

ARCHITECTURE NL

11 ex-pats Or 88 reasons to stay in Holland

11 expatriated architectural offices that have chosen the Netherlands as their voluntary exile show 88 aspects of their work at Schiphol.

What are these offices that were all established in the post-90s up to now? How do they operate in the given situation? What are their economic and creative strategies? How do the architectural origins of these immigrants influence today's Dutch architecture? How alien is their work? Or how Dutch have they become? And what on earth are they still doing here?

These and other questions are evoked by the team-selection criteria and the choice of Schiphol as location for the Dutch Wonderland exhibition. The title '11 EX-PATS or 88 REASONS TO STAY IN HOLLAND' prompts a reading of the exhibition beyond a mere documentation of the wide spectrum of architectural production and refers to the specific empowering Dutch context. This context spans a wide range of possible interpretations that put things in a broader perspective, from sentimental to economic, from pragmatic to ecstatic.

The teams participating are encouraged to individually interpret the curatorial concept and to present, reorganize, reproduce their work in a critical and direct way, demonstrating the potentially different and 'culturally critical' stance they take toward the changing conditions of the society that they live and work in. This will formulate a possible, if not compulsory, stance to take for the contemporary European architect, and will, one may expect, result in a positive view from the 'outside-within' on the Netherlands of today.

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If there is anything that is superfluous at the moment, it's yet another article about recent Dutch architecture. The building culture of hardly any other country has been so extensively documented in the media, has become so well-known and has grown into such a myth as that of the Netherlands. So let's save ourselves the umpteenth essay on the SuperDutch Phenomenon and turn to more newsworthy things instead – to the current mental and emotional state of the Dutch architectural world, for example. For while the slightly aged myth is still going strong with the tenacious longevity that is typical of its kind, a new, more critical mood is spreading among architects in the Netherlands.

First, though, we have to quickly look back to the nineties, when the Netherlands were regarded as the promised land of architecture. Dutch economy flourished, housing corporations were freshly liberalized, and government pursued an ambitious housing program and generously distributed subsidies. Thanks to a very Dutch camping mentality, which knows little of

claims to eternity, and thanks to a cheap, industrialized building process, young architects were given the chance to realize experimental designs. Feasibility and belief in modernity were some other keywords to be found in the bibles of the boom such as "The Artificial Landscape" or "SuperDutch"¹. Architecture became a part of image culture. At the same time, the participatory say that inhabitants and neighbors have in the Dutch building projects generated a great public interest in architecture. There once even was a one-and-a-half-hour TV-show about an architectural competition, with a live transmission from the city council session² – in other countries, architects can only dream of such media coverage. No wonder that many young architects came to the Netherlands from abroad, attracted by the hype, in order to do internships, to study or work in Dutch offices.

Those fat years still inform the international image of Dutch architecture. Meanwhile, however, the liberal zeitgeist has suffered a series of shocks: First, there was 9/11, then came 6 May 2002, when the politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated, followed by the murdering of filmmaker Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004. Since then, Dutch economy has been ailing and there is a general heightened wish for security and safety. The trend goes towards the cozy, well-known and risk-free – also among architectural clients. "High trees catch a lot of wind" goes a Dutch saying. Many a developer who used to have a preference for tall and sweeping trees now tends his



- ↑ **Residential estate Waterland**
in Leidschenveen, Bjarne architects:
Mastenbroek/de architectengroup, 2003
photo: Bjarne Mastenbroek
- **Residential estate Brandevoort**
architects: Rob Krier + Christoph Kohl, 2001
photo: Paul Princen
- ↶ **"The Mad The Tea Party"**
Illustration: Sir John Tenniel
("Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", Lewis Carroll, 1865)
- ↵ **CCTV-Projekt in Peking,**
Origin: Rem Koolhaas, Content, Taschen Verlag

architectural bonsais. In the meantime, as architect Tom Frantzen recently observed in a debate, architecture as image culture has been made service-able to commercialization and strikes back by churning out in standardized terraced houses in retro design.

One of the consequences is that the protagonists of the hype are still building SuperDutch architecture, but hardly in the Netherlands any longer. Whether it's OMA, MVRDV or UN Studio – they're all currently realizing big projects abroad. Dutch architecture has become an export success, a premium brand. In its home country, on the other hand, a time of self-reflection has dawned: against the backdrop of retro-tendencies, subsidization cutbacks and weariness with concept architecture, the architecture of the past years is seen in a more critical light.

Archis magazine recently published an issue entitled "Archis is without concept"³, and the editors' board of Oase invited to a discussion evening under the motto "What's after the party?"⁴.

As is often the case after a hype some people now question the entire architectural production of the "post-idealistic years". Of course, that's just as absurd as blaming the tulips for the stock market crash which put an end to the tulip fever in the 17th century. Still, there is no question that after a party which lasted for more than ten years Dutch architecture needs to let in some fresh air. The first signs of a certain stuffiness could already be made out a few years ago. This was involuntarily disclosed by the Netherlands Architectuurinstituut in Rotterdam in its 2003 exhibition entitled "Reality Machines", which celebrated the strategies of contemporary Dutch design. The fact that one hundred different

designs could easily be subsumed under five one-line design-strategy headings was something to really make you think⁵.

Above all, the most popular strategy, i.e. jazzing up limitations into concepts, has produced strange results recently. If an architect asks the inhabitants of his terraced houses, which all are very monotonous in design due to economic restraints, to hand in pictures of their real dream homes for the decoration of their front doors⁶, the irony has finally turned into cynicism, and it's clearly time for new ideas.

Therefore, the status quo of Dutch architecture is Quo vadis. What's after the party? Time to sleep it off? Time to cure your hangover? One thing is for sure: After the party, the guests go home. Many of the foreign architects who came to the Netherlands during the hype followed this rule. But an astonishing number have stayed and are now helping the hosts to clean up the mess.

"The ideal place for me is the one in which it is most natural to live as a foreigner", Italo Calvino once wrote⁷. Maybe this explains why many of the foreign architects, who normally move on from one economic and creative boom country to the next like migratory locusts, get stuck in the little Netherlands, a country known for its internationality. In addition, the subsidy system – although under fire – and the chances offered to relatively young architects still make the country attractive for foreign architects. At any rate, a glance at the home country often results in the realization that the grass is still greener on this side, even if the climate has become harsher.

Foreign architects contribute to Dutch architecture by questioning things which are considered normal and self-

evident in Holland, confronting people here with their outsiders' views and ideas. They reflect on the current state of affairs in the Netherlands and at the same time bring in their own cultural baggage, thus protecting Dutch architecture from becoming self-referential. Every one of them adapts to the Dutch situation in his or her own way.

In the nineties, they jumped down the rabbit hole after the Rem-rabbit or the Winy-bunny, and found themselves in the Wonderland of Dutch architecture. Many things turned out to be possible here which elsewhere are not. Like Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, it's a fascinating, but also a confusing and weird place with its very own logic which the foreigner has to adapt to. During the reality check after the hype, even the last ones realized that Wonderland never really was the land of milk and honey. So what's after the mad tea party? To paraphrase the words of a German soccer coach: After the party is before the party.

1 H. Ibelings (ed.), **The Artificial Landscape. Contemporary Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape Architecture in the Netherlands**, Rotterdam, 2000; B. Lootsma, **SuperDutch: New Architecture in the Netherlands**, Princeton, 2000. 2 Competition "Mix to the Max" for a housing block in Almere, "Het Aanzien van Nederland", 27.4.2003, 22:10, Ned 3. 3 Archis 6/2004. 4 1 February 2005, Premsela Instituut, Amsterdam. 5 The categories were "Photoshop Reality", "Comeback Effect", "Infinite Artifice", "Reinventing the Archetype" and "Is this for Real?" 6 Bjarne Mastenbroek/SeArch, Waterland-Project, Leidschenveen 7 I. Calvino, **The Uses of Literature**, New York, 1987, p. 341.