

UNTITLED_SPACE

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Untitled Space originated in 1995 during the creation of a design for the Prix de Rome contest. The request concerned a "contemporary" design for a new entrance building for the Open Air Museum in Arnhem (The Netherlands), i.e. a more or less public space in an attractive and special scenic location: a very concrete design assignment at first sight; however, one that, fed by a certain scepticism regarding the formalism that seemed to determine Dutch architecture in various guises in those years, and incidentally still does today, raised more and more questions in the course of contemplation. Which ultimately resulted in a project that gave expression to a need that had been growing for some time, namely to more closely define a personal position with regard to the practice of my profession. Where architecture manifests itself, much, if not everything, stops existing. This observation, which is both true and saddening, in combination with the assignment to apply "contemporary" architecture to a special and beautiful place, or rather to one of all the randomly special and beautiful places, leads to a problem definition that does not lend itself to pragmatic arguments. Why this architecture? Yes, if the person commissioning the assignment is satisfied, intellectual laziness tells us, then we will all be satisfied. Should a designer really be satisfied with that? What are the essential arguments for an architectonic design? Arguments that are simultaneously general and specific, perhaps even personal in nature, which ignore the purely programmatic or economic necessity of the commissioned construction, and that could form the basis for a beautiful and good design.

The *Untitled Space* project seeks its justification in a reorientation of architecture to its specific context. A reorientation to the immediate material context of the project: the existing physical space and the wider surroundings of the construction. The design chooses permanence and existing beauty above the often superficial fascination with the new. The starting point is nuanced transformation instead of creation. This architecture does not immediately appear as a form or object, but rather as a manipulated image of its environment, a duplicated or intensified existing reality. The project presents architecture and the creation of architecture almost literally as a form of perception: looking closely at what is already there, reassigning and redesignating, so that in this process, in that crucible of perception, interpretation and design, the transformation of the existing is not only given shape but is also reflected.

The history of architecture is also reflected, in a certain sense the immaterial context of the project, although it is often contained in material matters: the written, sketched, built and photographed history. Especially the history of the recent past, the apparently forgotten ideals of the Moderns and their direct descendants, the ambition to not only give shape to a single building but to an entire society, or in any case to express their social ideals in the design of space, material and even time. This context, the heritage of Modernism, is again being scrutinized, redesignated or redesigned and subsequently deployed in order to visualize for others the existing beauty

that is to be transformed, or even to "open up collectively" in the jargon of the first ideas and sketches. *Untitled Space* is in itself a simple architectonic space: an explicit "open" space that, in its ambiguous manifestations, is literally unnameable. It is one and many spaces simultaneously; a paradoxical space without properties that attempts to seize the last remnants of the infinitesimal and universal space envisioned by the Moderns in its many separate and specific manifestations. Its collective character lies concealed in this: the many views and interpretations that it tolerates offer opportunities to discuss, question and probably also explain a certain social significance of architecture.

The first attempt, *Untitled Space 01*, demanded a sequel. The initially personal idea for this fairly elementary form of architecture had more to offer than a single and still insufficiently developed project could represent. A first attempt that failed, incidentally, due to a broken photocopier and the second round of judging by the contest jury. So in collaboration with Jelle Post the idea gradually developed in the ensuing years to realize *Untitled Spaces* globally, in the most varied of locations, in order to more closely examine and further develop the many architectonic questions that had arisen, and, moreover, adequately present the possible results or consequences. Not as a tangible construction, but as photography, the medium in which the majority of more or less well-known architecture reaches us. An idea that initially opened almost as many possibilities as it raised questions and problems, not only conceptually, but also with regard to technical feasibility. And in the ensuing years, after having thought and spoken about the project sporadically, but nevertheless regularly, often on the sidelines of our other activities, we were ready to take the next step around the turn of the century.

Again, the Prix de Rome, which was awarded every five years at the time, seemed to be the logical and choice occasion for the first concrete sketches of the intended new realizations of *Untitled Space*. The idea to submit the same project in a different form again five years later was not only appealing as a good joke with regard to the aura of authentic unicity attached to these kinds of occasions, but precisely for this reason it dovetailed nicely with our starting points for the realization of *Untitled Space*. Both projects made for this occasion, for "Urban Development & Landscape Architecture" and "Architecture" respectively, the two disciplines that the contest covers, were given a different typological execution, with the aim of more accurately defining the tentative architectonic form of the intended future realizations of the project. *Untitled Space 02* takes the project back to the typological essence of roof and wall: it concerns a series of open T-shaped pavilions that determine, separately from each other and together, a number of places or spaces in the landscape without physically enclosing them. In that respect, *Untitled Space 03* goes even further: the project concerns a conversion that does not manifest itself as a new addition but merely as a removal and dematerialization of what already exists there. *Untitled Space 02* was nominated for the final round in the Prix de Rome's "Urban Development & Landscape Architecture" category in 2001.

In that year, a third sketch was created en passant, *Untitled Space 04*, inspired by a competition for a museum in Azuma Village, Japan. This sketch concerns a variation of *Untitled Space 02*: a series of T-shaped pavilions carefully situated

within the structure of the surrounding landscape. Based on these three sketches, the design for future realizations was decided upon in the beginning of 2002 (version 2.0). The design reverts to the very first version of the project: a construction of concrete, steel and glass that, judging by size and dimensioning, could very easily be a house, but could just as easily accommodate a range of other projects. It was also decided to limit the first realizations to locations in the Netherlands, and it was determined that each realization would be presented in three, separate photographic depictions: a façade, an interior and a detail. Supported by a project grant from the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, we began with the execution of the project in the course of 2002 in a number of different locations.

This publication presents eight realizations, *Untitled Space 05* to *Untitled Space 12*. It seems that for the time being the project, consisting of these eight realizations from the period 2002-2004, has found its tentative form. In the coming years, it will be realized in increasingly more places in the world, at various occasions and in different forms: whether in moving pictures, as text or possibly even in glass, steel and concrete. To demonstrate that each interpretation adds yet something new to the design, five authors were asked to write an essay about *Untitled Space*. This has resulted in five divergent visions that together form a veritable labyrinth in which the reader is driven to a liberating state of despair. History, theory, design and topicality simply can not be forged into a logical whole by means of one leitmotif. And in this way the project itself is already somewhat liberated from the straightjacket of ideas and problems with which the designers wrestled. Expectations are that it will ultimately become part of a social process, as architecture ought to do; the creative thought disappears into its own realization and is absorbed by the multitude of questions and possible answers that is typical of the phenomenon that nowadays is generally called the built environment.