

It Fell From the Sky

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On the way to Lelystad, where UN Studio recently completed a new theatre, I open the paper and read that Jean Baudrillard has died. In the 1980s, when I started writing about architecture, I regarded the French philosopher as an important source of inspiration. Is it a sign that his unfortunate death is being reported today, at the very moment I'm travelling to see this building? As I approach the theatre, that thought is reinforced by my first glimpse of the building. Is the orange object looming up ahead really a theatre? A building type with a long tradition, fitted out to accommodate shows that bring performing artists in contact with an audience? Gleaming and screaming at me from afar, it not only forms a remarkable presence that's meant to put culture on the agenda of this provincial town, but also seems to have avoided the requirements imposed on other buildings in Lelystad. More than an actual theatre, this Agora – for that's the name of the building – appears to be a *symbol* of a theatre.

As Baudrillard had already realized in 1968, the year in which he published *The System of Objects*, our consumer culture cares little about the function of a thing – what matters is its symbolic meaning, its position in a context filled with other things, its pursuit of instant success: a pursuit inevitably followed by rapid obsolescence as the thing surrenders its recently acquired status to a newer version of itself. In his book, Baudrillard concentrated on smaller objects manufactured for use, but the same logic can now be applied to architecture. Two months prior to my trip to Lelystad, SANAA had realized a theatre in the nearby town of Almere, a building composed of a series of sophisticated and exorbitantly expensive glazed boxes. Now an orange diamond by UN Studio beckons theatregoers to Lelystad, while doing everything possible to distinguish itself from its environment. That's typical of the 21st century: we live in a network of cities that battle to win over investors and potential residents, and that need famous architects and high-profile buildings to get what they want. A fact both fascinating and frightening.

With a population of 72,000, Lelystad is a small city on the decline. It was founded in 1967 following the impoldering of part of the IJsselmeer, one of the large water projects for which the Netherlands is renowned. The town was meant to evolve into the primary hub of the newly reclaimed area, but its growth stagnated rather quickly, and Almere, another new city that is closer to Amsterdam, soon eclipsed Lelystad. Several years ago, Lelystad's failure to thrive was officially acknowledged and a plan drawn up to provide the town with new opportunities to prosper. Lelystad was to wake from its slumber behind the dykes, develop its waterfront, build more housing for sale, and transform the heart of town into a real attraction featuring all sorts of facilities within a 'Green Square': West 8 designed a broad, looping road that encircles the inner city and lined the route with 1000 newly planted lime trees. The construction of the theatre is a direct consequence of the push for a renewed city centre. A vibrant urban nucleus is impossible without a theatre that's on everyone's lips. The man behind the project, Lelystad's alderman for culture, points out in his introduction to our tour of the building that 'generally speaking, the construction of an attractive theatre marks the downfall of at least two aldermen – but take note: I'm still here'. He presents the project as a success story, but deep inside he surely has his doubts: can a building that didn't exceed the budget (€20 million) and didn't generate a single no-confidence motion at council meetings really put the city firmly on the map?

In the meantime, the new building is engraving itself in my mind. There's no getting round it. An irresistible force reaches out and draws the passer-by inside. No longer in the thrall of orange, I can look at the theatre with a more analytic eye. The building consists of two auditoriums – one on either side of a staircase that serves as a 'vertical foyer' – which are separated for reasons of acoustics. Fusing the two main volumes into an entity is a continuous skin that enfolds the pair. 'This faceted envelope also results in a more even silhouette,' says architect Ben van Berkel. 'The raised technical block containing stage machinery, which could otherwise have been a visual

obstacle in the town, is now smoothly incorporated.' He and his team have chosen shades of yellow, orange and red to colour the aluminium skin, which is perforated in certain areas. The perforations not only conceal windows and mechanical systems here and there, but also create the depth and shadows needed to produce a varied external image. It's the visual effect that counts. 'At Agora, theatrical drama and performance are not restricted to the stage and to the evening,' says van Berkel, 'but are extended to the urban experience and to daytime.'

By using faceted walls in the larger auditorium as well, the architects have crafted a dark-red, futuristic cavern. Here, too, mechanical systems are hidden wherever possible. The mundane workings of the theatre must remain invisible, taking a back seat to an artificially generated experience that is meant to enchant and astonish.

Whereas the larger auditorium has a metropolitan air, the foyer is better attuned to provincial reality: a staircase without columns, not monumental in size, begins at the entrance and ascends two storeys, winding like a snail's shell. Modest corridors that lead to the entrances of the auditoriums branch off from the stairs. Despite the visible restraint, however, van Berkel has made this stairwell another kaleidoscopic experience. A pink balustrade circles upwards to become a skylight that fills the space with a festive variety of colour gradations and intensities of light. 'The party should start in the foyer,' says the architect. Verticality accentuates the desired effect, and a host of sightlines turns a night at the theatre into a game of seeing and being seen.

The determining conceptual moment in the design process leading to this building is undeniably the palette chosen by UN Studio. Apparently, the standard reaction among residents of Lelystad has been a question: when are they going to apply a finish coat of paint to the primer? The query harbours a note of irritation. Conspicuous colours rob the theatre of its essence, its theoretically receptive function, and turn the building into an object. As Baudrillard writes about overly bright clothing in *The System of Objects*: 'if you wear a red suit, you are more than naked – you become a pure object with no inward reality.' To which he adds, rather viciously: 'The fact that women's tailored suits tend to be in bright colours is a reflection of the social status of women as objects.' In 1968 the philosopher pointed out that it had taken the car and the typewriter generations to shed their dignified cloaks of black. A statement that applies equally well to the virginal white raiment of refrigerator and sink. In architecture, however, this development – which can be interpreted as either vulgarizing or emancipative – has yet to be totally accepted. Bold colours are still the exception to the rule, and their use is a recipe for success when the goal is to erect a guaranteed headliner.

Van Berkel has a clever riposte to such objections. He claims that his palette matches the colours of the sky – and he means the shades that characterize this specific location, because no place on earth has a celestial canopy like that of Lelystad. Project architect Gerard Loozekoot explains: 'The skies above Lelystad are extraordinary, thanks to reflections from the IJsselmeer and the green polders that surround it. We shot hundreds of photos of the sky and enlarged them many times. Using the computer, we distilled from those images the colours of the new Agora. The exterior shades of orange mimic what we saw at sunset and herald a night out. In the blue auditorium, you see the colours of a cloudless sky.' UN Studio has taken one of the more universal and clichéd phenomena of nature and made it into a unique selling point for Lelystad. Label it brilliant, for the tale is being accepted and making the rounds, having appeared in publication after publication.

A building that borrows the hues of the setting sun: a perfect example of the irrational requirements that determine the appearance of the contemporary city. And we wouldn't have it any other way; we eat it up. We gape at the colours, the textures, the reflections. We commend the architect for what he's managed to do. We're eager to write about it, dying to discuss it. And a couple of months from now? Another must-see theatre will pop up somewhere else.