‘It’s been a battle, even with myself’

Thanks to his talent and his vision that often clashed head-on with the spirit of the times, Jo Coenen has really made his mark on architecture. As an impassioned professor in the faculty of Architecture, he was able to achieve great things.

AUTHOR JooST P AnhUIJSEn
PHOTOS S Am REnTmEESTER
Prof. Dr. C. de Rooij

work as a professor
Parkstad, which aims
sustainable projects.
region by developing
studied architecture
and transformation.
In 2001, he became
(1999), Amsterdam
maastricht opened
an innovative Chief
professor of public
cV

Do you regret becoming an architect? That will come as a
surprise to many.

difficulties?
“Let me give you a practical example. If you
discover that your design for an apartment block
is about to be built in such a way that no daylight
whatsoever reaches into the entrance hall, you
will move heaven and earth to make sure a win-
dow is installed after all. But if, at a construction
meeting, you discuss humane architecture and
the importance of daylight in a building, some
people will dismiss it as ideological bunkum.
You may be told: You are not going to
be given mental support in that quest. At certain
moments in the design process, you need a mentor who
understands the process and says: You are not going to
fall. I will help you. That is the essence of
teaching. I learned it from my father.”

Today, would you still have opted for architecture?

As a professor, you enjoyed teaching individual students
the most. Why?

“Designing is not only about
independent minds, it is also
a question of attitude”

A socially committed environment then.

One evening in our house, important seeds were
sown for the Radical Political Party (PRP), an
offshoot from the Catholic People’s Party (KVP)
that would later become GroenLinks (the Dutch
Green party). In a living room in a small miner’s
house. I don’t want to become sentimental about
it, but I was raised in a tiny house in a Limburg
mining community. The mine railway was next
to our front door, and you could hear a cargo of coal
from the state mine trundling past every ten mi-
nutes. The noise was truly thunderous.

Making sketches is an essential part of the design process
for you. Was your father good at drawing?

“He was a captivating storyteller, who drew
the most beautiful illustrations on the blackboard
in different coloured chalk. Eventually I star-
ted to draw the same, drawing on the board. By
the way, when I started teaching, my father also
spent years giving me extra lessons in didactics.
He taught me to keep a close eye on who you are
teaching and whether they are capable of coping
with the level of the material. He also taught me
to respect people who may not be able to
conjugate every verb accurately, but who are born
craftsmen, with practical intelligence. A person
is a vessel, full of unsuspected talent and potential
and it is your job to awaken those talents. That
is how he put it.”

“You also mentioned your father in your speech: a ‘political-
and socially committed teacher of didactics.’

Where did he teach?

“He taught in an earlier version of teacher-
training college. Teaching people who would
later become teachers themselves. So I learned
the basics in didactics at home. My father himself
studied in Tilburg at Catholic teacher-training
college, taught by professors who used bulky
books. He learnt philosophy, religious education,
pedagogy – all with strong emphasis on social
commitment. I am currently studying his gra-
duation thesis. It explores miners’ families in Limburg,
and the dangers of poverty, including
spiritual poverty. He wanted to explore the
different methods for effectively combating
poverty.”

In your valedictory address, you explained how you have
decided in the end not to work as an architect in countries
like China and India, because you have insufficient under-
standing of the cultures, being European. But would Asian
megacities not actually benefit from the urban design
vision of an outsider?

“I did not rule out Asia completely. They could
certainly use our knowledge and experience, and
an agency in Asia would be an interesting venture
for us. But if we ever go there, it will need to be
in close alliance with local partners: archi-
tects, urban designers, architecture faculty pro-
fessors. They have a much better understanding
of the context.”