

### **'Design always starts from aesthetics'**

For someone who believes that it is actually impossible to talk about architecture, Willem Jan Neutelings had a lot to say on the subject on a grey spring morning in 2008. He started off our interview at the offices of Neutelings Riedijk Architecten [163] in the Groothandelsgebouw building in Rotterdam by stating that 'architecture no longer has a common language'. 'Everyone invents their own words and uses their own concepts. As a result, there is now a great deal of linguistic confusion in the world of architecture.'

If it's up to Neutelings and his business partner Michiel Riedijk, there will be an end to this confusion. This would be possible if architects were more concerned with their profession and less with quasi-theoretical reflections, as Neutelings told a large audience at the end of 2007 during the first part of the Architecture 2.0 symposium in De Doelen in Rotterdam. Architects should focus on 'knowledge, expertise and evocation', Neutelings exhorted his colleagues.

Although other top Dutch architects – Rem Koolhaas, Ben van Berkel, Winy Maas, Francine Houben and Wiel Arets (1955) – also gave lectures during Architecture 2.0, the symposium went down in history as the meeting at which Neutelings distanced himself from the smug self-adulation of Dutch architecture. Without mentioning them by name, Neutelings denounced the other speakers at De Doelen in Rotterdam. Architects shouldn't be mediocre journalists (Rem Koolhaas), he said, nor should they be mediocre scientists (MVRDV's Winy Maas) or computer whizzes (Ben van Berkel).

In fact, when Ole Bouman, the organiser of Architecture 2.0 and the then director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute asked about the future of architecture, Neutelings answered that not all that much had changed. Instead, the architect partly responsible for such remarkable new buildings as the Shipping and Transport College [162] in Rotterdam and the colourful Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision [164] in Hilversum claimed that the key to the future lies in the past. 'Ladies and gentlemen, buildings are heavy, clumsy objects that stand inert on the surface of the earth and obey the laws of gravity. They have done so over the last five thousand years, they have done so over the last twenty years, and they will continue to do so over the next twenty years,' he told the audience.

After Neutelings' lecture, something resembling a debate on architecture emerged, for the first time in many years in the Netherlands. On the architecture website ArchiNed in particular, architects and critics wrote long responses and open letters. 'Yes, it was remarkable that there was a response,' said Neutelings. 'When I wrote a few rather polemical columns in the magazine *Archis* ten years ago, in which I claimed pretty much the same thing as in my lecture, no one said a thing. Nothing.'

### **Why has the debate on architecture only started now?**

Neutelings: 'Because architects are afraid to criticise each other. Criticism is quickly regarded as professional jealousy. Moreover, architects are not very self-critical. In fact, they can't be. Criticism of one's own work or profession doesn't sell, which is something even high-profile architects have to take into account'.

Riedijk: 'Similarity also sells, which is why shoe shops and antique dealers are often clumped together in the same street. The international success of Dutch architecture in the past ten years has been partly due to the impression that Dutch architects were doing something great together.'

Neutelings: 'The lack of debate is also related to the end of ideologies, even in architecture. I still remember the fierce debates at the Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences in Delft in the 1970s between Carel Weeber and Aldo van Eyck, who almost came to blows. Previously, of course, you had the debate between the traditionalists of the Delft School and the modernists. Such movements and schools no longer exist.'

'With debates such as Architecture 2.0, Ole Bouman is in search of a new ideology. The starting point is that architecture is now undergoing a change of direction and that it must find an answer to new problems such as global warming, overpopulation, mobility, globalisation, and so on. The strange thing is that architects are looking for the answer to these questions in aesthetics.'

## **Can you give me an example?**

Riedijk: 'Blobs. Blob architects say that when designing a station, for example, they put all kinds of expected visitor flows into a computer, convert the data into a spatial diagram and then translate that into a building. With a motivation of this type, the design also immediately becomes good architecture; after all, you are providing an answer to the problem of mobility. In my view, this is a tragic form of self-overestimation.'

Neutelings: 'In reality, it's the other way around, of course. You want to make a nice blob and so look for a way of justifying one. Design always starts from aesthetics. I'm sure that at all architectural firms, what matters in the end is the 'charcoal sketch' – the assessment of the composition. It's not for nothing that architects make 1,000 models and 700 computer drawings during the design process. They are searching for the perfect composition and use classical tools to do so: typology, rhythm, mastery of materials, ratios, and the organisation of spatial systems. The problem is that it is impossible to talk about aesthetics, because architecture no longer has a common language.'

## **You have already been called reactionary because of this viewpoint.**

Neutelings: 'Yes, our plea for knowledge, expertise and evocation has been interpreted as a longing for tradition – but it has nothing to do with the neotraditionalism of new castle builders such as Rob Krier and Sjoerd Soeters. We don't care about style, or about bringing back stepped gables and Art Deco gutters. Indeed, 1930s houses aren't popular these days because of their style, but because of their craftsmanship. They have high ceilings with good proportions, the use of materials is good, and they have beautiful doors and panelling. That's where the quality lies and that's what makes them durable: no one demolishes such homes, which is happening on a large scale with houses built in the 1960s. We are concerned with craft, the profession, and the knowledge and expertise that go with it.'

Riedijk: 'We want this knowledge and expertise to be used once again. Ninety-five percent of buildings and structures are now conceived by managers, civil engineers or contractors, with architects playing only a minor role. Meanwhile, it is also clear that there is a great need for the knowledge and expertise of architects. For example, the future of the Randstad can't be left to planning officers, economists and lawyers, as is currently the case. A powerful and beautiful spatial plan should be made for this area as well, which is where the expertise of architects will be needed. Currently, the solution for the Randstad is being sought in the construction of islands off the Hague coast, but this is little more than a leap in the dark, and not a solution for the Randstad.'

Neutelings: 'Everyone craves plans such as Berlage made for Amsterdam South in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but such plans, with clear building lines and good street profiles, are no longer made by urban services. These days, the best they can come up with is something that looks like a smear with a few vague arrows. The architect is then expected to make something out of it. These days, the brief is basically: "You figure it out, just build something". Sadly, this is the current state of urban design. Urban design no longer solves anything, but only exacerbates the problem.'

## **But are Berlage-like urban development plans still possible at this time when the government no longer wants to play a leading role? After all, the 2004 National Spatial Strategy is based on the assumption that the market should be given more space.**

Riedijk: 'If that's what you really want, then you shouldn't complain about landscape pollution. All landscape pollution stems from the fact that the market is now in charge. However, spatial planning is too complicated to leave to the market.'

Neutelings: 'Incidentally, this doesn't mean that the plan has to be extremely complicated. New York has a simple grid plan, within which framework the market can still operate very well.'

However, you shouldn't let the market make the grid, because it simply won't happen. All those believers in neoliberalism have forgotten that even their idol Adam Smith, who believed the market was regulated by an invisible hand, advocated a limited but strong state. Good spatial planning is one of the traditional tasks that the state must perform properly in order to enable the functioning of the market.'

**You also argue that the bulk of architecture is actually just fine, yet you are the architects par excellence of striking buildings such as the Shipping and Transport College in Rotterdam, and in your book *Aan het werk*, you call for buildings as beacons in the city.**

Neutelings: 'Then you haven't read our book properly. We only believe in creating a beacon in the city if the nature of the building and its location in the city justify it. If you are building a town hall, like we are doing now in Deventer [165], we think that is sufficient justification for making it stand out. However, you can't make every home, office and motorway building weird, which is something that is being done these days. Everyone wants to cut loose. The result is architectural pollution, which just comes on top of landscape and urban planning pollution. In a city, there should be a distinction between the bulk of buildings and eccentric architecture. The bulk, which accounts for 95% of construction, must simply be functional. You could also call it boring, but solid and dependable. Against such a backdrop, a crazy-looking theatre or a mad city hall will make perfect sense.'

Riedijk: 'But no one appreciates boring, functional architecture. Last year, we drew up an urban development plan for the Homerus quarter in Almere. The idea is that everyone, whether rich or poor, will be able to build their own house here. This requires a strict, surveyor-style urban plan, which offers every builder as much freedom as possible. A simple grid with lots in different sizes and types ensures this. This may not result in a spectacle, although you can't really say yet, because perhaps in half a century's time it will have become another Manhattan. In any case, councillor Duivesteijn and especially his civil servants didn't think the plan was cheerful enough. Here, city marketing is chasing its own tail. Councillors often long for exorbitant urban development plans, with intricate patterns of triangles and circles and full of seductive blobs. They think that a city can only be sold with spectacular architecture.'

**Another point of criticism levelled at your plea for old-fashioned craftsmanship is that it doesn't allow for architectural innovation. Can innovations not result from fruitful misunderstandings and things outside of architecture? After all, the crazy idea of Le Corbusier that a house is 'a machine for living in' produced the Villa Savoye, regarded by many as a milestone in the history of architecture.**

Riedijk: 'Usually, it's the other way around, of course: innovation starts with a desire to design, with a desire to create new architecture. An ideology is then tacked onto it afterwards, by way of a justification. Obviously, innovations can also originate from a good, new idea, but you can only implement them if you also master the profession. If you want to fly to the moon, you have to be a very good rocket builder. Knowing a lot about horoscopes just isn't going to cut it. Old methods can be used to create new things. This is a commonplace idea in the world of literature. For example, nobody tells Arnon Grunberg that he's old-fashioned because he uses the same grammar as Couperus. In the world of architecture, however, you're labelled a reactionary if you advocate a reappraisal of the profession and the use of traditional knowledge and expertise.'

Neutelings: 'Innovations often start with a new kind of assignment. Each era generates its own type of new assignments. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the appearance of trains and, unlike a horse and cart, you could not put one next to a house or an inn. Therefore, a new building type had to be built. This new type of building, however, was developed by architects using existing methods, existing knowledge of materials and technology, and existing concepts of composition.'