to promote the economy of a city with a stunning design.

In this century, most of us may then live in urbanized areas, but we have lost sight of what this urbanization really means or could mean for our civilization. The old values and maps with which we navigated in the past are no longer serviceable. When Teun Koolhaas et al. build 'Landje Roele' in Amsterdam Noord and when Rob Krier builds the neo-historical housing complex 'Meander', they are realizing what the philosopher Frederic Jameson called a 'nostalgia for the present'. A world is 'reconstructed' which we never actually lost. It may then look like the past, in reality it is nothing other than nostalgia without memory. There are, for example, Muslims who were born and bred here but who dream of a 'homeland' where they have never lived. They idealize a world that never existed, which really only exists in the here and now. Today in 2006, in the search for what can take the place of the world in the twenty-first century, zombie categories form the basis of thinking, actions and designing. This ARCAM POCKET does not so much document the second Golden Age of Amsterdam's architecture (see ARCAM POCKET 2000-2002) as look at how the various architectural projects propagate a specific idea of the city, give shape to the non-city, play with the idea of the diffuse city.

Ikea Populism

For most of us, the concept of populism has a negative connotation. Populism is portrayed not only as anti-elitist, but also as cheap, irrational, common, dangerous and superficial. However, what we share as a group is of essential importance for every society. Whatever political system we choose, from democracy to dictatorship, they all have to do with how a certain idea of the city becomes a guiding and successful principle for the population. It is therefore not so much a question as to whether populism should be approved or disapproved of, but rather it is about what sort of political idea of the people is to be realized in a society. When you visit the archipelago IJburg – particularly the private plots on Kleine Rieteiland and Steigereiland where residents are building their own dream home – what predominates is not so much a postmodern architecture à la Seaside (such as featured in the film 'The Truman Show', or what Charles Jencks propagated with his Postmodernism, but rather what we could call 'Ikea Modernism'. Ikea Modernism is not imposed from above, as was the case with Modern Architecture. It is the vast, unrestricted choice of affordable lifestyles which is of overriding importance: 'To offer customers the widest possible range of well-designed functional home furnishing items at such low prices that as many people as possible are able to buy these items.'

Ikea is not for the rich; rather it seeks to improve the lives of everyone. It is not about a luxurious elitist style, but rather pragmatic, practical and stylish designs for in and around the home. Ikea brings the modern dream of comfort, fashion and good taste into people's homes. It is not for nothing that the new middle classes in China are delighted with the concern. Whereas Modernism, with organizations such as the Stichting Goed Wonen (the Good Living Foundation), educated people in 'modern living', we are now as residents connoisseurs of our own lifestyle. The problem with Ikea Modernism, however, is that the idea of the city seems to be disappearing in an endless accumulation of individual lifestyles. If we examine Ikea's store layout, we arrive at a good definition of the collapse of the existing city. The blue and yellow Ikea boxes full of individual modernist lifestyles are situated in desolate locations on the city's periphery, on excellent link roads. Ikea is always easily accessible, you can park there for free, you can eat a cheap and sensible Swedish snack and fill your car with do-it-yourself

furniture kits. While Ikea's infrastructure is extremely modern, witness the infrastructural, seemingly endless roof of connections and the underground world of incoming and outgoing streams (learning from Mies?), shopping itself unfolds deliberately in a cluttered rhizomic labyrinth of bargains from which it is difficult to escape. We have here two types of management efficiency: that of a cold, businesslike, linear infrastructure, which leads you efficiently to the Mecca of lifestyles, and that of the maze full of tempting items (including the ball pit). The success of today's Vinex developments, with a greater variety of architectural styles than ever previously realized in twentieth-century residential districts, has many similarities with Ikea's success formula. But what has really happened to the city? Is the public interest now nothing more than an endless accumulation of individual and commercial desires, a series of delectable design objects displayed on shelves and served up on trays? Must we learn to accept the diffuse city, the efficient infrastructure of access and exit roads, gated communities, lifestyles and building for next to nothing? Or can a different idea of the city be developed by means of architecture?

Autonomy as weapon

No one in Amsterdam can have failed to notice the proliferation of new urban blocks with 'neutral' urban walls. In many cases, such as, for example, the housing block 'Gibraltar' by Claus & Kaan on Oostelijke Handelskade, from the outside it is difficult to see whether it is a residential building or an office building. In order to resist the diffusion of the city, many architects are reverting to the autonomous language of architecture. Their architecture is not governed by charted data streams or organizational principles, as is the case in the work of, for example, OMA, MVRDV, NOX and UN Studio; rather it is about form. The urban form, which in many cases is independent of the programme, which changes over time, hopes to be durable. Instead of devising yet another new fashion in the fight for the consumer's attention, De Nijl, for example, examines how architecture can embody and represent the city's collective memory, or how the permanent elements of architectural language can make the city readable. However, the towers that De Nijl designed for a site on a park in Osdorp sit uneasily in their context. They are out of place in the existing open urban ideal, as realized in accordance with the General Expansion Plan (AUP, 1935) by Cornelis van Eesteren et al. By contrast, with its separation of public and private areas and its modernist urban grandeur, the formal urbanism of Jef Reijntjers in his project 'Onder de Pannen' appears to perfect the AUP. Other successful projects include the urban insertions by Van Sambeek & Van Veen in Swammerdamstraat and the surrounding area, and the insertion by drk architects in Govert Flinckstraat. With these projects, the existing city is stitched together by cleverly linking in with the existing rhythms of material, colour, doors, windows and volumes of the neighbouring buildings in the street, without lapsing into repetition of that which already exists, as is the case in the accomplished and unpretentious project 'de Mokumer' by M3H. Someone who really goes to town with brick, in a way only the architects of the Amsterdam School could, is Rudy Uytenhaak. In the Olympic Quarter, next to the Olympic Stadium, Uytenhaak shows that, right down to the level of the detail, architecture has not lost its power as an autonomous play of forms.

In projects such as the 'Sporboog' (de Architecten Cie.), the 'Albatros' (hvdn architects), 'Cruise Inn' (Claus & Kaan), 'Loswal' (UN studio), office tower Ito (Toyo Ito) and the new WTC tower in the South Axis (Kohn Pedersen Fox), the city's historical memory plays no role whatsoever. What matters here is the urban and formal aura as such and the question as to how the structure, with its strong, pure form, can give a desolate area élan and grandeur. It seems, for example, as if with his white, tenuous and slender tower, Toyo Ito has parked a piece of Tokyo in the South Axis, and it does not much matter to him which is the building's front and which the back. Vera Yanovshtchinsky does things differently. On the rear side of the long, monotonous urban wall she designed on IJburglaan, justice is done to the individual desires of the various Ikea families, while the 'chaos' of individual expressions is kept in check on the street side of the block. For Yanovshtchinsky, the urban carrier, the question as to what is public or private and how the building is fastened to the ground, plays an important role. The same applies to the firm KCAP, who in the urban design scheme for 'Kavel 206' in Amsterdam Zuidoost, positioned various office blocks on a high table, underneath which cars can be parked. This formal system not only separates the pedestrians from the cars, it also creates a collective field on which the various buildings have free play, without losing the idea of the city, unlike in the endless wasteland of singular, disparate structures along motorways and on the periphery of Dutch cities.

Even more successful is the plan for the multi-company building 'Kaap Noord' by Vasco da Silva architects, because it is more than an urban, collective deck with various towers overlooking the IJ. An idea about community has also been created, because the various components of the programme are situated around an enclosed inner courtyard. In this scheme, not only is everything held together, as in the schemes by KCAP and Yanovstchinsky (the above-mentioned Ikea Populism), but the possibilities of the typology of the enclosed enclave, and a strict control of materials in all components of the project, are also utilized. This idea of a closed community 'imprisoned' in an enclave of complex programmatic connections can also be found in the housing schemes 'Downtown' by Rudy Uytenga, 'Geuzentuinen' by FARO and, less successfully, in 'Oeverpad III' by Mecanoo. Most striking of all, however, is that, in Amsterdam, too, more and more projects are screened off from the dangerous outside world. Parking is underneath the building. Inner courtyards are not accessible to 'strangers'. Everything unfamiliar is anxiously excluded. Sometimes there are fences to keep out the unwelcome visitor, but in most cases the control is wholly inconspicuous thanks to the ingenious design. In that regard, this is not much different from Ikea, where everything is carefully orchestrated and the spectacle is a strictly controlled and stage-managed, but where visitors nevertheless imagine themselves to be free in a labyrinth of choice.

Another noteworthy fact is that the autonomous projects reviewed so far are wholly lacking in humour. They are stately, formal box-like systems with a restrained colour palette and often with a refined use of brick patterns. Or they have a reflective appearance like Kavel 206, which waits longingly for its featureless users. The office building by Dedato, the refuse sorting company Union (AG Nova) and the company building of clothing label G-sus (Evolu Vandenberg) are successful because of their strict businesslike approach and their original use of materials (untreated concrete, untreated wood and a clever use of prefabricated material). These buildings are wholly devoid of glitter and glamour, they are not actors in a city as theatre.

A question that can be asked is where indeed is the humour in architecture, where is the more playful form of autonomy? Signs of it can be discerned in three frolicsome projects. The bicycle factory that has been converted into a company building on Pilotenstraat (Neutelings Riedijk), with its three projecting heads and thus cartoonish character. The villas by Bosch Architects on IJburg, with their 'floating' black bedrooms in building forms which look like matchboxes and which would not be out of place in a James Bond film. And the containers by hvdn architects which, thanks to the coloured prefabricated facade panels, have been transformed into a vibrant residential area where students are temporarily housed.

Gizmo architecture

So far, we have been discussing architecture as a generic framework, a grammar of formal architectural techniques, materials and types, a system that wants to be nothing other than an autonomous bearer, irrespective of the life that takes possession of it. The question is whether a different architecture exists, which instead of retreating into the profession – a form of artisanal claustrophobia –, resolutely seeks to communicate with the public. No simple task in the light of Ikea Populism. Fortunately, however, there are architects in Amsterdam who take risks, despite the dangers that lie in wait. Instead of anxiously holding onto traditional definitions of architecture, they produce 'Gizmo architecture'. We owe this term to the architectural critic Reyner Banham, who in 1965 spoke of 'the great Gizmo'. He was referring to portable gadgets and he drew attention to the need for a theory of 'gizmology'. Banham was convinced that the monumental spirit of traditional architects had to be broken because they do not understand how new techniques can realize all manner of marvellous dreams. Today, we have, for example, the iPod (an mp3 player made by Apple). This object does not stand alone, rather it is an interface that gratifies desires. It is only complete when it is connected to the Internet and the user can constantly modify it. It contains an explosion of information and it is easy to use. In short, it is a true Gizmo, which architects can learn a great deal from. If we are to communicate with the public, then – whether we like it or not – we must relate to our contemporary society, awash with images, icons, advertisements, fashion, subcultures and different media which offer the public experiences. There is no way back to the functional artefact of wood and stone, the only route would seem to be that of the Gizmo. The most literal translation of 'Gizmo architecture' is the 'House of the Future', designed by UN Studio. Unfortunately, this building has been so cheaply built that Ikea would not even sell it as a lamp. Van Egeraat is slightly more successful with his building in Gelderlandplein, but

when all's said and done this complex seems to be little more than an aesthetic play of lines, which above all seeks to draw attention to itself. The booster pumping stations by Juliette Bekkering, GROUP A and Bonnemayer are, as is the bridge control building by LUX, enigmatic design objects connected to an infrastructure brimming with technology and, like true Gizmos, fire the imagination. The new building for the Faculty of Education at the VU (Jeanne Dekkers) and the architecture centre ARCAM also have a strong, enigmatic form and a gadget-like appeal, but they have a greater degree of complexity. Rather than representing the power of a king, an institution or a city with their form, these gadgets position themselves like magnets in the city, sucking their surroundings and the public inside them. The headquarters of the Department of Sewerage and Water Management, and particularly the Sewage Treatment Plant, both by Architectuurstudio Hertzberger, show what real Gizmo architecture is capable of.

With their urban and technical aura, these buildings reveal what goes on inside them during the day and at night. Their enigmatic form arises from the organization of the programme and their face towards the city. Programmatically, the new sports centre in Osdorp, by Van den Oever, Zaaijer & Partners, is also pleasing, but the execution leaves much to be desired. The function of a Gizmo is not to heal the city by becoming incorporated in the totality of existing urban structures; rather it functions like a pearl in the desert (not for nothing do Gizmos often look like landed UFOs or meteorites). The danger with Gizmo architecture is then that the good examples, just like the unique vases Hella Jongerius designed for Ikea, will get lost in a desert of mediocre structures. And of course you cannot save the city with superb incidents. On the other hand, in principle the Gizmo seeks contact with the user and is looking for relational connections, which the enigmatic interactive form and the programme bring about. Gizmo architecture is never finished because it is always open to new interpretations. The Gizmo project that appeals most to the imagination in the selection presented here is the superb housing scheme in Borneodriehoek by Zeinstra Van der Pol. While every dwelling creates unique relationships between the interior and the exterior, between the high and low spaces and between the open and closed sections - reminiscent of Maison de Verre by Chareau and Bijvoet in Paris (1927-1932) -, the dwellings surprisingly conform to the existing pattern of the city, without effacing themselves for a single moment.

'Inexpressive' architecture

Whereas Gizmo architecture by definition has a striking presence in the city, as an architectural and aesthetic manifestation, 'inexpressive' architecture is extremely unobtrusive and has a virtually neutral presence. This architecture is primarily about the complexity of the programme and the urban relationships that are possible inside and around the building. The building functions as an urban podium for public exchange. A superb example is the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ. Instead of investing the entire budget (not a huge amount by international standards) in the 'look and feel' of the building, here it was decided to create an urban roof, underneath which are various public programmes such as technically superb concert halls, urban balconies, offices, rehearsal rooms, an outdoor café, a restaurant, and a bar with a view over the IJ and the city. As a result, the strength of this building is that, with its sophisticated spatial orchestration of various 'sounds' in the city, it creates an urban symphony. Another urban platform, which is modestly designed and which fits in with the architecture of the Amsterdam School in the surrounding area, is the 'Balboa complex', situated in Balboaplein in the district De Baarsjes. This is a 'broad school', a new type of school based on a collaborative partnership between various parties who are concerned with children's early training. In addition to classrooms, the school contains a day care centre, a playgroup and all manner of cultural and sports facilities. All of this is housed in a block with dwellings, a collective inner courtyard garden and an underground parking garage. The complex programme has been subtly integrated in the urbanistic structure of this city district.

Landscape of missed opportunities

Looking at Amsterdam from a distance, we see that the city's international ambition is scarcely being realized, despite the enormous number of major projects currently in progress: see IJburg, the North/South Line, the South Axis, the reorganization of the northern IJ Waterfront, Centrum Noord, the renewal of the Westelijke Tuinsteden and the Bijlmermeer, the development of Oosterdokseiland, Westerdokseiland and Oostelijke Handelskade. In all these cases, there is considerable verbal overkill and the urban design schemes are provided with international references and voluminous city-image plans. In the realization of these

schemes, however, we seldom find the envisaged finesse. Time and again, in Amsterdam it seems to be impossible to build with daring, panache and grandeur. Why were there so many difficulties surrounding the extension to the Stedelijk Museum? Why is virtually no social rental housing being built these days? Why is Museumplein a succession of missed opportunities? Why was there no truly metropolitan approach to the locations of the Muziekgebouw and Oostelijke Handelskade? Is it because of our parochial perspective, or rather the huge flight of capital from our pension funds, which in America, where they are the biggest foreign investors, do build on a colossal scale. Or are politicians asleep and investors and property developers out to make a quick profit? One thing is certain: if the plan drawn up by OMA in 1992 for a compact city on the IJ – a combination of the Rockefeller Center in New York and La Défense in Paris – had been realized, Amsterdam would not now be stuck with a business district in the South Axis which is deserted at night and at weekends. Even a new station in the South Axis with a terminus for the TGV (in the hope of making something of it after all) will not generate urbanity or grandeur.

Anyone who visualizes a Manhattan on the IJ, with all the offices that now stand forlorn in Zuidoost and on the South Axis, and with the VandenEnde Theatre, realizes how important this could have been. This well-accessed, compact city with a mix of living and working would not only have had a superb view of the river, it would also have been centrally situated. Now, all manner of urban activities are scattered across the city and a new provincial dormitory town is being built on IJburg for those inhabitants who can afford it. With this segregation policy, rich and poor are being forced apart, and the new underclass – comprising mainly immigrants – is being banished to run-down districts which are situated further and further from the city centre. If we don't take care – and in effect it is already too late – Amsterdam will become a vast Ikea landscape with tourist advertisements and campaigns that safely direct us to the best buys in the city.

At any rate, the free market economy does not fit the bill, it now transpires. Over the past twenty years, the idea of the city has been sold off. In the time of Berlage and Van Eesteren, the metropolitan idea still prevailed and above all the public interest was invested in. In that period, architects were listened to and their talents were utilized. Today, the role of the architect and the urban planner is being marginalized and the profession is dependent on the logic of the market economy. In addition, within a relatively short space of time, spatial planning has become fragmented. While there is a noticeable shift in focus from the city to the region, the power the public works department once had is now spread over various city districts, resulting in considerable bureaucracy on a number of levels. This, too, is not conducive to the realization of an overall vision for the city. The architecture documented in this ARCAM POCKET can only compensate for the sell-off at the urban and regional level, at the level of the building. For the city, however, this yields little more than a landscape of exceptional projects, which are incidents scattered across the city. It is time to push back Ikea Populism and make a stand for a metropolitan and truly popular and public ambition. The talent is there, now all we need is the political and social ambition to put Amsterdam on the international map.

Roemer van Toorn

Footnotes

After the Second World War, people knew they would have good and inexpensive housing throughout their lives, because low rents in relation to incomes had been guaranteed. Most of one's income could be spent on other important essentials instead of – as is the case today – on a high mortgage.

Amsterdam has a shortfall of 300 million euros for the realization of all the new housing proposed by the council. By making drastic cuts in social rental housing, the council could keep the financing of IJburg affordable. Stadig in the newspaper *de Volkskrant*, 2 March 2006.

Ikea's mission statement, which is written on the walls in most of its stores.

VINEX! Een morfologische verkenning, Hans Lörzing, Wiebke Klemm, Miranda van Leeuwen, Suus Soekimin, Nai Publishers/RBP, 2006.

Something the architect cannot in fact be blamed for in all cases: sometimes, the purpose of a building is not known and the location is nothing more than a pile of deposited sand. All the architect can do then is design an attractive exterior.

A Critic Writes, Essays by Reyner Banham, 1996.

'It's one big administrative quagmire, in which everyone attends meetings and when all's said and done nothing much happens. Try and keep the holes plugged, postpone everything and don't take the plunge. Then there'll be elections and everything begins all over again.' Geert Dales, *de Volkskrant*, 4 March 2006 'Dales calls for new élan in major projects'.