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Thesis project
A Flat Tale
Part I

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A Good Life ABC
Architecture
Brick
Canal
Dike
Energy
Farm
Glasshouse
Harbour
Kunst
Landscape
Nijntje
Orange
Polder
Queen
Rain
Stamps
Tulip
Umbrella
Vinex
XPS Foam
Zwarte Piet
A Flat Tale
In the Kingdom of Netherlands there are two types of LAND
One that was water and one that is sand.
The cities of old were built in a RING
And placing agriculture inside was a logical thing.
Then a long time ago, in 1916,
Water comes on and floods the ravine.
“We need more land!” they shouted in glee
“Why don’t we just RECLAIM the sea?”
New POLDERS came with land galore,
And suddenly they have built even more.
The last one, Almere, has to be seen. It is said to be very CONCEPTUALLY clean. The quarters in it were built over time and the visible difference in them was prime.
The HOUSING was first
Built in a ring
To make polder life
A wonderful thing.
Later they changed it
Back to a grid,
And tried to correct
The mistake that they did.
The houses won’t have their IDENTITIES lost,
Even with the low final building cost.
So what if not all were made out of brick,
You just needed to pick a facade that would stick!
They saved the centre to be built last
So it wouldn’t get eaten by the tooth of the past.
OMA came and passed the test,
Now they just needed to invite the rest.
They pitched their IDEAS, or so it would seem,
And presented their perfect architectural dream.
No buildings were necessary to stand out from the rest,
You just needed to pass a conceptual test.
When visitors came they could sigh in relief
Because they were finally able to suspend disbelief.
The WELFARE STATE has shortly strengthened its reign
Which made the architects go insane.
The Ministry supported the architectural trade. Everybody could apply, and they weren’t afraid. The INSTITUTE would publish and promote them all, but it all culminated in one big brawl.
Now to survive and compete on the scene
They have to EXPORT the grand Dutch dream.
The buildings will surely bring them fame
Even though behind the facades they're all the same.
“In the Kingdom of Netherlands, everything you touch”
They say, “Must by rule be inherently DUTCH!”
They constructed a GOOD LIFE in land under sea
With building regulations that were uncommonly free.
And in the END the biggest trick
Is that not all is made out of brick.
“These carefully knotted stories make no distinction between the narrative material of architecture and that of the people – both are presented as ‘actors’ – so that the design at the same time provides a new interpretation of context and past, and appears to be the logical ‘happy ending’.”

Pitch
Pitch ▲
“...Holland, a country that has always managed to eat its ideological cake and have it too.”

Contents

11     A Flat Tale: The Dutch Story
18     Use of Utility: The Windmill
22     Facade, Ornament and Shell
30     Grid, Structure and Module
37     Dutch Style: The Diagram Building
41     The Mountain: A View from Above

52     Bibliographic References
A Flat Tale: The Dutch Story

This project is an exploration of the Dutch visual culture\(^1\), through architecture as a primary lens of discovery. Dutch visual culture is accessible and relatable to all. Everything here is designed, but in a way that is simple, clear, understandable, and often even very feasible. If good design is something that is also affordable, then it is something that will be used by everyone.

The visual culture in the Netherlands is a mass culture. It is accessible to everyone due to its seeming simplicity and realistic descriptions. Even as far back as the 17th century, what differentiated Dutch art from that of the rest of the world is the fact that it was portrayed as realistic. It was a constructed\(^2\) view of the world. Vermeer’s, Van Eyck’s and other’s paintings depicted everything as it was. Dutch art of this period was done for the people, and not for specific patrons. It was made and sold on markets. Simple and accessible. Realism and the market.

Considered to be a land of architectural opportunities, the Netherlands promotes contemporary architecture as an export\(^3\) product. The concepts\(^4\) and architectural stories are the foundation for the development of the architectural profession. The possibility to realize theoretical and conceptual architectural investigations has created a recognizable image for the Netherlands. To the rest of the world, a lot of the projects that are built here are considered almost impossible, but not out of technical or financial impossibilities. The problem is a creative one. There is a creative freedom present here that is impossible in some other countries. Creative freedom

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1. Visual Culture: It is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. It does not depend on pictures but on the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence (Nicholas Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture”)

2. Construct: An idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence (Oxford Dictionary)

3. Export: A product or service sold abroad (Oxford Dictionary)

4. Concept: An abstract idea; An idea or invention to help sell or publicize a commodity (Oxford Dictionary)
in architecture is accepted and valued by the government and acknowledged by its citizens. Factors outside of architecture do not restrain it in a way that affects the image of the finished project. This freedom perhaps exists due to a lack of liability for architects or it has to do with the country’s long lasting history of a “can-do” attitude. A favourable financial situation also allows for things that are maybe not possible in other places. If the project is not accepted in its first iteration, then it is siphoned through the polder model until everyone has agreed upon the best way of proceeding, which in the end leaves everybody at least a bit satisfied. Today’s model is leaning more towards a realist utopia. Anything you can imagine is possible, but only if it works. In order for it to work, you have to convince a lot of people that it is possible. It has to be relatable. To do that, it has to have a good story which wins over favours and settles fears and anxieties about possible deficiencies of the project.

“Pitch” is a collection of architectural text. It is an architectural journal modelled on the mixture of a manifesto and a lexicon. The format of the architectural journal is usually, with no exception, reserved for architects. When writing about architecture, or related subjects, architects tend to use a jargon full of overly complicated semantic constructs that allude to a complex, deep and overly intellectual creative process. Architecture is often mystified by architects themselves. By complicating the story, architects tend to exalt architecture into the realm of philosophy and high arts, while in reality, things are often not really that complicated. But is this really necessary?

All globally successful and famous Dutch architectural projects have one thing in common. They are all based on a successful and relatable narrative. The simple yet creative and intelligent story is what differentiates the Dutch projects from the majority of others. The process of creating architecture, the forming of meanings through the built form is something that is often mystified by architects. But, the Dutch do this differently. The depiction and description of architecture is much more realistic. There is rarely any semantic fog in the narrative of the Dutch architectural project. The

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5. Polder model: it means nobody can leave the negotiating table until consensus has been reached. All participants might not be completely happy, but they can work with and under the result (Aaron Betsky, Adam Eeuwens. *False Flat: Why Dutch Design is so Good.* Phaidon Press Limited. New York: 2004.)

6. Narrative: The practice or art of telling stories; A representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values (Oxford Dictionary)
architects use terms, images, words and experiences that are relatable to everyone. The story is aimed for the end user and the architectural theoretician or critic. “Pitch” examines architectural stories. Case studies from Dutch architectural history are used to set themes for the architectural stories. All chosen projects have a strong concept that leads the narrative and remains present through to the building’s completion. Architecture in the Netherlands is rarely generic. Giving buildings “character” and “personality” is in the brief. It is what pushes innovation⁷. It is also something that, if blindly followed, creates problems for building reuse. The architectural profession has slowly started to recover after the recent economic crises. But now, instead of a collective aim to produce more and more new architectural objects, the focus is turning on adapting and reusing the multitude of empty spaces that exist throughout the country. Coincidentally, it can be said that the building of these, now largely empty buildings is what caused the economic problems in the first place. The architects now return to the “scene of the crime” and begin to rethink their approaches. Innovation is now geared towards adaptation and reuse. So what are then the spatial, structural and visual qualities architecture needs to have in order to facilitate this necessity for change?

The chosen case studies are not generic buildings. They all have a recognizable visual character, an identity⁸ which remains obvious throughout their existence. The stories of the buildings - their concepts - have withstood the tests of time. All the projects have cultural value, and some of them are also iconic. Through the initial analysis of known examples, properties are distilled that make these buildings successful, recognizable and iconic. For most of the examples, these properties are what their concepts are based on. The concept is the thing that prevails. These properties form a manifesto, a user’s manual, a “how-to” of Dutch architecture. It groups diagrams⁹, original project pitches, topic descriptions and architectural prescriptions to form retroactive architectural recipes.

The journal ends with a “fictional conclusion, an interpretation of the same material, but through the words of an architectural project”¹⁰ If we look at narratives that

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⁷ Innovation: The action or process of innovating; A new method, idea, product, etc (Oxford Dictionary)

⁸ Identity: The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is; National Identity: A sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language (Oxford Dictionary)

⁹ Diagram: A simplified drawing showing the appearance, structure, or workings of something; a schematic representation (Oxford Dictionary)

follow some of the more well-known Dutch architecture projects, we can see that they are based more on the description of the experience of the user than on the specific philosophical, economic, sociological or other conceptual inspiration and transcoding. The story is often clear, direct, precise, relatable and very visual. In order to create mind images of the projects, they use pictorial associations, they relate the experiences predicted for the building to experiences that can and do exist in other places. They use descriptive language that easily paints the pictures of the projects to be. The pictures may differ in the minds of the readers, but they serve the end purpose, which is to familiarize the end user and with that, popularize the project in order to make it more successful and to aid its integration into the existing urban and social fabric.

The story has become the essential part of the project. In some instances, the narratives have become so good, that they even outdo the quality of the design of the actual project. The idea and story of a certain project sometimes becomes more successful than the project itself. This raises my main question: If the story of the project becomes so good that it makes even a not so successful project successful, can it then shed itself of this unwanted and unresolved appendix and exist as a story? Can the story of the architectural project exist without the project itself? And what then constitutes an architectural project, besides the story itself. Why would one want to create a story of an architectural project without actually manifesting the project itself (weather in built or paper form)? The purpose is the problematizing of the architectural narrative. Surely, the “project-less” narrative will always remain just a story; it will have no fixed or “concrete” architectural manifestation. The imagined visualisation of the project itself will differ depending on each individual that constructs its image in their own head. But this is exactly the topic that should be discussed in this story-based environment.

The project consists of three parts, three potential ways of representing architecture. It examines differences and similarities in narrative elements on the basis of their approach to architecture. The format of the tale
A FLAT TALE: THE DUTCH STORY

was used as a heuristic device which has allowed me to extrapolate different approaches to narrative analysis used by folk tale researches such as Propp and Todorov. Using these research and analysis approaches has allowed me to transpose the structural elements of tales onto different approaches to architectural narrative, which has, furthermore, allowed me to distil three main categories that the project is dealing with: the diagram and iconic object, the architectural design project and its narrative and the architectural essay. All three categories can be further analysed using the same approach, either as separate elements or as elements that form the totality of an architectural project.

To what extent does an architectural story define the architectural project and what are elements that can be fixed or loosened through using just a story as a “form giving” tool? If one excludes all the typical visual and graphic elements that define an architectural project, what is then left? What are the generic visual elements one can use to define, describe and create a “depiction/description” of an architectural project without actually drawing out the walls, the spaces, the toilets and the façade grid? Can an architectural project still remain accessible, relatable and understandable to the end user or to the architectural community without using some of its basic tools of representation? Can it become iconic with by being just a story? Whether one can successfully present and convey an architectural project, which is inherently visual, only through text is a relevant question.

The point is not to generate the formula for the perfect architectural project, the set items to win all competitions and tenders but rather to rethink what are the actual representational elements and tools the architect today needs in order to present his project. There is a variety of representational techniques that architects use that often just complicate things. But which of these elements are essential and which can we shed? Starting with just a story, a narrative of the project, without the actual project, I will problematize the topic of architectural representation. The project could in the end be viewed as architecture without architecture, but it isn’t really. Because the point of it is that the story is convincing and

11. Representation: The depiction of someone or something in a work of art. A picture, model or other depiction of someone or something (Oxford Dictionary)
precise enough to form a singular image of the project in the minds of the readers.

In order to test this approach one could choose a super-generic architectural type, as a canal house. But if we take into consideration the context of the Netherlands, a generic project like that is not very thrilling. By viewing the country as a realist utopia\textsuperscript{12}, different project possibilities present themselves. The Netherlands is a country which was, for a large part, physically built by its people by reclaiming the sea. The Good Life\textsuperscript{13} was constructed here and it consists of urban, rural, “natural”, industrial and other landscapes. But since most of it is reclaimed land, most of it is flat. Or at least not very high above the sea level. The only way one can observe the order and organization of the perfect, straight lines of canals, streets and train tracks that cut the orthogonal agricultural fields is from an airplane. The highest geographic point of the country equals the height of an average skyscraper. The only thing missing in the Dutch scenery is a strong verticality. A mountain. And in the Netherlands, this is not such a crazy, impossible idea.

\textsuperscript{12}Utopia: An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect (Oxford Dictionary)

\textsuperscript{13}The Good Life: A life of luxury, pleasure, or material comfort; A way of living characterized by simplicity, self-sufficiency, and the rejection of consumerism (Oxford Dictionary)
Use of Utility: The Windmill

Utility: The quality or state of being useful. Something useful or designed for use. ¹

Throughout centuries, the use of the windmill changes, while its morphology remains recognizable. It is used for multiple purposes including grinding different types of grain, pumping water to reclaim land or for the production of electric energy. The structure is also used as a storage area for dry goods, and in some cases as housing. Today, the windmill becomes a spatial icon which often houses programs not related to its initial use. Its spatial context also changes. In previous centuries the windmill was often placed on the edge of the city, either as a part of the fortification wall or as a component of the water protection system. Due to city expansion, today the windmill is often found within the dense structure of the city. With its, by no means generic, recognizable form, and its possibility to transform its purpose and adopt different programs, the windmill is an example of architecture that is not site specific, yet performs as a landmark. It can be multiplied throughout the urban and rural landscape in its various iterations.

“If the church brings a little bit of heaven into the middle of the city, the windmill reminds us of all the hard work we needed to create the ground beneath our feet. Windmills were not invented to pump water, but they proved very effective at this task. The poldering of the area lost to the St. Elizabeth’s Day Flood of 1421, and of the areas north of Amsterdam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

produced the lines of rotating crosses that have become so beloved. Ubiquitous and slightly enigmatic in their engineering, the windmills appear as abstract markers on the land, their simple shape and repetition creating an order all their own.”

The example of the windmill shows that even an architectural object that was created for purely utilitarian purposes can become an iconic one. The windmill has become one of the main symbols of Dutch identity. Its ability to transform and accommodate different uses along with its primary one has kept it alive through centuries. Today, the leftover windmills are regarded as cultural heritage. Their purpose of pumping water has largely been replaced by water pumping stations – mostly uninteresting, almost invisible structures. The windmills are, however, gaining new life by reprogramming them into bars, museums and other types of tourist attractions.

Fig. 2. The Hollow Post Mill
USE OF UTILITY: THE WINDMILL

Fig. 3. The Drainage Mill
Facade, Ornament and Shell

Facade: External face or elevation of a building, especially the principal front. A front of a building.¹
Ornament: A small, fancy object that is put on something else to make it more attractive. A way to make something more attractive and less plain.²
Shell: A framework or exterior structure. A building with an unfinished interior.³

These three words refer to the outside of a building. Whether they are only on the surface, like the ornament, or they are part of the building’s structure, its envelope, like the facade or the shell, they are usually a part of the building that is presented to the outside world. These things create a building’s identity.

In many known examples, when a program is changed in a building, the facade is often the first thing to change along with it. With this change, the identity of the building

also changes. If we view the facade as one element of the building which creates its identity and makes it recognizable, then we, as architects should somehow find a way to preserve this identity, even after the repurposing of the building’s program.

By looking at the example of Piet Blom’s Kubuswoningen in Rotterdam, which was built in 1977, we notice that the facade is the one thing in the building that cannot change. The facade is the building and the building is the facade. In its peculiarity, the facade has ensured its own preservation. If the facade would change, the entire concept of the building would collapse, its iconic and cultural value would perhaps be lost. The interior however, along with the use of the building, can be changed without having an effect to the image of the building as a whole.

The built version of the Kubuswoningen differs from Blom’s project. Not all the envisioned units were built in reality. Considering that fact, an addition of units to the existing structure would probably not have a negative effect on the building as a whole or its image.
“The stilt complex is one of the few he managed to realize. It is a series of cubes placed on their vertices and mounted on columns, clustered into a “forest” that rises out of a concrete bridge arching over the road I bike down. Here the traditional gabled roof has been doubled, flipped, and turned into a perfect geometric emblem multiplying into a solid mass of construction. Below the eccentric cubic dwelling units, the bridge supports a labyrinth of what are supposed to be communal spaces. It was a noble experiment, and only in The Netherlands would the city government (not to mention the inhabitants) support such a project. The structure works as an icon...”

To create a building in which one wants to preserve the facade and the image of the building, one has to create / envision a facade that simply cannot be changed. The facade needs to be an integral part of the building, rather than its decorative skin. It is also beneficial if the structure of the facade is connected and intertwined with the structure of the building itself. But to create this type of facade, the architect should create interior spaces that are easily transformed and are not strictly functionally connected to the facade. The transformation of the interiors should not affect the functionality or the image of the facade.

This specific building example can also be viewed as an example where the facade is the shell. It is what remains of the building, what creates and preserves its identity, while allowing for changes to occur within it. But there is also a more common example of an iconic Dutch facade. It is the Dutch canal house. The canal house is the most persistent element of the Dutch built environment. It appears in every historic town and is copied in every new housing development. The use of the canal house changes throughout history according to the scaling and social status of families living in them. Initial versions of canal houses were used either as warehouses or as housing. Today they are used for almost anything. From housing of multiple and single families to offices, shops, restaurants, cafes and museums, the appropriations of these narrow and deep buildings are numerous. Given their historical value, the outer shell of the building is in many cases protected as a cultural

Fig. 5. Piet Blom. Kubuswoningen. Rotterdam, 1977. Plans of units.
Fig. 6: Dutch Canal House
monument which enables adaptation only in the interiors. The facade of the canal house wasn’t always protected. It was removed and replaced when needed. This was a way of building in the Netherlands which still exists today.

“The housing’s hidden structure is as much a technological marvel as the invisible pumps that keep the area dry. After the Second World War, the Dutch had to build quickly and cheaply to repair the devastation wrought by German and Allied bombing. They adopted and adapted French and English building systems matching concrete frames with standardized facades. The frames went up on site, while facades, complete with windows, doors, and lintels, were delivered to the construction areas in one piece.”

The facade became an icon. It also, through time, became a part of the national identity. It became so specific, so recognizable, that it was transformed into an ornament.

“The colossal, twelve-storey-high hotel tower, essentially square in plan, is a monumental stacking and interpretation of various green-painted house types typical of the Zaan region, ranging from a stately notary’s dwelling to worker’s cottages. ‘The Blue House’, inspired by the work Claude Monet painted at Zaandam in 1871, is the ultimate attention-grabber. The overall result is striking. The varied fenestration, broad protruding sections and bay windows, and decorative white ridge-pieces lend depth and an expressive relief to the façade.”

The facade is ornamental. The structure of the facade has little to do with the structure and programmatic layout of the building itself. The typical facade of a Zaanse house is taken, rescaled, multiplied and stacked both horizontally and vertically in order to create the façade of the hotel. In this example, the ornament itself becomes a multiple. Its scale, position, use and number change in order to create and brand a new building. The ornament also creates a strong visual identity for the hotel building, as well as all the existing historical housing. Since the ornamental facade has no real connection to the interior, beside the fact that it merely covers the structure, the program and use of the building can change without it having any effect.


on the identity and perception of the building itself. The ornament is considered to be an unnecessary, decorative addition to the building. It can be added onto all layers of the building, from facade to interior. When placed on the facade, the ornament plays an important role in the creation of the building’s identity. There are many ways of using ornaments. From graphic and relief ornaments on facade panels and surfaces, to enlarged and misplaced structural elements, to the use of unrelated and borrowed motifs in varied scales, the appearance of ornaments differ.

To create a building that is an eye catcher, with the possibility of a flexible program, an ornamental facade is something that can preserve the building’s identity. The ornament should be used in a clear way, it should be recognizable. Instead of using multiple different ornaments, a system of scale and density variations may offer heterogeneity of the facade. Whether as an enlarged structural element (a gutter, a screw, a beam, etc.), as a pattern (perforations, relief, color permutations, etc.), or as borrowed elements (house facade, Delftse blauw tile, etc.). The use of ornament is endless. Even though it surely has an enormous effect on creating iconic buildings, the use of ornament is not always aesthetically pleasing to everyone.
Fig. 7. WAM Architects. Inntel Hotel Amsterdam Zaandam. Zaandam. 2010.
Grid: Network of one lot of equidistant parallel lines laid at right angles over a similar set forming squares, establishing the pattern for a plan.¹

Structure: Something arranged in a definite pattern of organization.²

Module: A unit of measurement in prefabricated construction or industrialized building enabling ease of reproduction of repetitive standard components.³

“The Grid - or any other subdivision of the metropolitan territory into maximum increments of control - describes an archipelago of ‘Cities within Cities’. The more each ‘island’ celebrates different values, the more the unity of the archipelago as a system is reinforced. Because ‘change’ is contained on the component ‘island’, such a system will never have to be revised.”⁴

The Dutch landscape is a structured one. It is based on land subdivision through the application of grid systems comprised of agricultural fields and canals for water drainage. This is the basic parameter for the construction of the entire country. The land is used for various types of production, living, working and leisure. The use of outdoor areas changes over time according to current needs. A large part of the landscape is constructed. By reclaiming land from the sea and swamped areas, new areas of liveable and farmable land are produced. These lands are called polders. One of the oldest polders, the Beemster polder, was constructed in 1609. Along with agricultural land it contained large estates where the land owners resided with their families. These estates, together with the agricultural land, were organized in an orthogonal grid. Given the fact that it is efficient and it allows for the change of use in one element without affecting the whole, this system is used even today.
“The term ‘plantage’ (plantation) evokes associations with markets and production, and denotes that the underlying landscape has been technically modified. The ‘plantage’ is the ordering principle in urban programmes for dwelling, work and leisure (as regards plot subdivision, dimensions, form and alignment) but also for programmes geared to intensive cultivation such as forestry and glasshouse horticulture. These programmes lay down rules for the physical environment that gives rise to regular patterns (grids) placed upon the existing natural and cultural landscape.”

The grid system can also be applied to architecture. When given a third dimension, it can create repetitive modules. These modules are, essentially, spaces that can, as the landscape, be used for multiple purposes.

5. Inge Bobbink, Saskia de Wit. “A Dutch Perception: A Rational Interpretation of the Formal Language of the Landscape”.

Fig.9 Beemster polder Estate. 17th century
depending on their characteristics. Modules can be added or subtracted which allows for the transformation of the building. The building can grow or shrink according to needs. It functions in the same way as the landscape. In the Netherlands, most buildings constructed with this logic in mind, are categorized under Dutch Structuralism. The main idea was to create buildings with complex spatial relationships, which would mimic the complexity of everyday life. To achieve that, repetitive building elements were used, such as modules and structural elements, which allowed for different types of connections and uses. The idea was also to enable the ‘democratic’ change in the size of the building, according to the needs of its inhabitants. This, of course, occur often in reality. Even though this system should work in theory, it is rare to see examples of modules actually being added or subtracted from an existing building. One of the early proponents of Dutch Structuralism is Aldo van Eyck. His
Burgerweeshuis (Orphanage) in Amsterdam, from 1960, is one example of a building structured with modular spaces. The initial idea was to create a building which would grow and adapt. The building was, eventually, readapted, by the architect himself, but new modules were never added.

“Here he succeeded in reconciling a great many polarities. The Orphanage is both house and city, compact and polycentric, single and diverse, clear and complex, static and dynamic, contemporary and traditional; rooted as much in the classical as in the modern tradition.”

“However, despite the clear articulation in units that suggests the possibility of extrapolation, the whole still remains a completed composition that one could not add to or meddle with. This became fully apparent when the building got a new function, what then was part of an effort to save the building from partial demolition, when in 1990 the Berlage Institute moved into an important part of the building. Van Eyck had the greatest difficulty with even the smallest changes to the building, which incidentally proved to be perfect for this educational destination. Van Eyck himself unfortunately saw the building as a closed system and not intended for change or expansion.”

Another representative of a Dutch Structuralism is Herman Herzberger. The Centraal Beheer building in Apeldoorn (1968-72) and the building for Ministry of Social affairs in Den Haag are both representatives of structuralist buildings which were created with change in mind. The Ministry of Social Affairs building is today no longer the home of the Ministry.

“It is more articulated (than the Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn), and it has “public space” inside that you can literally open up, and make publicly accessible. We ourselves also have an assignment to study potential reuse. So we’re quite aware of escape routes, parking and other complicated issues and conditions to confront. The building is so big that one single new user is unlikely to be found. So most likely it will contain multiple functions. But the regulatory plan so far doesn’t allow that. It says “offices”. So no housing, for instance. That seriously might

5_Francis Strauven. “Aldo van Eyck - Shaping the New Reality From the In-between to the Aesthetics of Numbers”. CCA, Study Centr Mellon Lectures. 2007.


Fig.11_Herman Hertzberger. Structure Diagram. Ministry of Social Affairs. Den Haag. 1979-90.
slow down the transformation process.”
Modularity and the grid extend also to the building materials. Having effectively no stone, the Dutch have throughout centuries used brick as a main building material. This tradition continues even today. The brick format adorns facades of the housing mass as well as the facades of public landmarks. The use of brick is as recognizable as the facades it is being used on.

“To this day, the town hall towers over the city as a reminder of the brief moment when The Netherlands, with Amsterdam at its core, was a world power. This building is an exception. In The Netherlands, any city is still largely made up of bricks, each the same, that together create row after row of houses. These form a collective wall and make up the bulk of the urban fabric. The brick as a building module is not very conductive to making monuments and for that reason is usually plastered over in other countries. It is too particular and too small. While brick is flexible, it is not very expressive in itself. It tends to create a sense of sameness from one façade to another, while exposing the method of construction in its orderly rows. It is also a small geometrical object made out of muck left behind by the river, thus showing, in yet another way, how order can be made out of nature.”

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Dutch Style: The Diagram Building

Style: A particular way in which something is done, created or performed. A particular form of design of something, of behaving or of doing things.¹

With architecture, as with art, it is difficult to pinpoint and define characteristics of a specific style until sufficient time has passed by. This is perhaps because, in order to identify something as a ‘style’ there must be a significant amount of people creating things in the same way (or at least creating things that have similar morphological, ornamental or ideological characteristics). Today, due to an extremely large amount of different ways of approaching and creating architecture, it is impossible to name a single style. Everything looks so different. But what if we consider style as the process rather than the product? We can observe in what way and through what intellectual and creative process architectural projects go through, rather than what their finished formal manifestation is. Style was always linked to technical, industrial and construction possibilities and innovations. Today this multitude of possibilities creates a multitude of architectural outcomes. But it is still possible to distil specific approaches to conceptualizing and creating architecture. In the Netherlands, this ‘style’ is the diagram, with the diagram building as its architectural manifestation.

Perhaps there are more examples of this manifestation, but the Hannover EXPO 2000 pavilion by MVRDV is certainly the most obvious and interesting one. With pavilions created for world fairs, it is much easier to experiment and create radical proposals. This example is a radical one in its literalness. But that is what makes it iconic. The main goal of the pavilion was to attract as many visitors as possible. This was the main point in the brief. The windmills on the roof were like icing on a cake. It did attract a lot of visitors. The term ‘stacked landscapes’ was coined due to this pavilion.

“The Netherlands is a densely populated country combining high standards of living with a great democratic tradition. It could well be the prime example of a country that has always had to (and knows how to) mold the natural environment to suit its needs. It is a country that time and time again has won more land from the sea. Perhaps in the near future extra space will be found not just by increasing the country’s width but by expanding vertically. This kind of operation would seem to be applicable to many more countries. It raises questions of global significance.

Can increasing population densities coexist with an increase in the quality of life? What conditions should be satisfied before such increases in density take place? What role will nature, in the widest sense, play in such an increase in density? Is not the issue here new nature, literally and metaphorically? This kind of effort can be the Netherlands’ specific contribution to the ecological spectrum of the World Fair in Hannover 2000, which seems to be devoted particularly to a nostalgic glimpse of ecology: a simple critique of technology and the consumer society, of asphalt and machinery. What the Dutch entry shows is precisely a mix of technology and nature, emphasizing nature’s make-ability and artificiality: technology and nature need not be mutually exclusive, they can perfectly well reinforce one another.

Nature arranged on many levels provides both an extension to existing nature and an outstanding symbol of its artificiality. It provides multi-level public space as an extension to existing public spaces. And even by arranging existing programs on many levels it provides
Fig.13_MVRDV. EXPO
2000
yet more extra space, at ground level, for visibility and accessibility, for the unexpected, for nature. Dividing up the space in the Dutch entry and arranging it on multiple levels surrounds the building with spatial events and other cultural manifestations. The building becomes a monumental multi-level park. It takes on the character of a happening.

The fact that this kind of building does not yet exist means that it also gets to function as a laboratory. It not only saves space, it also saves energy, time, water and infrastructure. A mini-ecosystem is created. Its a survival kit. Of course, it also tests existing qualities: it attempts to find a solution for a lack of light and land. At the same time the density and the diversity of functions builds new connections and new relationships. It can therefore serve as a symbol for the multi-faceted nature of society: it presents the paradoxical notion that as diversity increases, so too might cohesion.”


Fig.14 MVRDV. EXPO 2000 pavilion. Section. Hannover. 2000
The Mountain: A View from Above
There is no easy way from earth to the stars. Except for the Dutch.

The profession was just starting to recover after the recent economic crisis when the project of the Mountain surfaced. “Nobody remembered who it was. The idea had been in the air. Others were designing flying cities, spherical theatres, whole artificial planets. Someone had to invent the “Mountain”. An enclave of purity and nature in contained surroundings – it seemed like a first step, a radical and bold one in a gradual program of improving the world through architecture.” Nobody thought they would actually go for it. It was a huge, megalomaniac, utopian project. But that is how the Dutch do it. The barge caravans transported the materials every Monday morning. They were driving them from the Rotterdam port, where some of the pieces were delivered, towards the site just southeast of Almere. After a first couple of weeks, when the people caught on to what
was happening, they started to gather along the canals and watch the caravan pass by. “Look!”, they would say, “we are finally getting our mountain!”. Even though it was to be a hollow structure, it didn’t matter. It brought with it the promise of new found heights to this vertically challenged land. A change of views, of sceneries, of shades and sun and wind. “The notion that one creates a world by reorganizing and perfecting what is already there is central to the way the Dutch have made space and how they have thought about their environment. They do not import the new alien object to be placed in their landscape, nor do they merely try to preserve the crumbling ruins of the past. The aesthetic is one of utilizing and transforming reality.” 1 It was to be a new step in conquering the land. After taking the sea, they were ready to take the skies.

It was a massive and complex affair. The plan was to construct a large steel skeleton and then cover it with a generous layer of dirt. Of course, trees would be planted to prevent landslides and to create the most natural environment possible. The steel skeleton was, of course, modular. Efficiency is a Dutch invention after all. The

1. Rem Koolhaas. “The Story of the Pool”. Delirious New York. The Monacelli Press. New York: 1978. Pp.307 (Original text was slightly altered to fit with the narrative: “Nobody remembered who it was. The idea had been in the air. Others were designing flying cities, spherical theatres, whole artificial planets. Someone had to invent the floating swimming pool. The floating pool - an enclave of purity in contaminated surroundings - seemed like a first step, modest yet radical in a gradual program of improving the world through architecture.”)

architects, along with engineers, landscape designers, biologists, geologists and a whole lot of other -ists were employed or contracted by a newly formed state company (conveniently named HILL – Holland Invents Latitude Landscape), which was to be in charge of all mountain related issues. The company was, of course, also heavily subsidized by the government. All the national institutes related to the specific professions were also involved. It was also supported by the royal family which appointed a special emissary that was to inform them on all Mountain related issues. It was initially predicted that the construction would last 10 years. Given the Mountain’s radius of almost two kilometres and its 1500 meter height, some thought that the 10 years estimate might have been a little too optimistic. As time would show, they were right. But at that time everybody was just too excited that this was even happening to think about the slightly unrealistic timeframe.

The Mountain was a true collaborative effort. It was a huge project and it needed a large creative workforce. Everybody jumped on the band wagon. There were thousands of things to be done. The architectural community was buzzing with excitement. Everyone was able to be involved with a project suitable to their
interests. OMA, MVRDV and West 8 did the general masterplan for the Mountain. They divided the work of course. West 8 did the general layout, OMA planned the programmatic zoning, both horizontal and vertical, while MVRDV was in charge of landmarks, way finding and follies. Since there was an ambition to have a ski slope, UN Studio designed special ski jumps, cable car stops, and pavilions. An experimental educational center was planned which was to be designed by the famous architect Herman Hertzberger. Even though some of the participating architects protested, WAM was commissioned to build an authentic Dutch hotel village 800 meters up the Mountain. It was to be the Dutch town with the highest altitude.

The Mountain is the grid system – stacked. It takes the current logic of land division and city planning and multiplies it vertically ad infinitum. It is the most logical approach. This way, the programmatic zoning and multiple uses of the Mountain can be organized and transformed in a much easier manner than if it was to be an “organic” structure. The idea for the modular structure of the Mountain was taken from a variety of iconic Dutch projects such as the, now demolished Van Eyck Orphanage in Amsterdam, the newly renovated Kubuswoningen in Rotterdam and some of Herzberger’s ideas and building segments. In the end, the engineers
(and some interested and knowledgeable architects) decided that the best way to proceed was to design one part which could then be multiplied, stacked, modified and adjusted in order to create the Mountain. Steel structure was of course the natural way to proceed. But they needed a lot of it. A lot. So the Netherlands made a deal with China. The steel frames were produced in Chinese factories and then shipped in thousands and thousands of containers every week. When they reached their destination in the Rotterdam port, they were transported with large carrier trucks to the site. After a year or so, the government decided that it would be much cheaper to build a temporary port of the coast of Lelystad. The transport costs were cut significantly.

Naturally, the Mountain was extremely well integrated into the existing structure and infrastructure. The train tracks passing along its northern side would lead the visitors straight to the main cable car leading to the top. By entering the orange coloured cabins, the visitors would be transported through three stations while simultaneously having the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful views of
Amsterdam in the west, the Markermeer in the north and the polder landscapes to the east. When they would arrive close to the top, they would even be able to see the dune islands in the north. “The visitors would come to see some quality of freshness and pragmatism, a kind of optimism that architects in other parts of Europe had lost in the long years of the fierce and critical debate on modern architecture. In Holland, it seemed, architectural experiments were possible which could not even be thought up elsewhere, let alone realized.”

A new, direct train connection was also established between the Mountain and De Hoge Veluwe National Park. The train tracks ran through the mountain to connect with the existing tracks in the north. This way, the visitors could, in less than one hour, travel from lowland nature to fresh mountain air. The trip itself was also a very exciting event. Since the train track was one of the first things to be built, the visitors could literally drive through the massive building site of the Mountain and observe its steel underbelly.

When finished, the Mountain would be able to facilitate

Fig.18 A view of the polder landscape from 500 meters on the Mountain

everybody’s needs. Riding your bike up the mountain would no longer be just an expression of riding against the wind. The ski resorts in the Alps would be a far cry from the ones located on the Mountain. The tracks, named red, white and blue, according to their difficulty, provided diverse experiences. The white track, being the easiest one, sloped gently down the southern slopes of the Mountain. This was the scenic route, towards the national park, which allowed you to enjoy the nature vistas while slowly descending towards the bottom. There, you could visit Zeewolde and go for a quick game of golf before the cable car takes you back up the mountain. The blue track was, of course, oriented towards the water. In the years when the winter was very cold, the small lakes below the mountain would freeze, thus creating a multitude of ice skating rinks for people coming up and down the Mountain. The red track led you to the southern edge of Almere. While speeding down the track you could see Amsterdam in the distance. This was also the track where world cup ski competitions were to be held. Since the track was lit during the night and during competitions, it
would be visible from the Amsterdam canals.
The Mountain is divided into three zones by height. One every 500 meters. The first zone is the only one that is populated. Due to the fact that the Mountain was placed in a populated area, the existing housing had to be moved. In order to facilitate a speedy and conflict free move of the families present on the scattered polder farmland, real-estate options were offered on the first ring of the Mountain. The families could choose which areas they wanted to inhabit and with what views. Since more housing was planned to be built than it existed on the land, the excitement for land purchase grew incredibly fast. From housing corporations to private persons, everybody wanted to own a “view from above”.
The southwest slope was the most popular one, due to its favourable views towards Amsterdam and Utrecht, as well as the lack of shading from the Mountain itself. The second zone was a big park. Intertwined with hiking, biking, horseback riding and ski running trails, it was to be used for all sorts of recreational purposes. It was also the zone where a number of public buildings would be placed, such as an experimental nature-based school and kindergarten, a Wildlife Research Centre and Museum and a Vertical Agriculture Development Centre, which was established to investigate the production possibilities of this newly constructed landscape. The top zone was reserved for hotels and rented cabins. It was an exciting vacation destination with an experience unparalleled to anywhere else in the Netherlands. It was said, that on a clear, sunny day, you could see the entire country.

But in the end, as all grand dreams of better futures, this one was also interrupted. Due to its extra orbital construction price and a new financial crisis, the government had to pull out of the financing of the project. The developers involved in some larger areas of land were able to sustain the project for a bit longer, but in the end they were also destined for an economic demise. Today, the half-finished Mountain stands as a monument to grand dreams of constructed utopias. Since it was never fully completed, it resembles more a volcano, with its tip cut off to form a giant steel crater. The first height zone is the only one that was fully completed, and luckily so, since the real estate on it was able to settle the investor’s debts.
The relocated families were given new homes, a couple of hundred meters above their original location. Some pieces of structure, that never made it to the Mountain, are now dispersed throughout the country and used in a multitude of ways. Some are pavilions, some shops, park and highway decorations, sound barriers, some are even housing. There is a rumour that an amusement park owner is interested in developing the pit of the Mountain. Given it already has a train running through it, and all that steel structure, maybe the idea is not such a crazy one. There is still an issue of postage stamps circulating, which depict the Mountain as it should have been, peak and all. They reprint it in order to encourage people to still dream big. One could say that they did, in the end, conquer the heights, be it for merely 705 meters, (beating the Belgians for just over 10 meters).
Fig. 21 Famous Dutch Artist. “Piece of Mountain”. Part of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Collection.

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