

## ABSOLUTE\_BEGINNER

Wouter Vanstiphout

The glassy interiors of *Untitled Space* still show traces of inhabitation: a beautifully shining hybrid bike, clearly never used, a soccer ball, perfectly spherical and so pristinely white that it mirrors the reflections from outside, some design furniture obviously... A dystopian future opens up: a cold wind has swept over the world, killing all human life, rearranging the landscape to a sublime state of beauty – frozen, with no more need for seasons, movement or oxygen. One of the mysterious features of this cosmic freeze-out is a physical process that seems to have affected only human artifacts, gradually changing their molecular structure so that they reach their perfect design gestalt, before dissolving further and further into transparency and eventually nothingness, a phenomenon strangely reminiscent of the myth of modernist design. The last human family died a thousand years ago. Their suburban cottage has been reconfigured into a glass pavilion; all traces of wear and tear polished away. Their bodies lie somewhere out of view of the camera. Their flesh has evaporated, their over-ornamental skeletons dissolved and blown away. Perfectly folded Margiela pants and sweaters lie around, already well on their way to non-existence. Another thousand years and all will be forgotten.

*Untitled Space* is a project that consists solely of a single design for a glass house, carefully rendered and montaged into panoramic photographs of Dutch landscapes. This is the level of "realization" the project seeks. These spaces have not been built, we probably shall not build them and we will not witness with our own eyes the effects of the landscape on the architecture and vice versa. There is an intrinsic strangeness to these images that provokes the viewer to come up with his own explanations for what he sees. The above is my personal deliberate (mis)reading of the images and I am sure many more exist and together form a rather chaotic parallel universe of stories.

Strangely enough, this doesn't seem to be the real 'project' behind it: the interest of the project's authors, Paul Toornend and Jelle Post, seems to be rooted in reality, in architectural reality; it is a quest for open, abstract, beautifully designed or beautifully un-designed spaces that do not limit themselves to either being private or being public, but that are anti-authoritarian, either for individual or collective use. Spaces defining an architectural object that doesn't manifest itself offensively as architecture anymore, but rather as a picturesque manipulation of the existing beauty of the surrounding landscape. From the explanatory texts, it seems that we are dealing with an architectural project that is moving away from the functionalism

usually associated with modern design. Old categories like public or private have become obsolete since society became too complex and have invaded each other, due to the unpredictable behaviour of groups and individuals. Toornend neatly argues that architecture and urban design should refrain from trying to force society into behaving in a certain way, but should offer it undetermined, "untitled" spaces that it could use in whatever way seems appropriate. So far so fatalistic, but then why not follow through and build these untitled spaces and see what society does with them? If working in virtual reality, like Toornend does, why not consummate the endless possibilities of unreality? Why not play God and have your wicked way with society?

It seems so strange to promote a bitterly pragmatic form of spatial *realpolitik*, and then only "realize" it virtually. In a way the project reminds me of the episode of the political comedy *Yes Minister*, in which the minister visits that rare hospital capable of balancing its budget and reaching its targets. It turns out that the hospital's managers had decided to do away with patients, doctors and nurses because sickness and healing, due to its unpredictability, formed an obstacle to a smoothly run operation.

"Dealing with contractors is not exactly something I always enjoy doing" is Toornend's ironic but stubborn explanation for his refusal to try to actually build the glass houses that are featured in the sophisticated photomontages presented in this book. Is Toornend the architectural equivalent of the Princess on the Pea, or does this project address the current state of affairs in Dutch architecture in a serious way? Has it become impossible in this country to uncompromisingly build perfectly reasonable architectural ideas? A glass house framing and reflecting a beautiful landscape should not be an architectural idea that is only possible to realize through the use of computer-generated special effects. Is it true that even the most basic of architectural ideas are so hard to realize in contemporary Dutch society, that gifted architects like Paul Toornend feel they need to throw the towel in the ring and retreat to a melancholic realm, somewhere between art and architecture, sterile and boring, but blissfully free of ordinary people and contractors? Is *Untitled Space* just a very elaborate way of sulking?

*Premsele*, a Dutch think tank for design has stated that never before have the agendas of the Dutch government and the design community been further apart. We are living in an aftermath, nursing a hangover from a decade in which Dutch design conquered the world because it worked with the most undervalued pieces of reality. Suburbanization, plastics, waste disposal, bioindustry, old people, traffic, cheapness, immigration and even illicit sex were the stuff that notorious design was made of. A whole generation of architects traveled the world, wowing it with a design attitude that was not worrisome, not inward looking, not

classicist but happy, critical, populist and all the time exceedingly modern. The Dutch happy pragmatism seemed to perfectly reflect the economic and social successes of modern man-made Holland. The pinnacle was of course MVRDV's pavilion for the World Expo in Hannover that stacked man-made landscapes on top of each other as a suggestion for the solution to Holland's space shortage. The Dutch landscape, which has always been a political landscape, seemed to be putty in the hands of clear-headed officials and wild-eyed architects. Dutch architects never needed to retreat into virtual dream worlds to design spectacular futures like the generation of Archigram, Superstudio, Archizoom or Yona Friedman before them; they could do it right here, right now, or so it sometimes seemed to some, mostly not living in this country. Of course very little has come of all the radical plans; visiting tourists must be extremely disappointed when they ask around for the stacked landscapes, the Pig Towers, the artificial islands, the windmill fields, the freight-container mega-structures, the autarchic houses, the noise barrier housing, the high-tech mosques, the off-shore airports, the drive-in high-rises and so on and so forth. The interesting thing about the past era is that the most radical ideas were not drawn up by isolated architects in schools, but by architects in collaboration with politicians and business people, convinced that they would actually be built. So maybe Paul Toornend is right, maybe this so-called pragmatism of the SuperDutch generation was a sham from the beginning.

Recently, reality has had a bad press in Holland. Never had the international reputation of the Netherlands and Dutch architecture been better than during the eight-year socialist-liberal government of 1994 – 2002. But then of course the socialist liberals were ousted by the populist movement of Pim Fortuijn. And then Pim Fortuijn was murdered and his political heirs bungled their mandate. A Christian-conservative coalition took over and has not shown interest in anything else but closing the borders to immigrants and imposing crippling cutbacks on an already clinically depressed economy. A profession obsessed with the idea of permanent reinvention and big happy ideas, finds itself confronted with local administrations exclusively interested in keeping the lid on popular discontent and a national government devoted to a radical reduction of ambition.

Maybe we as Dutch architects have always expected too much from the reality that surrounds us, and at the same time have not given it enough attention. Even during our most ethnological episodes, describing in breathless words the most obscure parts of our geography, weren't we always looking for the seeds of imminent revolution? We looked at the most banal expressions of lower or middle-class leisure culture, and turned these into arguments for megalomaniacal upheavals of the landscape. One person flying a kite in the port of Rotterdam was to us the beginning of a mega-leisure-delta-super city, combining ecology, heavy infrastructure and permanent vacations. Two truck drivers

eating steaks in a restaurant on the highway at three o'clock in the morning led us to believe in 24-hour mega-structure cities exploding upward from spaghetti junctions. Three decades of different Ministers for Housing, Regional Development and the Environment presenting spatial planning policies that were carefully stylized versions of the unplanned spatial developments that were going on already convinced us that the landscape and the cities were and could be planned, designed and programmed top-down. And our ideas, our brilliant ideas, our lovely, beautiful, unique ideas could be realized, if only we could get the Minister to listen to us, just to us. And listen they did, to every single one of us.

Well that's over now. Nobody listens to architects anymore. It is true that if we scan contemporary Holland for points of departure for important design-driven transformations, we do not see a pretty picture. But let us not confuse this lack of a clear role for the modern architecture community with a sign of abject chaos or of mute inertia. This is a mistake modern architecture has made too often this century. The twenties of the twentieth century were also wonder years for Dutch modern architecture. This was based largely on the fact that the national and local governments took a large role in the building of social housing. In the years just before the crisis, modernist architects and socialist politicians jointly attempted to centralize the building of mass dwellings for workers, using industrial construction methods and avant-garde design. This was seen as a revolutionary departure from the nineteenth century when mass housing was provided only by a network of small-scale private building firms, that hardly had any clear urban or architectural agenda. The centralizing and nationalizing of the housing industry gave modern architects like H.P. Berlage, J.J.P. Oud, C. van Eesteren and J.B. van Loghem a central role; suddenly housing became the lever with which modern architecture could "break open" the city and re-sculpt it. It also meant that the link between the need for affordable mass housing, industrial construction techniques, urban planning, modernist design and government control was not only established but ideologized. Surprisingly, during the period in which this link was actually in action, very few houses were built, compared to the periods before and after, when the private sector took the lead. The projects that were built, however, all made it into the manuals and bibles of twentieth century modernism: Oud's "De Kiefhoek", Brinkman's gallery blocks, Van Loghem's Haarlem dwellings, the Amsterdam School of housing architecture etc. Political changes and an economic recession meant that by the end of the twenties, the government retreated from mass housing and left it to the private sector. The period between the late twenties and the early fifties has been described as one of depression, conservatism, lack of ambition, as a depressing aftermath to a short period of huge innovation. Architects like Oud retreated from the mass housing question into a highly personalized design crisis; Van Loghem tried his luck in Siberia, Berlage died.

Partly due to the abandonment by the state of modern architecture and social housing, the political and architectural thirties have earned their miserable reputation in the Netherlands. To a certain extent this reputation is unfair. During the thirties a hundred times as many houses were built than during the revolutionary twenties. They were designed by traditional *and* modern architects and built by a huge network of small building firms. City governments had retreated to the role of controllers and legislators. Instead of directly commissioning architects to design entire blocks, they demanded that the building companies create uniform façades. The entrepreneurs then decided to share architects' designs for the facades of entire blocks. Some of the most monumental and consistent pieces of city fabric, like the thirties extensions of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, were in fact built by hundreds of different building firms, camouflaging their differences with endless brick curtains. The interesting thing is that the role of the government was minimized, re-routing the architects' loyalty towards a distinctly unmodern building industry, and a record speed and quality was reached in the extension of Dutch cities. This extremely effective period in Dutch building has done nothing however for the reputation of the architects involved.

In the twenties the modernist avant-garde had wisely ideologized the combination of modern architecture and government control, but foolishly tripped over its own ideology when the government retreated. They could have also adapted to the new reality and let themselves be absorbed by the huge and complex network of private entrepreneurs that developed Dutch cities in the thirties at such a high speed and – in hindsight – with such high quality. Then they could have also accepted that the wonder years weren't all that in the first place; that with government support and modern production techniques very few and very cost-inefficient houses were built. They could have shed the obsession of modern architecture with centralized government control over planning and housing and developed a much more hybrid, down-to-earth, agile, businesslike, streetwise attitude. They could have avoided the cynical way in which Dutch street and modern architecture regard each other to this day. They could have integrated into Dutch society.

Dutch modern architecture in 2004 is in a similar state as it was around 1930. Internationally it still coasts on a handful of buildings, many books and some very big promises. Nationally it sees how the government and the local councils have stopped commissioning experimental design and research, how they are making serious cutbacks on subsidies and turning more and more power over to private developers and housing corporations. The tradition of big national planning bills has withered into a wafer-thin edict turning over the responsibility for national planning to local authorities. While a number of corporate firms are doing very well out of this, by just building, the architects with international reputations of being experimental, of

embodying Holland's tradition of permanent spatial revolution, are being ignored. The atmosphere of disenchantment is palpable: the SuperDutch generation is spreading building, teaching, lecturing and publishing across the world, distancing themselves from each other and from Dutchness and becoming famous in their own right. There is a sharp distinction between the lucky bastards working on the crest of the wave, profiting as a group from the revolutionary reputation of an entire nation, and the poor sods who have just missed the boat and whose work will automatically be associated with a tired architectural and political trend: *Holland*. Nobody outside Holland knows a Dutch architect who started out in the thirties, just as no one will be interested in a Dutch architect starting out in the 00's. It happened then and it is happening now, as if it is a natural cycle, unavoidable.

But is this a bad thing? Should it not be incredibly liberating for the current generation of architects to be ignored? Finally they can just look at the world around them, instead of being asked to join up, be brilliant and reinvent it. They have the chance to observe a society that is going through transformations that have very little to do with the intuitions of architects and planners. This means that they might just learn something new.

Somehow Rotterdam is the laboratory for the kinds of transformations Holland is going through right now. Before 2002, Rotterdam was the main metaphor for the worldwide acknowledged brilliance of the SuperDutch generation: the city of the modernist housing projects of the twenties, of the reconstruction in the fifties, the city of Rem Koolhaas and the city of SuperDutch, boasting Ben van Berkel's Erasmus Bridge and the office of Winy Maas: MVRDV. But it was also in this city that the neo-liberal populist movement of Pim Fortuijn was born and where he swept to victory in the city council elections of 2002. It is also this city that was used time after time to illustrate the problems that Dutch society was going through and that were being ignored by the government seated in The Hague. Rotterdam has become the main political metaphor for the whole of Dutch society. This holds equally true to the supporters of the Pim Fortuijn revolution, as to its most bitter detractors. From being architecture's main tabernacle, this city has become its butcher's block.

Two phenomena are of particular interest. The first we could dramatically call the dissolution of urban planning. Urban planning in Rotterdam is being dissolved in several ways. First there is the literal dissolution of some of the most potent urban tissue built in this century: the post-war neighborhoods and satellite towns around Rotterdam. These starkly humanist compositions of slabs and voids are by now fifty years old, and are being used by completely different people than they were planned for. Therefore these precisely programmed settlements are being used in entirely different ways than was foreseen by the

original planners. These post-war modernist neighborhoods are now being demolished and replaced by an entirely new urban tissue, containing larger houses with more and larger gardens, more space for parking and a lot less public space. Generally speaking, they are being suburbanized. The collective spaces and buildings are the first to fall. Behind this physical process lies another, less physical dissolution. The demolition and replacement with suburban tissue is a massive process, involving in Rotterdam alone tens of thousands of houses and changing the make-up of the entire city. Urban planning, however, plays an extremely minor role in this process; the urban planning department follows the lead of the large housing corporations who decide what is to be demolished based purely on financial real-estate reasoning. This reasoning is determined by land prices and rent levels. It results in decisions to demolish and rebuild. Architectural offices are involved to design projects of a couple of hundred houses at the very most, and at in the end the urban planning department comes in and designs what is left of the public space. The fascinating thing is that it turns out to be entirely feasible to radically change a city's spatial structure without any significant urban input. Underneath the dissolution of urban planning lies a deeper dissolution: that of urban governance. The largest part of cities' housing stock is owned by housing corporations. These started out as local, not-for-profit corporations subsidized by the government and mandated to rent out social housing. They built most of the walk-up flats that make up the post-war ring of neighborhoods and satellite towns around Rotterdam. In the late eighties these corporations were privatized. Their subsidies were abolished but they could keep their colossal stock of houses. From the moment they became commercial developers, the corporations started to define long-term strategies to safeguard their capital, much like banks would do. The first thing they did was initiate a series of mergers. We are now in a situation that the housing corporations cover territories that far exceed those of the cities. The second thing they did was draw up a road map from their corporate headquarters to completely change their stock, doing away with the cheap walk-up flats, and replacing them with suburban housing. The road maps are being broken down into portions, which are then implemented in different locations: Rotterdam, The Hague, Gouda, Delft, Vlaardingen etc. This means that decisions about the housing stock of Rotterdam are not being made as part of a political or business strategy for the city, but as part of a strategy of the corporation, for whom place has become irrelevant. Of course cities play an active role in this, but purely as a local financial partner to deal with. Paradoxically, city government should work better once it dissolves itself. It has been harder to make the city departments of planning, housing and social services reach the targets set by the local politicians than to just register them in business-like contracts with corporations or other companies that want to take over a piece of the city.

The housing corporations are currently better equipped to manage housing projects than the city itself. Famous modernist housing developments, like Zuidwijk in the south of Rotterdam, designed by W. van Tijen in the early fifties, are not only being largely demolished and suburbanized, but the entire responsibility for public space, services and even the building of police stations is being turned over to one single corporation, based in The Hague. Not only that, the housing corporations have proven more capable of determining and implementing a clear demographic policy for the city than the city itself: less poor, more middle class, less immigrants, more Dutch.

The second phenomenon that we are witnessing in Rotterdam can pretentiously be called: the inversion of cultural politics. The City Council of Rotterdam has called for entries for what it calls 10 "Groeibriljanten", literally growing diamonds. The people of Rotterdam are asked to submit projects that would strengthen their neighborhood. These projects have to also be feasible without subsidies: they have to involve local entrepreneurs, they have to have broad support amongst locals and they have to have a serious business plan. If awarded the status of Groeibriljant, they are accorded 50% of the budget, political support and professional assistance by the City Department of Public Works. After the first call for ideas, a huge amount of projects was entered, from an idea for a small neighborhood restaurant to a huge new park for all the leisure activities of one of the isolated satellite towns of Rotterdam. Some were entered by local inhabitants, others by shopkeepers or artists and curators. After this first call for ideas, a jury selected the fifteen strongest projects. Then the people of Rotterdam were asked to vote for one of the projects. A fascinating campaign followed, involving brochures, Internet campaigns, old-fashioned canvassing and vans with speakers driving around town. Every team wanted to get as many votes as possible, in order to influence the final choice of the jurors. After grueling research into the projects by accountants, city officials, local opinion leaders and journalists, seven Groeibriljanten were finally selected. The City Council promised to do everything in its power to have these projects realized. The philosophy behind this project was unequivocally: A. To replace top-down urban and cultural planning with a system that provoked and rewarded bottom-up entrepreneurship. B. To change the cultural and economic make-up of the city not through blanket master planning, but through a "homeopathic" infusion of highly specific projects with a huge spin-off effect. The Groeibriljanten is a dramatic departure from the way cultural projects were previously implemented in Rotterdam. Rotterdam became famous in the nineties for the grand manner in which it planted huge cultural institutions of national or even international value in the city, involving large amounts of work for very famous architects. The city succeeded in getting the national architecture institute to move from Amsterdam to Rotterdam by offering it a free location in the middle of the city. An international competition was organized, resulting in

the famous NAI building by Jo Coenen. Rem Koolhaas was then asked to design a huge Kunsthal (art hall) and a museum park. A famous Belgian curator was attracted from New York to head the new Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. Ben van Berkel, the now world-famous SuperDutch architect, was given the opportunity to design and build a gigantic, spectacular, sculptural bridge over the Meuse. The Neo-Baroque British superstar architect Will Allsop designed an enormous development project around Rotterdam's Central Station. (The abandonment of this last project, when it was ready to be built, was one of the first actions of the Pim Fortuijn people when they took power in 2002.) In all these projects gigantic cultural and economic programmes were projected onto the city and confirmed by world-famous design. Their locations were chosen by the city planners, who looked at "the big picture".

In the Groeibriljanten, the exact opposite happened. The council took a gigantic risk by promising that the best projects would actually be realized, even if they were initiated by local amateurs, for locations that up till then were unknown. The entire city apparatus is being mobilized to implement ideas and projects that could not have been predicted beforehand. Culture is not supplemented from outside but strengthened from within. Architects are involved, but they are not hired by the city: they are hired by the people who submitted their ideas. The Groeibriljanten project is an ostentatious symbol for the neo-liberal populism of Pim Fortuijn and his followers, and it seems to work quite well. It also functions as a boot camp for the city's cultural administrators and civil servants. Instead of looking at Rotterdam from an international point of view, as a subject for constant change and architectural innovation, they are forced to lower themselves to the level of its inhabitants, and work upwards from there. Lastly it acts as a brutal provocation to the city's artistic and architectural elite, by seemingly destroying any chance for huge, centrally supported, cultural programmes on a monumental level, and by turning cultural and architectural innovation over to the streets.

This is what is going on in Rotterdam. The dissolution of urban planning and the inversion of cultural planning are, in some form, also spreading to the rest of Holland. The difference is that in Rotterdam this is being pursued openly and with a nearly ideological fervor. Again: what does it mean for architects? It means that they will have to regroup because they have clearly lost the steady support of local or national government. Does it mean that they should just conform to the powers that be and work for housing corporations, limiting themselves to designing public space in the wake of huge demolition and suburbanization schemes, designing small, populist pavilions and façades for local businesses and organizations of inhabitants? Of course they should: many are already doing exactly this. But there will always be the group of architects, sometimes called the avant-garde, for whom this is not enough. They still want to lead the

way, to change the world, to do what no one else wants to do, but they know it is good anyway. What will happen to them, now that there are no powerful administrators to go along with their ideas? Traditionally, this group will start sulking, complaining that the country is going to the dogs, that it is not interested in architecture anymore, that it has become provincial and reactionary. They will retreat into private realms of theoretical design or disappear into the stratosphere of the international star system. But what will happen to the generation that cannot afford this luxury?

They are blessed with an opportunity that the former generation did not have: to invert the relationship of architects to politics. Up till now architects sought to be as close as possible to politics, assuming that real large-scale innovation could only be reached through the parallel agendas of politicians and designers. Architects, especially the avant-garde kind, have always enormously exaggerated the power of politics, and politicians have gone along with them. This time round, the current generation could finally come to terms with the fact that the big spatial, economic and cultural transformations this country constantly goes through are not planned, and not even plannable. They will be able to develop a dialectic way of dealing with politics, corporate business and public support. Architects will have to look very carefully and very critically at the world around them and determine what they want and are able to alter. Instead of working for the housing corporations, they could choose to work against them, designing new ways of using post-war neighborhoods, instead of designing suburban housing projects to replace them.

In a city with no discernible interest in architecture or planning, there is also no political manipulation of architecture. In a city that has sold out the whole idea of planning, there is not one planning model that everything should conform to. New architects could try to add buildings, programmes and spaces that create some kind of focus, that are exceptional because they are born out of an idea. In a city where the whole idea of cultural planning has been turned upside down, they have the luxury of not having to wait and lobby for The Big Job, but can profit from the chaos and drive through their own private dreams and ideologies. This un-architectural, un-urban city can become the stage for a fierce confrontation of completely different ideas.

And in the middle of this hurricane of possibilities is *Untitled Space*; quiet and still. It is the child of a mindset completely alien to the one I have used to describe how the world appears to me and perhaps to other citizens. Therefore, to mock it for its escapism and its refusal to engage, as I have done earlier, is probably pointless. It would be better to admire its peculiarity; its conviction that it is actually letting the world in, instead of shutting it out. Come to think of it, there is much to admire in its voluntary alienation. While we see a density of events,

changing conditions, urgent choices, a call to immediate action, hundreds of reasons to engage, to make clear our position to emancipate ourselves, *Untitled Space* projects a wide-open emptiness and an infinite stretch of time. It manages to see through – or not notice at all – the contemporary mess that the Netherlands has become, and see beautiful landscapes, reflections, colors, clouds, light. What exasperates us most is that it hardly seems to notice the existence of other people. The only things allowed into the frame are traces of a human existence that is a stylized version of the life of the designers themselves. The outside world is just a visual experience, separated from the viewer by exquisitely designed panes of glass. While we all want to rearrange the world, step outside of our own lives and influence those of others, *Untitled Spaces* concentrates deeply on its own life, on its own loves and tastes, on its own soul. We could see it as an attempt to step-by-excruciatingly-slow-step sculpt a world that at least one person would feel comfortable in, then two persons, then perhaps a big jump to four, then maybe after a few years five. While we are in the middle of the societal jungle, trying to hack ourselves a path through it, *Untitled Space* is a million miles away terraforming an empty planet into some place where the human race might start again. The starting point is to painstakingly construct one intimately personal corner of the universe and then to move on.

Toornend and Post – we must identify the makers of *Untitled Space* – manage to operate in a fantastically different way in the same plane of existence as the one we operate in. Their project confronts us pragmatist ideologues with a painful truth: that for our near-panicking sense of urgency and engagement there exists an alternative: an individual disconnection with collective utopian overtones. Our engagement with the world is reduced from an unavoidable circumstance to a mere personal choice. We could also practice a more personally orientated (dis)engagement with collective utopian overtones. Why don't we? Is it because we choose not to, or is it because we don't have what it takes: the inner quietude and conviction needed to imagine a world entirely based on what we really really want – not for others – but just for ourselves?