

The somewhat overdramatic title ‘Modernisme, catastrofe en openbaarheid’ (Modernism, Catastrophe and the Public Realm) of René Boomkens’ article in *OASE 24* epitomises the brand of late twentieth-century social critique that analysed the relationships between urban settings, urban culture and politics. It was suffused with the critical ethos of the 1970s and turned its back on the urban politics of the 1980s and 1990s. These decades also gave rise to the much-talked-of postmodernism; a palette of positions that broke away from the supremacy of the CIAM doctrine. Robert Venturi’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1966) and Aldo Rossi’s *L’architettura della città* (1972), offering a viable alternative cultural construction to modernism, were groundbreaking in this respect.

*The public nature of the urban space* formed the central theme of critical urban analysis. Much of the writing drew on the sociological theories of Hanna Arendt, Richard Sennet, Jane Jacobs and Alexander Mitscherlich and revolved around attempts to fathom and explain the function and effects of the social processes of group formation, identification, urban integration and segregation. It saw urban space as first and foremost a product of social practice and mental maps, resulting in a broad, overlapping palette of urban domains, occupying a space somewhere between public and private. While enabling personal and group identification, it also provides the basis for potential conflict.

During the 1970s, the debate on the influence of the built environment on human behaviour nearly triggered an existential crisis in the design disciplines – which were being ‘eroded’ by the social sciences. This was the context that prompted the urban policies of the 1980s and 1990s with their growing awareness of the competitive economic climate. The urban realm came to be defined in terms of investment, management, control and city marketing.

Boomkens’ text epitomised the interventions championed by the critical intel-

ligentsia with their debate on the course of urban politics. The article is scholarly, but strongly politicised. Both modernism and the CIAM legacy are put in the dock for having caused the alleged ‘catastrophe’ of the public nature of the urban realm and the heavily monitored city, stemming from a deep-rooted fear of the chaos of an everyday, urban reality. Under the headline of ‘the new metropolitanism’, the phenomenon of global city marketing is condemned, levelling particularly fierce criticism at the redevelopment of Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam.

However, the urban policies of those days effectively observed the unmistakable logic *behind* the cultural expression of modernism: the inevitable globalisation that modernism had merely provided with a fresh and distinct identity. The text is thus typical of a period in which modernism was written off in an audacious attempt to use this theoretical position to also regard the underlying cause of progressive globalisation as a political choice. However, in so doing it failed to consider the inevitability of the *experience of modernization*, in which – to quote Marshall Berman – *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*.

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from *OASE 22* to 43

*Translated by Laura Vroomen*