

Lessons in Cityness

Wiel Arets Architects' school campus at Leidsche Rijn, Utrecht

Against the closed city

The new Dutch suburbs may be designed as safe, clean, efficient, tidy places but they lack all qualities attributable to a city. Different population groups, rich and poor, live isolated from each other. Economic activity and stimulating cultural endeavour are wanting, nor do they possess an urbanism and architecture able to cope with change. And there is nothing at all of a vibrant street life in the shopping centres of these gated communities. Sociologists term this condition a closed city. The segregation of functions, a homogeneous population, techniques of zoning and regulations see to it that everything that doesn't fit in is shut out. A thicket of rules dictates what should or shouldn't happen on the historical, economic, ecological and social fronts. Nothing may offend or provoke, everything must be arranged neatly in rows. Countermanding this closed city of neo-liberalism is the concept of the open city. In the open city, places are compact and varied, with well-filled streets, squares and parks like the ones we know. Their duties are as much public as private; it is under such conditions that we encounter the unexpected, and are likely to make discoveries; innovation thrives because the unfamiliar is welcome there. By incorporating discord and conflict, an open system can evolve. If a city functions as an open system, its form and organization are by nature porous; it stimulates ever new narratives in time and space. In this respect it is democratic, not in the legal sense but as a physical experience in space. Inhabitant participation is less about the right to vote than the degree of attachment felt among citizens, especially when they don't know each other. So making a democratic space is about creating a forum where strangers meet. But how can you create an open forum such as this in a building in the middle of a district operating as a closed city? Despite the complexity of the brief, Wiel Arets has chosen the open city concept as the frame of reference for his design for a school campus in Leidsche Rijn near Utrecht. Arets uses his architectural lessons to show how to establish an open forum in a school complex against the backdrop of the closed city.

City walls

Let's start with the walls of the school. An odd choice perhaps on the face of it, as a wall more often encloses city spaces than opens them up, but in the case of a school campus the wall is as much porous as resistant. From a distance, the school facades mainly impress through their scale and intense

blackness, introducing a grand dimension to the district. The facades give the school a stately, even ceremonial and imposing institutional identity. As you get closer, the resisting black wall in the district changes into an inviting membrane. Once silhouettes, the people behind the large windows between the black rectangles now take on human dimensions. As you approach the school, it forfeits its stately grandeur. Then it's not just the irregular pattern of the black planes that strikes you; the graduated embossed relief on the black concrete plays a refined game of reflections that are full of surprises. On approaching closer still, you soon discover that beyond the black walls and different coloured windows are the classrooms; these are reached from a central glass building for communal activities and containing the entrance to each school. Instead of a single monolithic building turning a cold shoulder to the district, the four black classroom fingers stretch out towards it. From two of the spaces between them, a large expanse of asphalt rolls out to the district like a black carpet. This asphalt 'avenue' welcomes the inhabitants, inviting them to enter the communal glass hub. Nor is it just the black walls that are simultaneously porous and resistant. The many glazed walls engage in their own refined game of inside and outside. Not only does each school have its own colour of window; through the alternation of coloured and clear glass you see the most banal things in a new way. The colours of the glass make you aware of the changing light of the sky. The portrait format of many of the windows and the added tints change views out of the district into arresting prospects worthy of the photographer Andreas Gursky. The moment you enter the school building from the asphalt avenue, the black and glazed walls trade in their stately and ceremonial air for a delicate membrane that gives free rein to the interplay between inside and outside.

Provocative abstractions

Architecture is not just about walls. Architects organize the programme spatially by means of typologies, access systems, materials, furnishings and colour. Outside, the black of the walls militates against the colourless world of the residential district; inside, the world of daily use can unfurl in all directions through the white, open, transparent quality of the interior. Inside, everything is interrelated, with unexpected links between spaces springing up at every turn. Entering the school building is like entering a city theatre. A narrow walkway above the entrance hall with its chic swinging doors skewers together the two classroom portions. A broad stair straight ahead of you (which can double as tiers of seating) brings you to the first floor. Beneath this theatre seating is a bar alongside which is a tall space furnished with white tables and chairs and

recalling a city plaza. If the large curtain, which can be used as a blackout blind, lends this space an air of domesticity, the white furniture of the cafeteria gives the entrance hall the ambience of a Mediterranean terrace. A large illuminated glass wall emblazoned with a photograph of a Dutch river landscape by the artist Marijke van Warmerdam not only separates the entrances, cafeterias and theatre stairs of the two schools, it elevates this space to a city-style *grand café*. Again, the theatre lights on the ceiling betray the fact that the entrance zone can change into a cinema or stage area cum swish restaurant. In short, this building looks its best when being used; then the many contradictions life has to offer are brought alive by its provocative architectural abstractions. The monochrome, abstract nature of the architecture, the black walls, white interior and lightly tinted windows, give that life every opportunity to show its true colours. It is not so much looking at the object - the form and the colour as such - that confounds the stereotyped gaze, as the many passages through and along the programmatic space. Over and again different worlds are drawn together, worlds that in other schools are dutifully kept separate. A democratic atmosphere prevails between teachers and students through the close proximity enjoyed by the spaces and the broad transparent corridors full of transparent doors and windows. The tinted glass doors at intervals along the corridor place the teacher or student in class at a distance; this framed gaze turns reality into a cinematographic experience, in that everything that is colourful becomes a yellowish-green monochrome hue. When the door opens, this enchanting gaze promptly vanishes and the daily routine returns.

With this school campus Wiel Arets, flying in the face of the closed city, has given the district of Leidsche Rijn back its cityness. No matter whether you're black, white, rich, poor, whether you like football or opera, everything and everyone comes together here. All kinds of commonplaces can nestle together here comfortably, even as they are provoked into looking further than the stereotyped, hierarchic life that pervades the closed city. This school campus is comfortable and alien in equal measure. And this is precisely where its power to inspire lies. In this school campus as in the open city, predictable parameters are erased by multi-scalar visual and physical exchanges and spaces created for multiple forms of collective and individual use.