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# English

Valéry Didelon (pages 8–15)

English Translation: N. Hargreaves/M. Robinson

## The Netherlands – an avant-garde for better or for worse

From the crisis of urbanism to the crisis of the critique of urbanism

Urban changes generally seem to evade being controlled by those responsible for them, but the Netherlands now seems to be the country where something we could call being “avant-garde for better or for worse” is emerging. Today’s Dutch architects and town planners remain faithful to a long tradition of radicalism – initiated by Gerrit Rietveld and Theo Van Doesburg during the heroic period of modernism, and later pursued by Aldo Van Eyck –, and so they exploit positions that are expressed more cautiously elsewhere. However, we shall also see how Rem Koolhaas and his successors are considerably

enhancing the status of the avant-garde: rather than trying to break away from the dominant culture, they follow it and have become its standard bearers.

In his 1994 article “Whatever happened to urbanism”, Rem Koolhaas set out what he considered to be a beneficial renewal within the field. On the basis of the paradox that sees town planning as a discipline suffering at the very moment that urbanisation is growing so rapidly, he called for a complete break with accepted approaches. For him, the failure of modernity to transform its environment is a reality and post-modern substitutes (from historicism to deconstructivism) have not been able to provide alternative solutions. Rather than simply changing the method, he called for ideological renewal and concluded his article as follows: “What if we simply declare that there is no crisis – redefine our relationship with the city not as its makers but as its mere subjects, as its supporters?”. This represents a major epistemological break that is now cutting through architecture and town planning in the Netherlands in the form of a strategy of the real.

From the welfare state to the “new deal” of liberalism

During the 20th century, a subsidy-based system of construction marked the ideological triumph

of social democracy in the Netherlands which found itself assuming the town planning approach proposed by the CIAM (president from June 1931: Cornelis Van Eesteren). Modern architects and town planners have adapted their response to this desire to transform society actively by rationally organising its artificial environment (transformation of quantity into quality through abstraction and repetition). From the reconstruction of Rotterdam to the building of Bijlmermeer, modern town planning in the Netherlands symbolised the triumph of the will.

But in the mid 1980s, two major trends finally led to a complete reappraisal of the accepted model: firstly, the devolution of local authorities and secondly, the voluntary withdrawal of the State and its replacement by market forces. In order to democratise the country further, the Netherlands undertook a decentralisation process that had a considerable effect on urban development. More importantly, the privatisation of public real estate companies symbolised the objective alliance between social democracy and market forces, and withdrew the state from its historic role as an urban developer. The recent urbanisation of Borneo and Sporenburg, two former piers in the port of Amsterdam, is characteristic of this new approach. Marcel Smets has shown how much this operation broke away from the tradition of new urban districts initiated

