

Pragmatic Modernism: The Dutch Laboratory on Architecture, Landscape and the City

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The Netherlands have become in the last decades one of the most interesting laboratories on architecture, landscape and the city. Other geographical or metropolitan areas around the world can boast significant concentrations of design firms and realized projects, but the extent and the duration of the Dutch Laboratory have acquired a rather unique dimension. With just 16 million people (less than some world metropolitan areas) over an area almost half the size of Maine, the Netherlands command a singular position of authority in the design world.¹

The resources, forces, circumstances and background behind the blossoming of the Dutch Laboratory are many, and others have already offered comprehensive overviews (Lootsma 2000, Ibelings 2000 & 2002, Betsky 2004). The aim of this paper is instead to focus on the underlying philosophy of this laboratory, which may be called Dutch "Pragmatic Modernism".

Pragmatism at Work: From De Stijl to "Free Style"

The Netherlands have a great tradition of Modern architecture and urbanism and Dutch architects and planners, from JJP Oud, to Cor van Eesteren and Jakob Bakema, greatly contributed to the conceptualization and implementation of Modernist principles. Modernism naturally appealed to the Dutch engineering tradition of environmental transformations, and the Dutch fully embraced the "project" of Modern architecture.

However, whereas over the last decades of the XX century, in other countries and contexts, Modernism inexorably slid into a

form of tired and sterile formal exercise, in the Netherlands, from the early 90s, it acquired a new vitality and a whole new validity in the face of the economic, social and cultural changes of the "Second Modernity."² Probably starting around the 1990 symposium "How Modern is Dutch Architecture?," organized by Rem Koolhaas to question whether the pre-war Modernist style was still valid, the Dutch have been cultivating a non-ideological approach to Modernism. Like the 1991 NAI (Netherlands Architecture Institute) exhibition encapsulated, the Dutch have been able to practice a "Modernism without Dogma": from De Stijl to "free style."

With an increasingly experimental attitude and intervention-based strategies, Modernity is being experienced in the Netherlands more as an ever-evolving condition and a continued commitment to innovation, rather than as an aesthetic manifesto for cultural propaganda. Perhaps in the most authentic sense, *a la* Habermas,³ the Dutch manage to practice and celebrate Modernity as an "incomplete project," where experience, experiment and interventions are the working (and creative) conditions of a pragmatic philosophy of life. What may be called a "country by design," the Netherlands were almost invented by molding nature: they are a work in progress, a design idea.

Contemporary Dutch Pragmatic Modernism is maybe less ambitious, but probably more effective, than its heroic predecessor; it tests compromised solutions (also at the risk of failure) as they emerge from a process of design and discussion, rather than searching for the rare conditions to implement a pure idea; with a scientific mentality, it is open to

unexpected outcomes, instead of devising the means to achieve pre-determined formal goals; it welcomes cross-fertilization of ideas, cross-disciplinary experiments, and an economy of means.

Unconventional Realism

A distinctive trait of any pragmatic philosophy is some degree of realism, whereby reality is both material and end of the artistic process. Says Ibelings: "The disappearance of the compulsive tendency to construe everything in symbolic terms [made it possible that] things are now accepted phenomenologically for what they are. The moralism and dogmatism implicit in [Modernism and] postmodernism have made way for realism." (Ibelings 2002: 133)

Real communities, places, cultural constructs, urban patterns, and building types have extensively represented important references for Dutch architects and urbanists. This realism, though, does not necessarily generate conventional designs. The materials from reality, in most cases, are elaborated and given unique twists that allow for unexpected formal and spatial outcomes.

A pragmatic recognition of real conditions and factors does not prevent Dutch architects and urbanists to still strive for unconventional images of Modernity. The assimilation of reality, even in its quantitative determinations, is not an obstacle (rather a fertile ground) for a creative data processing completely free of stereotypes. Reality is only a springboard for *unexplored territories*. As it has been observed by Janny Rodermond: "[Dutch design] refers to reality as truth, but also to numerical facts. The image that foreigners have of Dutch architecture is to a great extent determined by the inventive way in which the pragmatically-oriented architectural firms are able to manipulate vast volumes of data."⁴

For example, the housing complex for the Hageneiland residential district, in Ypenburg, by MVRDV (2001) has obviously relied on the reality of Dutch housing culture. However, the design has given an unconventional twist to established typologies. As noted by Ton Versteegen: "The terraced house is the



Figure 1. MVRDV, Hageneiland (2001)

universal home of the common man. But the way in which the designers use it on Hageneiland immediately turns the idea of a standard neighborhood with terraced houses upside down. It is precisely the cunning combination of the freedom offered in the parcelization with a distinct materialization that resulted in an exceptional residential climate."⁵

With realism, Dutch architects acknowledge context, but not as a comfortable safety net of accepted patterns where to insert traditional designs. Context assumes a broader sense and becomes a challenge. Say Neutelings & Riedijk: "A context is not just a physical entity, such as an old town center, an urban periphery, a village or an industrial site. There is also a cultural, historical or political context." (Neutelings & Riedijk 2004: 35). And their entry for the Ground Zero design competition (a "horizontal tower" in Manhattan, 2002) shows this notion "at work."

Social Engagement

Pragmatism has also led Dutch architects and urbanists to accept and even seek a process of social engagement as part of their design strategies. The origins of such an attitude have been already identified in the "polder model." Says Hans Ibelings: "The polder model, the modern collective myth of solidarity and consensus that dominates Dutch society, has also [had] far-fetching effects on

architectural culture. Cooperation is the watchword: dialectical oppositions are overcome, leaving at best partial differences of opinion which are maintained and nourished in the interests of a highly esteemed diversity." (Ibelings 2000: 64)

In such a climate, radical and provocative proposals are not discouraged, rather they are welcomed, as they have to be filtered anyway through the process of a larger dialog. Even if it ends up in compromised solutions, this process keeps on injecting into the public discourse a healthy dose of challenging thinking. As Bart Lootsma noted already a few years ago: "Firms like OMA, West 8, MVRDV, Neutelings & Riedijk, and UN Studio try to deal with the new situation by plunging into it with almost masochistic gusto." (Lootsma 2000: 23)



Figure 2. "Ground Control": a platform for young urban and landscape designers (a project of MUST, initiated in 1998, and commissioned by the Netherlands Architecture Fund).

This culture of consensus and collective discourse has also led to the phenomenon of the sub-commissions, whereby large urban projects are planned by a variety of firms in co-operation with the municipal planning office.

In Amsterdam, for the Ijburg, Palmboom & van den Bout, planned the overall development (1995). Then the first western sector was elaborated by three firms in joint-venture (Claus & Kaan, van Dongen, Schaap & Stigter, 1999), and their plan was then sub-commissioned to a number of designer-supervisors, who in turn engaged other architects. Similarly, in the Eastern Harbor, also in Amsterdam, the overall plan (outlined,

as a development strategy, by the municipal office) was sub-divided into sub-plans to be carried out, among others, by West 8 (on the Borneo-Sporenburg islands), Jo Coenen (on the KNSM island), and Soeters van Eldonck (on the Java island), with a large number of sub-commissions for the designs of specific blocks and buildings. Sometimes these collaborations produced unexpected results, like in the case of Hans Kollhoff whose building design on KNSM departed from Coenen's more conventional urban design, thus adding diversity of image and urban experience.

With a performative mentality, architecture is now seen as a "device", to promote a constructive social discourse. Says Winy Maas: "... architectural products can be seen as 'instruments' of general observations, as 'messengers' of urban transactions, as 'communicators' of wider processes ... Consumer oriented. Connecting bottom-up with top-down. (...) [And] the individual meets the collective again."⁶

The Influence of Program

In the case of Modernism, program had an impact more on façade composition than on architectural form itself. Openings and volumes, in their interplay, were typically a function of the inside program.⁷

Contemporary Dutch architects have looked at program with a more pragmatic attitude, letting it be part of the design process and of the actual form-making. They have recognized, pragmatically, with Bernard Tschumi⁸, that "there is no architecture without program", and that program offers a great potential as design generator, thus experimenting on the various, unexpected outcomes of program deconstructing and formalizing, sometimes with "extreme logic." (Ibelings 2000: 104)

Such a mentality has been tested on various programs, sites, conditions and types of interventions.

On a large scale, DP6 explored for "Floriade 2002," in a true laboratory mode, the "layered city", a possible urban scenario for 2010. With an experimental pavilion that could be dismantled and re-used after the exhibition, the firm showed how an intensive and varied

green effect could impact future urban landscapes.

At a building scale, the Temporary Bicycle Garage for Amsterdam Central Station (1998-2001) was conceived by VMX as an ascending cycle path, with 6 meter-wide ramps. The ramps, finished with a red strip of asphalt, recall the red bicycle tracks typical of Dutch roads, making the garage a sudden, intense, vertical, warped extension of the road tracks. And the long cantilever at the end of the building is meant to facilitate the maneuvering of water buses.

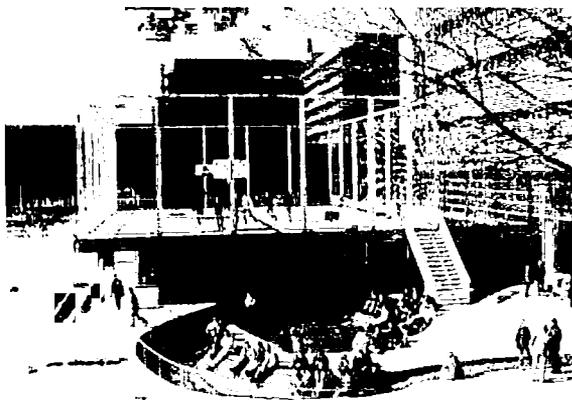


Figure 3. NL Architects, BasketBar, University of Utrecht (2003)

Program influenced Neutelings & Riedijk's Firestation in Breda (1999), inspiring the beautifully sculpted design towards an image of a "walled monastery": "... a sheltered environment where exhausted firefighters can recover after returning from a hectic rescue operation ... (...) A building character must side with its users, [it] must sidestep the obligatory platitudes of today's spatial condition." (Neutelings & Riedijk 2004: 241, 323)

However, the BasketBar in Utrecht by NL Architects (2003) is a great case in point, and, being an addition to a 1960s building on the University of Utrecht campus, it is also an example of a smart intervention. Combining a bar/café with a basketball court on top, with the intent of keeping the court as close to street level as possible, generated the solution of lowering the bar level, to achieve a grander

space and a continuity with the ceiling of the adjacent bookstore. Thus, the bar counter met the street level. Then came the idea of the "orange pool" (a ramp/seating/skating/disabled access area leading to the bar level); then the hole in the bar's ceiling, coinciding with the middle circle of the court. Walter van Dijk, one of the firm's partners, has commented: "[In our firm] the designs follow a certain logic that is rooted in consistency. The results can be not only surprising, but also, in some cases, surreal."⁹

Re-use

Pragmatism implies also a sense of economy: why wasting resources? Re-use plays a major role in sustaining the on-going experimentation of Dutch Pragmatism. As Betsky as noted, "the Dutch have an interest in the re-use of forms, materials, and ideas."¹⁰

They also quite often re-use actual buildings, even the most apparently uninspiring, like a pre-fab concrete shed on the Schie Canal between Delft and Rotterdam, brought to a new life by MADE as a house for a family of four (2002). Or, they re-use actual urban spaces, even those left over by the growth of the urban fabric and infrastructures, like the underspace of a motorway viaduct in Voorburg, where Maurice Nio sneaked in a sinuous volume with a flexible layout, for the Village life-style department store (2002). In the Art Pavilion in Zeewolde (2001), Rene' van Zuuk re-used forms, materials and standard construction principles of traditional barns for a striking, lyrical statement in the polder landscape.

And NL architects re-used an object (the carrier strap) in their sparkling interior design for a Mandarina Duck store in Paris (2001): a semantic transfer reminiscent of Pop-Art techniques.

The notion of re-use in contemporary Dutch architecture and urbanism has a more functional connotation, rather than an ideological one. It is not about nostalgia. Re-use is smart, makes sense and is a good use of resources. It also allows for a multi-layered symbolism. Often with wit.

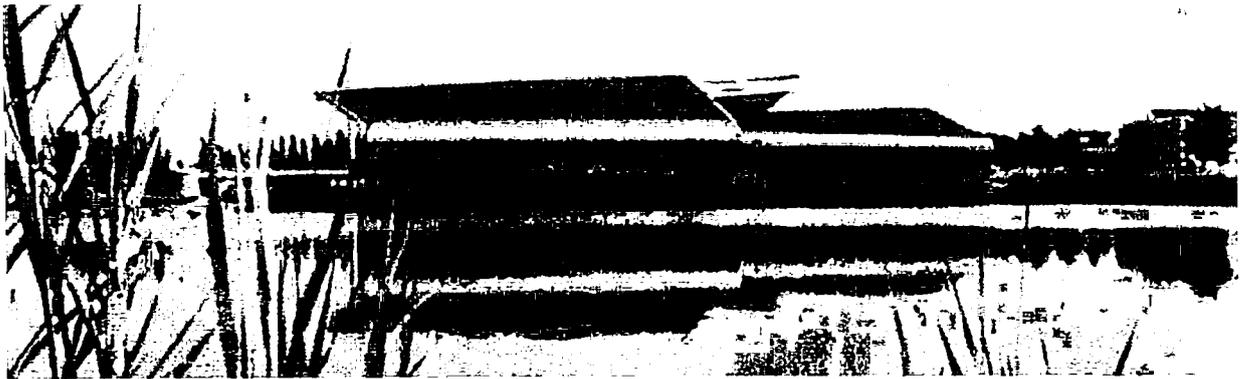


Figure 4. Rene' van Zuuk, Art Pavilion, Zeewolde (2001).

Thinking Out-of-the-Box

What has been called the “why not?” generation has shown a consistent attitude of thinking “out-of-the-box”, with a mentality inevitably leading to a radicalism that does not hesitate to contemplate extreme solutions. MVRDV’s design philosophy states:

“In every instance, the spatial consequences, and the limits and potential of a sweeping overview of situations, are examined and shown. The limits encountered are tested by a systematic intensification, so as to reveal the extremities. This constitutes a radicalization that helps to identify these limits, and makes the formulation of a discourse about them possible. The extreme diversity of these data thus finds a pragmatic transcription in a spatial matrix consisting of the superimposition of the diagrams that distribute these data (datascape).”¹¹

The largely celebrated WoZoCo apartment block (1994-97) may be seen as a built paradigm of this out-of-the-box thinking. If the footprint and the day-lighting zoning regulations allow, within the building envelope, only 87 of the 100 units of the program, why not letting the program influence the design and cantilever from the block the other 13 units?

The apartment tower project “The Tree” in Hengelo (1999-) is MVRDV way (radical, provocative) of bringing nature up high and offering gardens and trees to tower apartments.

Conversely, “grouping/stacking the box” could be the motto for the firm’s project for the Flight Forum in Eindhoven for an abandoned airport (1997), where, by grouping and clustering commercial boxes into “bedrock shapes” of business islands, and by sweeping roads and landscape in between, a whole new urban landscape is created for one of the very sore spots of contemporary global urbanization.



Figure 5. Korteknie Stuhlmacher, Parasite Las Palmas, Rotterdam (2001).

“Over-the-box” may be, on the other hand, the motto of the famous PARASITE project by Korteknie & Stuhlmacher, launched in 2000 and culminated within the initiatives for Rotterdam 2001, Europe Cultural Capital. Taking the urban landscape of the existing post-industrial city with unconventional realism, the “Para-site” project is asking why not looking at current conditions as opportunities? Why not re-using all those locations within the urban fabric that are

normally considered not suitable for habitation?

These Prototypes for Advanced / Ready-made / Amphibious / Small scale / Individual / Temporary / Ecological houses and boats are an architectural research project on contemporary temporary housing. Prefab wooden panels make columns and beams unnecessary and, by coming in a kit-of-parts, they allow for great flexibility and variety of configurations. Hence, Mechthild Stuhlmacher can speak of "design liberation". [Un]folding the box.

Crossing Boundaries: Disciplinary Joint-[Ad]ventures

Then, why not crossing disciplinary boundaries? A pragmatic, functional, performative mentality logically entertains the notion of disciplinary joint-[ad]ventures to provide the most effective, appropriate and articulated response to design problems.¹² Public art, architecture, landscape design and urbanism are more often than not intertwined in many Dutch experimental interventions on the physical environment.

John Koermeling infuses an artistic vein into his architectural interventions, like in the Pioneer's Hut in Rotterdam (1997-99), while Mecanoo interweaves landscape and architecture at the University of Technology Library in Delft (1993-97). Architecture and urbanism shape new spaces and landscapes together in the works of S333, like in the CiBoGa Terrain development in Groningen (2002), while Palmboom & van den Bout look at the landscape from a planning perspective, spanning all the scales of spatial planning ("Our specialty is spatial design."¹³), and H+N+S expand to a planning level their grasp on landscape and environmental issues, like in the Brabant 2050 project.

From yet another perspective, West 8 considers the city as artificial landscape and has been at the forefront of cross-disciplinary practice offering services in landscape and urban design.¹⁴

West 8's Borneo-Sporenburg urban plan in Amsterdam Eastern Harbor district has shown how a pragmatic and out-of-the-box approach (yet realistically relying on tested housing typologies) can achieve successful results and

establish a unique sense of place. Similarly, their interventions in Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam (1991-96) re-invented an urban place and set a whole new standard of design for an urban square of the 21st century.



Figure 6. West 8, Schouwburgplein, Rotterdam (1991-96).

A sharp understanding of new sensibilities, cultures, aesthetics, and ways of life, for the urbanites of the Second Modernity, supports West 8 cross-disciplinary strategies. Says Adriaan Geuze:

"City dwellers impose their own fantasy on the environment. (...) [They] are no longer pitiful victims, but have become intelligent, well-equipped, and endlessly inquisitive explorers. (...)

City dwellers yearn for meaningful experiments that go beyond the development of new park fashions, for experiments that lead to a new genre of public space. Interventions in public space, or, rather, in the public landscape, should no longer be focused on generating greenery. The real challenge is to create space and textures for city dwellers to colonize in their turn. (...)

That is no more and no less than Darwin's conclusion after discovering the ecology of the Galapagos islands. New public space will manipulate users in such a way that they become aware of their behavior there and then (...). What matters is not the design, or the beauty of the dimensions, materials, and colors, but the sensation of a detached culture, that which the city-dwellers create."¹⁵

Open Questions

There seem to be two crucial questions arising at this point.

The first, building on Rem Koolhaas' 1990 challenge, would be : how Modern is Dutch Pragmatic Modernism?

The issues discussed throughout the paper seem to offer a positive answer. If the *ethos* of the Second Modernity lies in the atmospheres evoked by Adriaan Geuze, than how better to relate, respond and be part of it other than through a set of mentalities like those characterizing the Dutch Laboratory? As noted by Winy Maas, "ranging between research and appropriations, architecture turns into a permanent *testing ground* that keeps in touch with an accelerating world."¹⁶

Even with the (subjective) reservations that some critics have raised, especially for a lack of social critique and foundation that recent Dutch architecture seems to display¹⁷, and the (objective) current crisis of Dutch socio-economic model that highly contributed to the blossoming of so much good design, Dutch Pragmatic Modernism, particularly with its commitment to innovation, seems to remain one of the most fertile approaches to the challenges of the new global culture and its multiple environments.

This would lead to the second question: is Dutch Pragmatic Modernism a model that can be assumed as guiding pattern in other contexts? Says Betsky:

"In fact, the Dutch have produced a model that other countries can follow. The knowledge that we live in an artificial environment we have collectively created and must collectively use is something that is true everywhere, even in the United States, where an acre a day of open desert is being swallowed by the suburbs of Phoenix. The ability to use directed subsidies and lengthy negotiation, rather than force or might, to achieve goals, would seem like a good thing to adopt in other countries. The attempt to create a common culture not through heroic images or propaganda, but by encouraging experimentation, the reuse of commonly accepted and used forms, and the assimilation of the melting pot of youth

culture, should serve as a model." (Betsky 2004: 354)

Those aspects of the Dutch Laboratory discussed in this paper may not necessarily bear a Dutch copyright. On the contrary, they could be adopted as design strategies in other post-industrial contexts. In the end, they are all intelligent reactions to rather common conditions in many societies of global capitalism. Paraphrasing Geuze, Pragmatic Modernism may be seen as a "Darwinian" response to the challenge of intervening experimentally in the physical environment of the Second Modernity.

References

1. No surprise that the second biennial European Union Mies van der Rohe Award for 2005 was awarded to two Dutch firms (OMA for the Dutch Embassy in Berlin and NL Architects, as Emerging Architect Special Mention, for the BasketBar in Utrecht). Says Burton Hamfelt, of the young Dutch firm S333 (whose non-Dutch founding members are from England, Canada and New Zealand): "The Netherlands are promoted as a kind of Hollywood for architects. If you want to become an actor you go to Hollywood; but if you want to become an architect, you come here." Interview with Lucas Verweij, *Fresher Facts. The Best Buildings by Young Architects in the Netherlands* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers/Publishers, 2004): 90.
2. See *ARCH+* 143 (October 1998). Says Bart Lootsma: "According to sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, the 'second modernity' is a product of global economic and political developments, of the rise of international media networks, of new forms of democracy based on systems of expertise and the political involvement of individual citizens and, not least, of congestion. (...) As a small trading nation and prosperous welfare state, the Netherlands are perhaps more susceptible to these developments than other countries and therefore forced to anticipate the developing situation, among other things at a political level." (Lootsma 2000: 21).
3. See Juergen Habermas, "Modernity: an Incomplete Project", in: Foster, H. (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays in Post-Modern Culture*, 1983, pp. 3-15. This milestone essay was originally delivered as a talk in September 1980 when Habermas was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno prize by the city of Frankfurt. Habermas delivered it again as a James Lecture of the New York Institute for the Humanities at the New York University in March 1981 and later published with the title of "Modernity vs Postmodernity", in: *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981).

4. Janny Rodermond, "After Next", *Fresh Facts. The Best Buildings by Young Architects in the Netherlands* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers/Publishers, 2002): 111.

5. Ton Verstegen, "Use by", *Fresh Facts. ... cit.:* 93-94.

6. Winy Maas, "Architecture is a Device", *Reading MVRDV* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003): 145, 147.

7. Sir John Summerson has claimed that the architect's program (seen as a "local fragment of social patterns"), resulted from a new appreciation that Modernists gave to social factors, is the "one new principle involved in Modern architecture". See Sir John Summerson, "A Case for the Theory of Modern Architecture", *RIBA Journal* (June 1957): 309.

Others, like Thomas Schumacher, have dealt with the variable consistency of Modernist architects with Corbu's dogma "the outside is the result of the inside" (which Corbu himself not always complied with). See Thomas Schumacher, "The Outside is the Result of an Inside'. Some Sources of One of Modernism's Most Persistent Doctrines", *ACSA JAE* (Sept 2002): 23-33.

8. Bernard Tschumi, "Spaces and Events", *Architecture and Disjunction* (London & Cambridge, Mass. USA: The MIT Press, 1996): 139.

9. Walter van Dijk, *Fresher Facts ... cit.:* 22.

10. Aaron Betsky, "Experimental Pragmatism. The Ever Fresh Facts of Dutch Architecture", *Fresh Facts. ... cit.:* 17.

11. MVRDV web-site (July 23, 2005).

12. Again MVRDV: "[Our firm] makes use of, and lay claims to, *diversity*. [We] proceed as a team, inviting different and at times unexpected disciplines to join forces with [us], mixing disciplinary categories. (...) Advisors in the fields of building and installation technology, building sciences, building management and building costs assist a team." MVRDV web-site (July 23, 2005).

13. Palmboom & van den Bout web-site (July 23, 2005).

14. The firm states: "The knowledge that contemporary landscape is for the major part artificial, made up of different components - designed and undersigned - allows West 8 the freedom to respond by positioning its own narrative spaces. The basic ingredients are ecology, infrastructure, weather conditions, building

programs and people." West 8 web-site (July 23, 2005)

15. Adriaan Geuze, "Accelerating Darwin", in: (Ibelings 2000), p. 256.

16. Winy Maas, "Architecture is a Device", *cit.:* 145.

17. See Roemer van Toorn, "Fresh Conservatism and Beyond", in: (Ibelings 2000), pp. 266-268; and Anne Hoogewoning, Roemer van Toorn et al., "Game Over", *Architecture in the Netherlands. Yearbook 2004-05* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers/Publishers, 2005): 15-19.

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Credits

Fig. 1 - From: Betsky 2004, p. 287.

Fig. 2 - From: Ibelings 2000, p. 88.

Fig. 3 - From: *A+U* 403, "Young Architects in the Netherlands" (April 2004), p. 99.

Fig. 4 - From: *Fresh Facts. ... cit.*, p. 56.

Fig. 5 - From: *A+U ... cit.*, p. 73.

Fig. 6 - From: Peter Reed, *Groundswell. Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 35.