

symposium

Dutch architecture abroad

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On the sixth of June the symposium committee organized another symposium. This time the symposium was titled 'Dutch architecture in foreign countries'. Working abroad is very popular with Dutch architects. Why is that and what are they building there?

The theme was conceived out of the contemporary issues within the field of the Dutch architect, which forces a bulk of them find their luck abroad. Issuing how to deal with the different cultures: how would one position him- or herself as a Dutch architect abroad? Would one submerge into the local approach of the assignment by ways of techniques and architecture, or would a Dutch identity still be seen in the result, or would perhaps an international approach be more fitting?

To answer these questions, we sought out a variety of people that we deemed able to shed a light on the topic. The day was divided in two shifts, each with offices of comparable size. This would make a following debate more interesting because the comparable size would supposedly shed different lights on problems or events the offices would come across. The first shift would feature the firms OKRA landscape-architects, Emiel Lamers Architectures and Next Architects, while the firms Cepezed, Mecanoo and Soeters van Eldonk would speak in the final shift.

The symposium was initiated at 11:20 by Boudewijn Almekinders of OKRA landscape architects, a firm he has co-founded. They preferred to have a young team, consisting of various disciplined architects and they had a special department called the adventure department, in which they seek out new ventures in foreign countries. They found it takes about 2 years time before a new venture was successfully addressed. From then on he mentioned some of their projects abroad noting the specific problems they found per country: whereas Belgium was much more hands-on and worked fast: in Ireland for example they almost got lost in bureaucratic mazes. Luxembourg had extended amounts of building phases and in London they had to follow directions and personal taste of a Lord in that area.

The second architect to talk was Emiel Lamers, who had lived in Budapest, Paris and Ljubljana for the last 9 years. His lecture gave us views on other Dutch architects active in other coun-

tries also. While having worked with a lot of local architects he gave us a good example of Erick van Egeraat, who had designed and redesigned some of Budapest's most well known buildings. During that period, he guided some interns on which he had a clear influence. In return, Hungary also had influence on Emiel Lamers: in 2007 he designed a pavilion in Amsterdam taking Hungarian vernacular design characteristics and molding them into a pavilion which fit perfectly in any Dutch city.

The architect who would end the first shift was Marijn Schenk, a co-founder of Next Architects known for the book "You can't change China, China changes you." As the title suggests, they have ventured into China, where they had set up a second office in Beijing in 2005. He explained how different a country could be: whereas the former lecturers had noticed some differences, China seemed to be a whole different level. The selection of designs was done quite differently: seeing a mouse eating money in a small pavilion which meant it was sure to be a profitable building. Other projects had been of immense scale with a supply greater than the demand, concluding they actually contributed to building ghost cities.

In the discussion following all the architects had shown that it is easier to work abroad with a local office. OKRA always did so, Emiel Lamers did so too, and Next used to work with a large Chinese office, but had just moved out, continuing with a Chinese partner to co-lead their Chinese annex. But with the variety of countries discussed another conclusion was made: every country had different ways of dealing with architecture.

The shift next started with Ronald Schleurholts, partner of Cepezed, who are quite active in at the moment. He explained their usual mode of operation, a fast and less expensive use of pre-fabrication with an assembly on site, fitting in the context of the building but inserting their own designs and technologies, and as concluded before: also using a local firm. While their way of working is quite ef-

ficient, they found out that countries such as China were not incompatible with this, limiting their activities to European countries.

Next, Friso van der Steen, currently the manager of international projects at Mecanoo, told of his activities in Korea, China and Taiwan. His lecture shed light on a big issue in East Asia: a diminishing understanding of building scale. Clients want to see a design first, before knowing the necessary program to design proper architecture. In contests, superficial jury members select winners by skimming over large papers explaining a design hardly paying attention to the user, or knowing who will be using the design. After being active in Taiwan for an extended period of time, he knows now when a design will be successful, using impressions and films to attract the jury, rather than explaining why and how the design 'works'. As Marijn Schenk had pointed out, it seemed that designs worked better when clearly resembling favorable symbolism.

Jos van Eldonk signed off the second shift. While telling of their design for the Chinese Wuhan Energy Institute, he conveyed some knowledge they came across during the project. First of all, it was clear that there simply was no context: any context available would soon be replaced, making it only temporary. Second, they too found that they were designing facades before program: the institute the building would house was not yet existent. It only required floor space, sustainability and the necessity for offices and laboratories. Using the jury's superficiality to their own ends, the cup-shaped building providing its own shade, was dubbed a flower. It worked. The project could be described with two perhaps paradoxical statements: the boss is always right, and never to change your mind.//

OKRA:
>> <http://www.okra.nl/>
Emiel Lamers Architectures:
>> <http://www.architectures.nl/>
Next Architects:
>> <http://www.nextarchitects.com/>
Cepezed:
>> <http://www.cepezed.nl/>
Mecanoo:
>> <http://www.mecanoo.nl/>
Soeters van Eldonk:
>> <http://www.soetersvaneldonk.nl/>