

ON THE EVE OF SOME- THING BIG AND NEW

Originally in virtual symbiosis with the architecture programme at Delft University of Technology, *OASE*'s editorial staff began to distance itself from the school and make room for outsiders in the mid-1980s. This greater openness to the outside world was expressed in the contents of the journal, whose diversity began to accelerate to the point that the precise motivation for the periodical begins to blur. What exactly is *OASE* about in the latter half of the 1980s? Theoretical discussions about movements like postmodernism or mannerism alternate with monographic discussions (not always devoted to architects whose reputations have stood the test of time); there are studies in historical urban typology, usually with Amsterdam or Rotterdam cases as pretext; there is architectural philosophy and there are many more genres. Above all, in the issues spanning the period between 1985 to 1990, there is room for free-wheeling literary impressionism, for instance in regard to the peculiarities of the landscape garden throughout history or placing the reputation of an established legend such as Aldo van Eyck in a completely other light than usual. The free-thinking tenor of the content was also a free-thinking tenor in editorial style; leafing through the issues, one gets the feeling the editors demonstrated blind tolerance for all manner of explorations of the limits of the architectural discourse. Such tolerance is fitting to an architectural culture that was subconsciously, but no less fundamentally, redefining itself. This redefinition concerned the ideology of the profession, but also the pragmatic aspects of day-to-day practice; it related to philosophical foundations, but in equal measure to contextual conditions. This contribution focuses on the interpretation of what, for the most part, was unfolding beyond the columns of *OASE* and would gradually come to alter the character of the journal as well.

When Herman Hertzberger was commissioned to design the new Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs in The Hague in 1979, he was asked for 'an open building for an open organisation'.¹ By the time it was completed, 11 years later, little of this had come to pass. The new edifice was clearly a Hertzberger, to be sure. The programme called for extensive floor space, but the inevitable dominance of the volume this entailed was mitigated by the finely articulated grammar that has always typified Hertzberger's compositions. However, his intention to have the offices gradually merge, on all sides, into the public space of the surrounding city had lost out, in the construction climate of the 1980s, to concerns about easily monitored spatial organisation and security. No matter how passionately Hertzberger argued about the execution of his design, entrance to the building had to be restricted. As a result, the edifice displayed all the characteristics of what has come to be known as structuralism, even as it presented the aspect of an impregnable fortress. The longed-for interweaving of spaces and functions had become merely a feature of its interior.

¹ Hans van Dijk, 'The retreat of the public domain', in: Ruud Brouwers et al., *Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook 1990-1991* (Rotterdam, 1991), 87-90.

The sort of ambivalence that characterises the Social Affairs building can be identified in a project completed five years earlier in Amsterdam's inner city: the Faculty of Letters of the University of Amsterdam. Its design is the work of a kindred spirit of Hertzberger's, Theo Bosch, and its completion entailed an equally lengthy process. Bosch initially carried out the commission in collaboration with his then-partner, Aldo van Eyck. The two men strived to produce a building with a structure that would enable it to fit comfortably into its setting. In Van Eyck's case, his dedication to the city was such that he wanted to give it 'something meaningful' in return for the space the building volume would consume, in the form of a number of urban functions that would introduce nuance into the transition between building and public space.² This intention failed, just as Hertzberger was unable to extend the indentations in his edifice in The Hague to the level of the street. In both Amsterdam and The Hague, the end products were structures that referred, externally as well as internally, to the structuralist ideals of the Dutch contingent of Team 10, yet came up short in their interlacing of city and building.

Deeply disappointed by the implementation of the design for the Faculty of Letters, Van Eyck eventually ended his partnership with Bosch, who had apparently shown himself more accommodating than he in regard to the demands of the university and the city authorities to rigidly segregate, rather than interlace, the building's inside and outside. The indentations in the façade were confined to the upper storeys and left the building line undisturbed at street level. Critic Hans van Dijk, in his discussion of Theo Bosch's achievement in Amsterdam, indeed came to the conclusion that the Faculty of Letters displayed more than simply structuralist characteristics.³ Because of the autonomous architectural order Bosch applied, the building's conceptual premise was a city composed of separate fragments: therefore, Van Dijk claimed, the faculty was also contextual in nature. He even argued that the Faculty of Letters, in the respect shown for the building line, had a rationalist foundation. Van Eyck must have seethed with sorrow and rage upon reading such qualifications, for he shared at most one-and-a-half of the three references attributed.

The fact that the Social Affairs ministry was ambivalent in character and that the Faculty of Letters was a hodgepodge typifies the sea change that took place in architecture during the 1980s. This change signified the end of a tradition, an end described by Hans van Dijk in a different context and with appropriate solemnity as 'the demise of structuralism'⁴. By the time the Social Affairs edifice was completed in 1990, not only were the practical difficulties of structuralist design condemned, but its underlying ideology – which had seemed incontestable in Dutch architectural culture for so long – was also now under attack. In retrospect, a symposium held in Delft in the same year and entitled 'How modern is Dutch architecture?' stands out as the final episode in the dethroning of the Dutch Team 10 and

2 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck: Relativiteit en verbeelding* (Amsterdam, 1994), 576.

3 Hans van Dijk, 'Structuren en hun relativering: de Faculteit der Letteren van Theo Bosch', *Wonen TA/BK 1* (1985), 8-17.

4 Hans van Dijk, 'The demise of structuralism', in: Ruud Brouwers et al., *Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook 1988-1989* (Rotterdam, 1989), 6-10.

the corresponding group centred round the editors of *Forum* circa 1960, led by Van Eyck. The symposium was held to mark the end (remarkably enough not the *start*) of Rem Koolhaas's brief tenure as a professor at Delft University of Technology's architecture faculty. In his address, Koolhaas himself attacked the emancipatory pretensions of the Dutch version of modernism, including the interpretation given it by Van Eyck and his cohorts. He found it all suffocating and was not shy about saying so. 'Locking down, identifying, proclaiming grand intentions, being unable or unwilling to leave anything empty – these are all characteristics of Dutch modernism, be it Rietveld, Van Eyck or Van Velsen.'⁵ This modernism contained 'not one iota of futurism', nor 'one iota of constructivism' and certainly 'not one iota of materialism . . . as in America with all its dangerous things like capitalist exploitation'.

In the next address at the symposium, contributed by Ed Taverne, it was the supposed anti-urban character of *Forum* and the Dutch Team 10 that was particularly denounced.⁶ Van Eyck's Amsterdam Orphanage may have been a radiant and fresh building, but it was still a 'fairy tale in the city', not equipped to deal with the complex reality of that city. Because post-war Dutch modernists were unable to respond to the concrete morphology of the city and got mired in abstract configurations, the contribution of Van Eyck and his fellow travellers had resulted in nothing better than 'the provisional retirement of Dutch architecture from the international scene', Taverne argued.

Finally, this Delft symposium featured a third address, which followed on perfectly from the previous contribution and was of course given by Hans van Dijk, surely the most productive Dutch architecture critic of the 1980s. In his address Van Dijk reviewed the ideological remnants of an architecture that had declared its own modernist inspiration null and void. The term Van Dijk used was 'schoolmaster modernism', alluding to a craft passed on academically, especially in Delft, in which modernism had been reduced to a 'tradition of form . . . as a totality of knowledge, skills and norms that was identical to architecture as a profession, as a *métier*.'⁷ This *métier*, contrasted in particular by Carel Weeber – displaying a considerable talent for polemics – with the blessings of the modernism of the past, was the end point of a process of erosion that had been dramatically made clear, for the attentive observer, in the drawn-out design and construction process of both the new Social Affairs ministry in The Hague and the Faculty of Letters in Amsterdam.

This end point, reached between 1985 and 1990, was an architecture that could only be understood in terms of form, that distanced itself from the edifying, emancipatory intentions that used to cling to the avant-garde and that presented itself as a purely architectonic interpretation of the programme, without any pretensions beyond the craft. The profession had adopted a more passive, more pliant posi-

5 Rem Koolhaas, introduction in: *Hoe modern is de Nederlandse architectuur?* (Rotterdam, 1990), 11-20.

6 Ed Taverne, 'Towards an open aesthetic: Ambities in de Nederlandse architectuur 1948-1959', in: *ibid.*, 23-59.

7 Hans van Dijk, 'Het onderwijzersmodernisme', in: *ibid.*, 173-191.

tion than it had throughout the entire history of modernism that preceded it – in order to achieve, paradoxically enough, a long-forgotten autonomy and freedom of action.

In terms of ideology, this conclusion coincided with the coming into fashion of postmodern philosophy. This philosophy should be seen not so much as a complete overhaul of all norms and values but rather as a continuation of the modern project under crisis conditions.⁸ Frequently represented, then and now, by dissonances and negatives, postmodern analyses mainly seemed to describe the decline of a worldview that, throughout the first several decades after the Second World War, had been able to rely, with little resistance, on a general faith in the ability of planning to construct a society understood as an integral entity.

The rejection of the idea of constructing society towards the end of the twentieth century affected not only the social order, but also, in the material world, the design of landscapes and cities. The movements of people and capital gradually broke free of the formal structures of the city, most recently adapted on a large scale during post-war reconstruction. Increasingly, the spatial order bore the brunt of this uprooted behaviour. Yet the fundamental premises of a modernism launched in the mid-nineteenth century continued to be fully applicable even at this new juncture. At first glance, postmodernism may have seemed to entail a revival of the past, yet its relationship with tradition was in fact just as complicated and twisted as before: the organic connection with an unbroken tradition had been abandoned long before the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Similarly, the two great sociocultural trends of social individualisation and massification remained active in parallel. The deeper reality of modernity, that existence was based on the transitory, the ephemeral and the coincidental, retained the validity it had acquired in the late nineteenth century.⁹

On the other hand, the norms and values of the service economy that established itself in the West, as they spread far and wide, did bring about an acceleration of the process of globalisation. It helped that a ‘substantial cross-fertilisation’ in the cultural discourse had been taking place across the Atlantic Ocean since the 1960s, including in regard to the status quo of the city.¹⁰ The differences between Europe and America were increasingly blurred. The 1980s saw the launch of an intensively shared discourse, not least in relation to the spatial order. As though the American model were contagious, on the European side too the city began to drift from the ideal of a harmonious social organisation of society, right down to the level of spatial morphology. Two movements became particularly manifest in this respect during the 1980s. The first concerned the retrenchment of state authorities from public housing. Overseas, the Reagan administration slashing government spending in this social sector by 80 per cent over

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See Bernard Colenbrander, *De verstrooide stad* (Rotterdam, 1990), 34; René Boomkens, *Een drempelwereld: Moderne ervaringen en stedelijke openbaarheid* (1998), 35; Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Cambridge/Oxford, 1996), 182-201.

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See Michael Müller, ‘Over de “schone schijn” van de post-moderne architectuur’, *OASE* 13 (1986), 2-16.

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Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, op. cit. (note 8), 44.

seven years was in keeping with a detachment on the issue that is virtually anchored in the Constitution of the USA. But the fact that major European countries like France and Britain joined this trend, after almost a century of intensive involvement, was definitely something new.¹¹ Even the Netherlands followed suit. ‘In the last five years there has been a marked shift in the Netherlands from idealistically inspired town planning and public housing, sometimes with a tinge of state control, to a policy which adopts a subservient and flirtatious position with regard to investors and project developers,’ Ruud Brouwers wrote in 1989. ‘The “bodily and spiritual elevation of the population” as it used to be called, has had to make way for a pragmatism motivated by financial considerations alone.’¹² Henceforth, residents would have to make it on their own in the housing market, with as little support as possible from the powers that be. ‘At the moment, the cities are being presented as enticing opportunities for investors,’ Brouwers also noted. ‘But it is precisely the socially inspired urban renewal undertaken by the government in the years 1975-1985 which has made this possible.’

In the place of the state and the traditional social middle, another prime mover had indeed appeared on the urban stage: the project developer.¹³ This advent changed the public domain of the city from something that is essentially an indivisible whole into a collection of fragments, most of them marketable. Accordingly, the role of the urban planner changed: in the final decades of the twentieth century, this dwindled to supplying a form of ‘applied architecture’, sneered London planning professor Peter Hall.¹⁴

In the 1980s, the environment of the city was exposed more openly than in the past to the invisible, organising hand of the market, even in Europe. This did not mean that the intervening influence of the state ceased to operate; it was simply handled in a different way. In France, architecture became one of the instruments used to lend the culture of the state a personalist face. François Mitterrand marked the years of his presidency with an impressive series of *Grands Projets*, having made it clear immediately upon taking office that he intended to expand the Louvre.¹⁵ Paris was given a number of striking new focal points. In other countries, a similar surge of interest could be detected and the organisations of such events as a World’s Fair or the Olympics (in Spain) were used to launch a large-scale infrastructure-building campaign, led by the government.

In this tableau of continued state ambitions, the Netherlands also featured a clearly identifiable profile, because the culture of design was given free rein on several fronts. Even the modernist idea of social engineering remained partially intact. Abroad, the construction of the new town of Almere was considered an amazing project.¹⁶ This was not simply because a city was conjured out of nothing in a few decades of accelerated building fever, but also because in Almere, spatial

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Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City* (London, 1992), 181.

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Ruud Brouwers, ‘Ideals and one-off projects’, in: Brouwers et al., *Yearbook 1988-1989*, op. cit. (note 4), 25-28.

13

Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City*, op. cit. (note 10), 44.

14

Peter Hall, ‘The strange case of the new city’, *Blueprint* 5 (1992), 35-36.

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Erica Winterbourne, ‘Architecture and the politics of culture in Mitterrand’s France’, *Architectural Design* 114 (1995), 24-29.

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Diane Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism* (London, 1996), 26.

design was put to intensive use in mediating the segregation of classes and incomes prevalent elsewhere. The state, even in the Netherlands, may have pulled out of the positions it had once occupied in public housing and urban planning, but in the exceptional circumstances of the construction of a new town in the polder, an equally exceptional administrative dynamism was evidently *de rigueur*.

In addition to being the country in which, late into the postmodern era, a new town could be created from the top down, the Netherlands was also the land in which ‘architecture policy’ was invented: the definition of a full-fledged policy domain for the state, focused on the creative exercise of architecture, officially positioned alongside a building and monument preservation policy 100 years its senior. The first government report on architecture, ‘Space for Architecture’, was issued in 1991 and described the interest in architectural issues in the official practice of various governments in recent times. Ironically, this interest was at odds with the tendency of the state, in view of supposed cost efficiencies, to distance itself from its traditional responsibilities as a commissioning client. Public buildings, for instance, should now preferably be rented from the private market rather than built on the government’s initiative: this would even be more profitable in the long run, the office holders involved incorrectly assumed. The subjugation of the state’s commissioning capacity to the norms of the market especially surprised the Government Architect in office during the latter half of the 1980s, Frans van Gool. Van Gool observed that his government agency was virtually bankrupt and there was little credit to be gained anymore in the commercialised construction of public buildings, going on to note that his minister nonetheless ‘was full of edifying stories about architecture’.¹⁷

Under such circumstances, the government report on architecture was the document that camouflaged the decline in self-evident administrative power by identifying and positioning the autonomy of architecture as a separate area of interest. As such, ‘Space for Architecture’ is a fitting official counterpart to ‘schoolmaster modernism’ in the architectural discourse. In both instances, these were phenomena that were the result of a process of inflation and erosion that, miraculously, nevertheless produces a residue that can be deemed fortunate: autonomous architecture as a laudable cultural craft.

The first Dutch government report on architecture was a more specifically noteworthy achievement because it furnished the policy domain of architecture with an impressive array of stimulus measures that were to be found in no other country. Its implementation was entrusted to several institutions, the most significant of which were established immediately before and immediately after 1990. The Berlage Institute was a new institution intended to give the teaching of architecture a post-doctoral international impulse; the commercial survival of this initiative was made possible by the state. The Netherlands

17

Bernard Colenbrander,
Frans van Gool: Leven en werk
(Rotterdam, 2005), 234.

Architecture Institute became a new museum centre with monumental aspirations and a landmark presence in the city, supported by a government subsidy budget unthinkable anywhere else in the world. The Netherlands Architecture Fund complemented the existing subsidy infrastructure with a funding source able to support the culture of design with a considerable budget, again without equal abroad.

When all these institutions were established in Rotterdam around 1990, this accentuated that city’s new status as a major nucleus in the architectural discourse. This status had been prepared with clear political control by the work of the architecture section of the Rotterdam Art Foundation and also, although unintentionally, by Rem Koolhaas locating his agency in Rotterdam – if only because the latter turned the city, in the course of the 1980s, into a pilgrimage site for architecture connoisseurs with a preference for the cutting edge.

The way the government marketed its architecture policy in the Netherlands circa 1990 and Rotterdam began to promote itself as an architecture city was hardly in synch with the reality on the construction site. The rhetorically evangelical architecture policy concealed an anemic public commissioning role in an era of ideologically drained modernism. This period (starting in 1988) saw the start of the series of *Architecture in the Netherlands* Yearbooks, and what was published in these accurately reflects this ambivalent reality. Among the buildings featured, *tour de forces* by gifted architects in all shapes and sizes predominated. From the very beginning, the new generation is pervasively represented, and its early work more often than not bore the marks of schoolmaster modernism. However, the cheerfulness of these buildings is immediately put in perspective in the discussions published alongside about the state of public housing, urban planning and public space: this is architecture of high formal quality but with a weak cultural foundation – that is to say, one that is shifting towards a new paradigm – which would only take on a more enduring form in the course of the 1990s. The mutation of the programme, context and commissioning of the building in the 1990s would launch an architectural movement that displays little remaining affinity with the phantom pains of structuralism and the flare-ups of modernist nostalgia of the preceding decade. After 1990, architecture and architects as a profession reinvented themselves. The extensive reliance on market mechanisms in developing the Vinex housing programme during this decade was a major incentive to this. By increasingly adapting the design of the most prominent building locations, even beyond Vinex housing estates, more explicitly to the criteria of the public-private partnership, architecture was subjected, to the fullest extent, to the interaction of often highly explosive social forces.

In their landmark history of modern architecture published in 1976, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co describe the

architecture of the time as an architecture of alienation. 'Often, in fact, architecture speaks very much more fluently precisely of that in which it has no part,' they write, 'The production of the 1960s and 1970s is much more a demonstration by negatives than by positives.'¹⁸ In this latter decade, the alienation to which they allude still bore the traits of the negative, because designers were unable to make a meaningful contribution to the societal sea change that was taking place, from the late-modern welfare state to the globalised network society. In relative isolation, they did their thing – which did not mean that a movement like schoolmaster modernism was not in fact able to draw strength from the denial of the ideological aspirations that had been handed down. The autonomous craft, cured of its illusions about ideals of social engineering now proven unfeasible, recovering from its addiction to an impossibly symbiotic longing to pay back the weather-beaten old city with new architecture, made multiple leaps of pure vitality in the 1980s. Peter Eisenman, for instance, found in the harsh dismissal of three putative 'fictions' in classical thinking about architecture the appealing starting point for a new, unfettered beginning.¹⁹ The three fictions were representation (the idea that architecture is the expression of something else, of reality for instance), reason (that architecture is somehow 'true') and history (that architecture expresses the spirit of the age). Against this Eisenman proposed an architecture that expresses itself not in fictions, but that is *itself* fiction: 'it is merely different from or other than. A "not classical" architecture is no longer a certification of experience or a simulation of history, reason, or reality in the present. Instead, it may more appropriately be described as an *other* manifestation, an architecture as is, now as a fiction. It is a representation of itself, of its own values and internal experience.' Self-assured arguments such as this cannot have failed to be instrumental in freeing architectural criticism from an ideological pattern that had become unworkable. Aldo van Eyck had to contend for the first – and not for the last – time with free interpretations of his work. A discussion of Aldo van Eyck's houses by Joost Meuwissen published in *OASE*, 'Aldo in Wonderland', was replete with lavishly poetic interpretations that offered a welcome change from the established tendency of architectural criticism to elucidate 'twin phenomena' and the like more as a profoundly human gesture than as a formal architectonic quality.²⁰ 'Wonderland is defined here as the place where things become bigger or smaller gradually, and not in fits and starts as in our world.' Just as conventions of architectural criticism were redefined in the latter half of the 1980s, so was it with the call made upon history. Oddly enough, the stage in this regard remained, for the moment, filled with the same main characters. Virtually all of the figures who had personified the historic avant-garde of the period between the world wars were given a new interpretation, better informed by historical sources and more nuanced: this was the case for Mies; it was the case for Le Corbusier; it was the case for Loos; it was the

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Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York, 1979 [1976]), 391.

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Peter Eisenman, 'The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End', in: Kate Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (New York, 1996), 219-220.

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Joost Meuwissen, 'Aldo in Wonderland: opmerkingen bij de woonhuizen van Aldo van Eyck', *OASE* 26/27 (1990), 64-77.

case for Gropius; it was the case for Oud. Diverse international studies lent the historical tableau of leading characters a psychological texture that had grown noticeably more layered in comparison to the first decades after the Second World War.

Spatial research did not concentrate merely on individuals. The 1980s also witnessed a wealth of geographic urban explorations. A random selection out of several volumes of *Archis*, for example, offers a range of generally academically grounded studies on cities like Paris, Rome and Venice. Usually these combined a morphological reading with an examination of aspects of culture, socioeconomics and political governance.

In terms of methodology, urban research in particular underwent a great leap forward. For the Dutch-speaking world, the 1987 publication of Frits Palmboom's compact study, *Rotterdam, verstedelijkt landschap* (Rotterdam, urbanised landscape), was a landmark event. This study was a painstaking attempt to 'drill through time' and provide insight into the city's evolutionary strata. The study of this evolutionary process makes it possible to diagnose the nature of interventions in the city's autonomous morphology, providing an overture for a sequel by means of spatial design.²¹ In this regard, even Palmboom, fascinated as he was by precise morphology, did not lose sight of the issue of fiction raised by Eisenman. For the evolution of the city cannot be summed up in simple objective terms. Palmboom got himself out of this bind by evoking the way Van Eyck, of all people, had placed the analysis of the city in the context of the interpretation of dreams. 'Just like dreams, Van Eyck argues, cities are "kaleidoscopic, chaotic and constantly subject to metamorphosis"'. Just as in dreams, experiences from all time periods leave their traces, apparently thrown together at random, always changing, popping up unexpectedly and influencing one another. Just as in dreams, time and space lose their defined edges and events unfold largely outside any conscious control.²²

From these words it is clear Palmboom was ready for what awaited architecture in the 1990s. It would become the decade of Rem Koolhaas, whose global launch in the 1980s had been carefully prepared and whose status in Dutch culture had already been discussed in detail when he was awarded the Maaskant Prize in 1986. 'So I'm a sort of poltergeist,' he announced in his hilarious acceptance speech, going on to plead, in this capacity, for 'a reconstruction programme . . . for the mythology of the architect'.²³ 'It is also in your interest that the time comes back when the architect, like a Rumpelstiltskin, perhaps stamping his feet, can say, "I want it, because I want it!" And in compensation he can astound you with the never-before-seen, the impossible, with new horizons.' Admittedly these horizons, for the most part, lay far from the European continent, but armed with their own mythologies and those of others, an elite of gifted designers did indeed manage to astound the world.

Translated by Pierre Bouvier

21
Frits Palmboom, *Rotterdam, verstedelijkt landschap* (Rotterdam, 1987), 11.

22
Ibid.

23
Rem Koolhaas, 'De wereld is rijp voor de architect als visio-nair', *Archis* 8 (1986), 45-47.