Test tube babies

Three projects by Neutelings Riedijk

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The latter quarter of 1997 witnessed the completion of three buildings by Neutelings Riedijk: the Minnaert Building in the Uithof campus of Utrecht University and Veenman's new printing complex in Ede, both in the Netherlands, and the post office in the Belgian village of Scherpenheuvel. In all three cases, one glance is enough to set you thinking.

In Utrecht the university building is rendered in terracotta shotcrete and patterned with a series of ridges. The facades of the Ede complex are printed with hundreds of letters – letters which can be organized with difficulty into words or sentences. And the post office in Scherpenheuvel is concealed within a man-made hill, jauntily studded with conspicuously tall synthetic roof lights. What are we to make of the unorthodox appearance of these buildings?

In a recent interview with the magazine *Oase*, Willem Jan Neutelings made an enlightening remark: 'Our buildings,' he said, 'are born naked.' This remark is even more revealing when you realize that the interview revolved around the subject of cladding. Neutelings explained that the facades of his firm's buildings were not their primary concern: 'Our buildings are born naked. Once they are born, we look and see how they should be dressed. Our design work is programme-based; the outer walls are seen to at a later stage. The outer wall cladding is determined afterwards, to emphasize the concept.'[1]

If we are to take Neutelings at his word, this means that when confronted with a building by Neutelings Riedijk we are looking at something that was added later, a surface that was not initially there but which was subsequently felt to be an appropriate container for the thing it was built to house. The projects illustrate the old saying that there is more to the world than meets the eye. Understanding these buildings demands more than a cursory glance; one has to probe beneath the surface for an in-depth analysis.

This approach has been under pressure, or certainly out of fashion, in recent years. For quite a coterie of architects who claim to be at the forefront of the profession, the surface is just about now regaining significance. Under the influence of new computer programmes we are experiencing a kind of symbolist revival – of a symbolism that regards the surface as the main signifier, and even goes so far as to suggest that the surface is all there is. The magic word for these architects is animation: matter is animated, form takes on a life of its own. Hence the flowing forms in the designs of architects like Greg Lynn or Peter Eisenman, Lars Spuybroek or Ben van Berkel: they represent the life forces vested in animated architecture. This resurrected vitalism is actualized by crossing it with state-of-the-art technology: the disparity between the organic form and the essentially inorganic nature of architecture is reconciled by adopting the formal language of biomechanics. In animated architecture organism and prosthesis

fuse. One of the problems here is that until now the organic and biomechanical character of this new generation of designs is only visible in computer-generated sketches; the womb we know as building practice is simply not equipped to faithfully reproduce the new organisms. Yet the intention in such projects is that there be a direct link between interior and exterior. The surface is the organism's outer skin, the top layer of a tissue that continues on the inside.

The fact that Neutelings Riedijk's projects are born without an outer skin does not imply that the surface has no significance in their work. On the contrary, as Neutelings states in the interview, the exterior cladding 'is decided on at the end to underline the concept'. The facade is a means of communicating a message; the facade translates the building's underlying concept for the observer. Obviously, there is no guarantee that the observer will interpret the message correctly, nor that the architects will provide a good translation. For what are the facades in Utrecht, Ede and Scherpenheuvel saying? Does the university building tell us, 'I'm a geophysical phenomenon'? Does the printing plant announce, 'I make culture'? Does the post office shout, 'You can't see me!'? The answer to these questions can be found by analysing the programme. After all – if we are still to believe Neutelings – that is his starting point for each design.

The university building De Minnaert – named after the Utrecht astronomer – contains rooms for the staff of the faculties of Mathematics, Astrology and Earth Sciences, laboratories and lecture rooms, and a restaurant which can seat 500 people. From the floor plans we can see how this programme was tackled. Space for access, circulation and general services – 'tare space' as the architects call it – is concentrated as far as possible in one central hall, from which all the programme components can be accessed. But this is not the only function of the spatial focus. It also fulfills a crucial role in the climate control of the building. Normally, 35% to 40% of the construction budget for such complexes is set aside for services engineering; the architect delegates these technological aspects and architect delegates these technological aspects and incorporates the solution in his plans. But that is not how the architects went about it here. In this science building the climate control is exploited as an architectural theme. There is no 'indoor climate' in the central hall. Rain water falling on the roof is filtered to then drip into the hall. Caught there in floating dishes containing Zeeland cockles which help purify and soften it, the water is subsequently collected in a large basin. Here it serves as a cooling agent, being pumped via a system of pipes through, among other things, laboratories full of computer equipment. The heated water is finally discharged back onto the roof! It cools, drips back into the basin and the cycle is repeated. Surplus water is channeled off, or if the water level drops too low the basin is topped up with tap water. In this way, the central hall transforms into a vibrant, mysterious place – dark, cool and dark like a cave. The acoustics are in keeping with this ambience. It is an ideal setting for the hot drink dispensers. Down one side, eleven niches in the wall open into what resemble private train compartments, furnished with red imitation leather seats and heated with what the architects refer to as 'stoves'.

Our first impression of the building was correct. The building's rock-like appearance, with its deceptively natural-looking sedimentary play of lines, is a way of announcing the

grotto-like interior, the presence within of the faculty of Earth Sciences and the architecture's climatological concept.

If you study the new-build for Veenman's new printing complex in Ede you discover that on plan the traditional programmatical division into office building and print shop ordinarily characterizing such commissions is counteracted here by the continuous facade wrapping round the entire building. Also, the bland, nondescript surroundings – a barren plain along the motorway, punctuated here and there by industrial buildings – are relieved by the aesthetic internal court, designed by West 8. Both interventions suggest dissatisfaction with the way such commissions and settings are usually dealt with.

Michiel Riedijk explains that the challenge lay in coming up with an alternative tor the conventional industrial park architecture for the same standard budget. How could they accommodate the programme in a less obvious architecture? This they solved by applying a greenhouse construction method whereby the relatively cheap glass could be used as facing material. Transparency is clearly not the objective here: the glass is backed with a reflecting fabric, one of whose functions is climatic. The glass, an ideal printing surface, served as a vehicle for an art design: each glass panel is printed with one letter. The letters make up a text specially written for this purpose by the writer K. Schippers. The way the words turn the corner, the absence of punctuation and the fact that you can't see where the text begins and ends ensures that the message the facade projects is ambiguous. Instead of throwing the text into relief, this gives the impression that the building itself is text. The printing works cuts a surreal figure – as if it were a letter-factory.

In contrast with the resolute presence of the printers, the Post Office in Scherpenheuvel is a picture of reserve. It looks every bit an exercise in respectful conservation: a large house converted into a 'classic' village post office, with the added volume containing the 'new-fangled' sorting office relegated to the background.

On closer examination, however, it proves more subtle than that. Structurally little more than a roof, the sorting office dictates the mood of the complex. This roof consists of a concrete slab, generating an 18x18-metre column-free space. To reduce the weight, the slab is perforated with 81 round holes fitted to cater for natural and artificial light and acoustics. Apart from being a roof, the sorting office also acts as a wall for the cash dispenser, post office boxes and a letterbox. Screening off the forecourt with lime tree, this wall is the modern, dematerialized version of the old post office next door.

The reassuring aestheticism with which the new building has been slotted into Scherpenheuvel (a place of pilgrimage for worshippers of the Virgin Mary) is compellingly captured in the photographs which Sarah Blee shot of the complex. These are visibly staged and recall the uncomplicated world of the fifties and sixties. The postmen on their bicycles transport us to a Jacques Tati film while the clerk at his desk might have been plucked straight from a Kabakov scene set in the Belgium of yesteryear. It is the material formgiving that evokes this atmosphere: the pigmented exposed concrete of the interior, the gentle shotcrete slope at the front and, above all, the outsized synthetic

domes of the roof lights. Illuminated they will obviously remind us that people are at work here at the most ungodly hours, but they are also an allusion to the days of, say, the Jetsons, when the future was merely a reincarnation of the present, decked out in pastel colours and streamlined forms.

Perhaps this is what all three designs have in common: while the architects are breaking new ground, applying materials in unexpected ways and departing from standard methods, their innovations are not legible in the exterior.

The Minnaert Building has already been applauded for its low tech and high performance, the letter-factory in Ede seems given over to some cultural craft activity and the post office in Scherpenheuvel conjures up the impression that village life has remained unchanged there since the 1920s, a time recalled by Ernest Claes (whose name graces the street in which the post office stands) when describing the neighbouring village of Zichem in his autobiography *De Witte*. Innovation takes place at the stage of conception. Instead of relying on stereotyped solutions, they prefer to re-invent the wheel. This is how these architects keep themselves professionally on their toes. Neutelings Riedijk's children may be born naked, but they are test tube babies who have been severely doctored in the making.

1. ‘Born naked’, Interview with Willem Jan Neutelings by Dirk van den Heuvel, Vincent Kompier and Sanna Schuiling’, *Oase* no. 47. 1997, pp. 80-93

In: *Archis* no. 4, 1998, pp. 40-51.