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English

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.
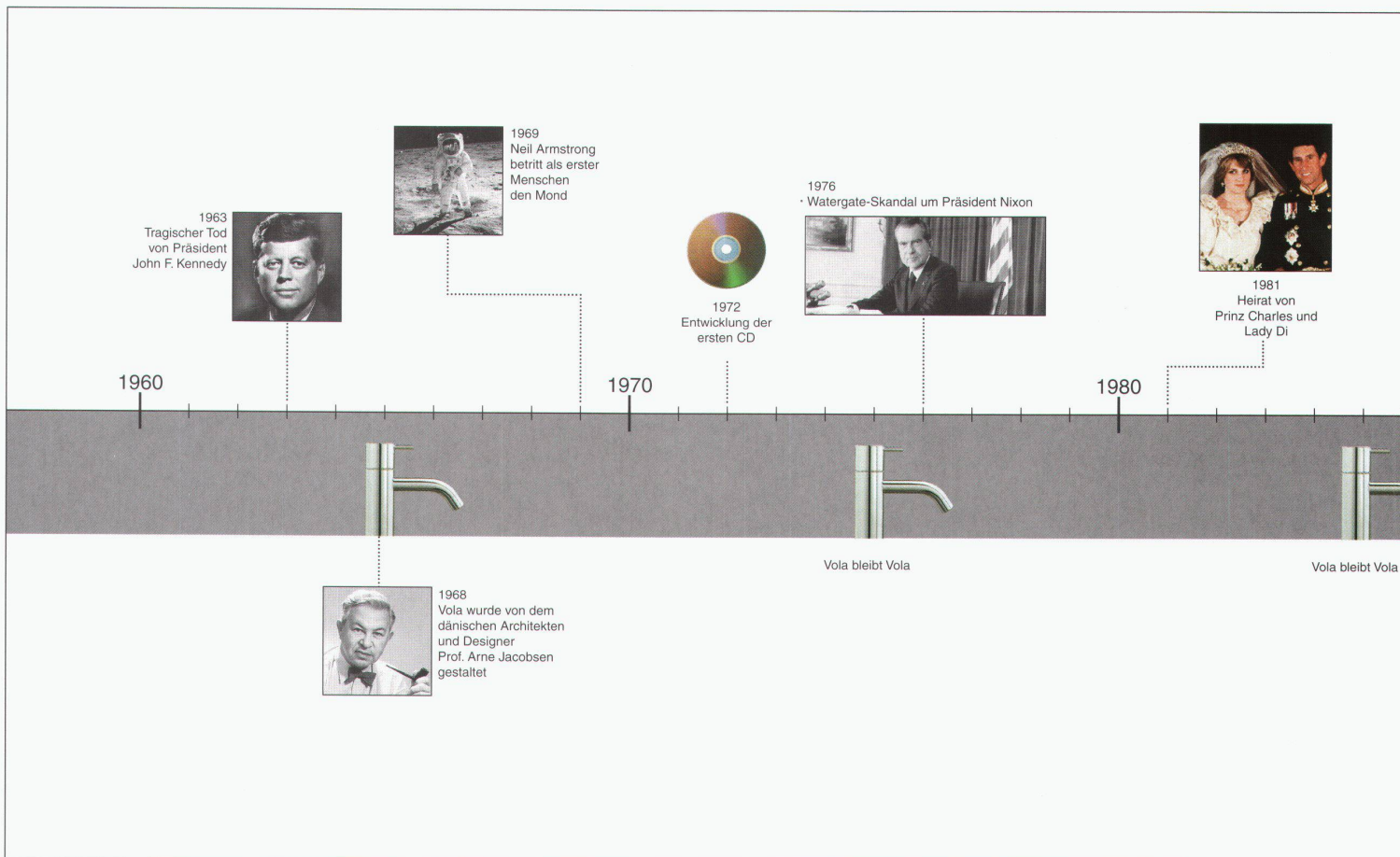
In his 1994 article "Whatever happened to urbanism", Rem Koolhaas set out what he considered to be a beneficial renewal within the field. On the basis of the paradox that sees town planning as a discipline suffering at the very moment that urbanisation is growing so rapidly, he called for a complete 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

1963
Tragischer Tod von Präsident John F. Kennedy

1969
Neil Armstrong betritt als erster Menschen den Mond

1972
Entwicklung der ersten CD

1976
Watergate-Skandal um Präsident Nixon

1981
Heirat von Prinz Charles und Lady Di

1960   1970   1980

Vola bleibt Vola   Vola bleibt Vola

1968
Vola wurde von dem dänischen Architekten und Designer Prof. Arne Jacobsen gestaltet

by Berlage and how it became committed to an opportunistic and lucrative town planning approach. With this project, the city of Amsterdam not only abandoned its role as owner to the private sector, but also initiated and encouraged a vast process of gentrification. As a result, town planning has become less and less an expression of policy and increasingly an economic activity. What we are seeing is a massive privatisation of the power to transform the urban environment effectively.

The welfare state has been completely replaced by an improbable combination of market forces and local democracy. The reality of power is now vested in new finery that both the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the historian Frank Ankersmit have reviewed. For Frank Ankersmit, the three successive social organisation models described by Gilles Deleuze: sovereign societies, disciplinary societies and control societies, correspond to three power paradigms. Both believe that we are now witnessing the final breakdown of disciplinary societies and entering a control period ruled by the third paradigm of power. This latter reveals itself above all by a deficiency and evidence of it can be found wherever there is an absence of formal power. It eats away at the institutions that we have inherited from disciplinary societies and, wherever the powerlessness of modern states is

criticised, this is no more than an implicit recognition of the reality of this new type of power. This third paradigm of power covers the influence of market forces, the ascendancy of bureaucracy, the defence of particular interests (NIMBY) and the power of corporatism. Although it remains difficult to grasp, and even if it does not have a clearly identifiable form or origins, it seems to be as real and influential as the financial markets. Finally, what's left is a little space where architects can design their buildings and town planners their town. Nothing but a form without an author, a three-dimensional representation of the third paradigm of power discussed by Frank Ankersmit.

The apology of the real

In that context of the middle of the 1990s, a new generation of Dutch town planners and architects attempted to recover possession of their disciplines, among them: MVRDV, West 8, NL Architects, ONEarchitecture and MAX 1. These firms adopted an intellectual position that allowed them to survive and even thrive in what certain people were already calling a second modernity. In the Netherlands and elsewhere, a large number of critics did their utmost to define these professionals as being part of the same movement and, among others, this resulted in the term fresh conservatism proposed by Roemer van

Toorn in 1996. This designation is particularly interesting as it goes beyond the aesthetic appreciations referred to by neo- or super-modernism.

Fresh refers to a number of characteristics: unqualified optimism, readiness to enter into dialogue and be tolerant, communicative energy, marked degree of strong hedonism, and so on. It is a way of exorcising the disarray that defined the previous generation. Conservatism refers to existing values, to the rejection of radical reforms (rejection of utopia) and the constant search for consensus. Fresh conservatism matches the current mood by assuring a synergy between preserving what exists and aspiring towards what is new. Its political horizon is the alliance between social democracy and the market economy. This oxymoron arises from the tension between an aspiration to individual differentiation, and modernity's increasing tendency to homogenise all that it encounters.

This new position breaks away from something that modernism and post-modernism shared: the quest for a new realm. Modernism sought a better future while post-modernism wanted to return to a nostalgic past (historicism, neo-regionalism). Rather than trying to escape from the present, the new position found that the existing environment was the one that suited it best. The everyday sameness of the contemporary city is an inexhaustible source of inspiration

1989
Fall der Berliner Mauer

1994
Nelson Mandela zum Präsidenten von Südafrika gewählt

1997
Dolly - das erste geklonte Schaf

2003
Wird der Weltraumtourismus zur Realität?

2010
Sind die Forscher dann vielleicht im stande, Zellen für bestimmte Zwecke zu züchten?

1990   2000   2010

Vola bleibt Vola

Vola bleibt Vola

to this young generation of Dutch architects who owe a great debt to Robert Venturi. The spaces that interest them are generic (shopping centres, leisure parks, residential suburbs), deteriorated (industrial and urban wasteland), technical (communications and distribution networks) and forbidden zones (red light districts, crime-ridden areas). They visit them much like professional tourists who prefer remaining on their home ground and for whom the present and reality remain the last exotic pleasures. This resolutely consensual position seems to represent a conspiracy of the real, in the etymological sense of the term where conspiring means "respiring together".

Modernism and post-modernism were based on an intellectual critique of society, with the former risking never being able to build a better world, and the latter remaining within the confines of a bitter rejection. The new generation of Dutch architects seeks to resolve this deadlock by substituting the optimism of action for the pessimism of reflection (Aldo van Eyck being the major proponent of this first position in the Netherlands). It begins by analysing and studying those aspects that are so banal that they are no longer noticed. The most mediocre elements, the strict programmatic requirements and the most restrictive laws are analysed in a more or less scientific manner (the systematic use of statistics to this end occasionally seems more like crystal-gazing numerology than a real research exercise). Each data element is then distorted and twisted until it can be seen in a new light and provide a degree of shock value. This approach led MVRDV to design WoZoCo, an old people's home, which has become one of the most "fashionable" buildings of recent years, to such an extent that it features centrally in a Dutch television advertisement. In this way, what was banal becomes radical and something extraordinary can be drawn out of something that is normally highly conventional. For these architects, only pragmatism is able to produce the unexpected and their motto is a reinterpretation of: "Be realistic, demand the impossible".

As such, the manipulation of the real is assumed as a way of combining critical research with constructive action. Architecture and town planning are approached in terms of systematic idealisation and overestimation of the possible, both of which are conceptual tools initially developed within the OMA framework.

72 From the real to the natural
The apologia for the real that the young generation of Dutch architects and town planners have adopted as their credo is clearly rooted in the work and writings of Rem Koolhaas. While he used Delirious New York and then SMLXL to express his positions, it was his journalistic past that forged his intellectual position. Baart Lootsma has clearly shown how "Zero-journalism", of which Koolhaas was an active proponent, attempted to prove that events were more important than comments, that information could quite happily

dispense with opinion and that the role of the critic was obsolete. For Rem Koolhaas, a journalist's work consisted in reporting what was happening as precisely and objectively as possible. Creativity resided in the subjective selection of objective events and in the capacity to draw attention to undervalued issues. It was in Rem Koolhaas's journalistic past that he conceptualised the unveiling of the real that he now seeks to put into practice in urban planning.

But because Koolhaas has assumed the mantle of a reporter covering the contemporary city, he is now subject to the same criticism as the other journalists. Consequently, there is no reason not to analyse the positions held by Rem Koolhaas and his successors from the point of view of the mass media critic.

For instance, to what extent is the renunciation of opinion and commitment really a neutral position? Isn't the fact of reporting reality as it exists the best way to serve the powers that be? While the major American and European networks are occasionally accused of aiding and abetting the events they cover (conflicts, economic changes, etc.), doesn't the urban reporter role that Rem Koolhaas extols also contribute in its own way to a unified vision of the city? Can one continually give account of a situation without assuming a certain responsibility?

What Rem Koolhaas's position reveals is a tendency to naturalise urban phenomena. He presents us with a generic city resulting from chaotic and inexplicable transformations without any programmed end. The city he describes seems governed by semi-organic rules; rather than being the result of a cultural construction, it is a state of being where reality is assumed to be natural. The idea of a biological future for town planning is reinforced by repeated references to "mutations", but it should not be forgotten that most of these are now provoked and orchestrated. The position adopted by Rem Koolhaas is reminiscent of that held by Alan Greenspan when discussing the "irrational exuberance" of financial markets. And yet, both are well-placed to know that urbanisation and globalisation are not natural phenomena. If politicians and urban planners seem to be losing control over one another, it is clearly because they are complying with rationalities that go beyond their understanding. While we recognise that Koolhaas has the merit of ensuring that the world in which we live is a central concern, he can nevertheless be criticised for having only partially lifted the curtain on urban reality, for not following his ideas through to their logical conclusion, and contenting himself with an apparent chaos.

Subversion?
A large number of Dutch architects and urban planners are now following Rem Koolhaas who remains in the comfortable position of being the meteorologist of cityscape, and adopting the strategy of the real. As suggested by Anna Klingmann, the Netherlands is a country where transgression is a way of rethinking that is not as

a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic, but as a fracture within the order. The intention is not to break away from the system but rather to expose it within its crisis context.

If there is an avant-garde, then it brings out both the best and the worst. The best is to have successfully developed a certain efficiency, highlighted the real problems set by the contemporary town and provided innovative solutions. It is a remarkable way of following the post-modern architects and town planners who had abandoned reality in favour of an autonomous discipline that only produced more or less self-referential fictions (from historicism through to deconstruction). The worst is linked to the risk of collusion related to the apologia of the real, as the celebration of the generic is clearly a way of approving those who impose it. In certain ways, Dutch architects and town planners constantly take the risk of abandoning and betraying their role as critics, and joining those that rationalise what exists, simply justifying the established order. As soon as this avant-garde loses its provocative role, it will simply become a rubber stamp for urban changes. That would be a major U-turn which could put the avant-garde on the periphery of the existing system. If subversion becomes mainstream, it will be nothing more than a marketing plan, aiming only to secure commissions. When Rem Koolhaas said: "What if we simply declare that there is no crisis ...", he indirectly raises the real problem now represented by his ideological position. Like Luc Boltanski, who demonstrated that the real crisis is not that of capitalism but that of the critique of capitalism, one can postulate that there is no crisis of urbanism, but rather a deep crisis in the critique of urbanism: "The role of the critic only makes sense when it exists in the differential between a state of things that are desirable and a state of things that exist".

From the avant-garde to the arrière-garde and back again

Formal and aesthetic projects and architectural conservation areas

Asking questions about a contemporary architectural avant-garde touches upon a taboo. People avoid the idea as though it carried some danger of infection. The burden of the failed modernist project associated with the historic avant-garde is still too heavy and too discouraging. But the avant-garde still persists as a rhetorical figure within the architectural debate. As reliably as a biological reflex, every generation of young architects claims that they are

"pioneers" rather than "mainstream". And the problem zone of the "avant-garde" as a piece of terminology is concealed behind an apparently ideology-free heading like "research".

The enfant terrible of contemporary architecture, the architecture of topology, is steeped in the law of the avant-garde, i. e. the methodologically applied transgression of everything that has been there previously, with a continuous impetus vaguely reminiscent of Che Guevara's practice of professional revolution. Like heroic modernism, topological architecture also lays its claim to be avant-garde by presenting two connected figures: introducing something radically new into history, and thus breaking with history at the same time. As is well known, under modernism the notion of being new was defined by a social Utopia that promised to end the alienation of the individual and remove social inequality. This materialized more or less directly in new architectural themes: in transparency as a new interface between human beings and space, and in a new formal aesthetic. History was proclaimed to be scorched earth, and people set off to a new place to establish a new tradition. In fact Sigfried Giedion's great propaganda work "Space-Time-Architecture" was subtitled "The Growth of a New Tradition".

The idea of the new features just as vehemently in topological architecture, but of course it is defined completely differently: by asserting a break with Euclidian geometry in favour of new topological surfaces and "calculus-based geometries" (Greg Lynn), by new construction technologies like file-to-factory as a direct combination of Computer-Aided Design and Computer-Aided Manufacturing (applied in Frank Gehry's Zollhof complex in Düsseldorf), by the new spatial notion of the free section, which replaces modernism's free ground plan (for example FOA's new ferry terminal in Yokohama, now under construction), and also finally through new materials, extending the canon of modernism via the triad of steel, glass and concrete (e.g Kotalan and McDonald's O/K apartment).

Topological wear and tear

Similarly to the paradigm of reconstruction that it replaced, topological architecture bases its claim to be avant-garde above all on being formally different from everything that had been there before, as shown clearly by the title of an essay by Greg Lynn: "Why tectonics is square and topology groovy" (Any Magazine 14/1996). And Lars Spuybroek claims with similar vigour that his architecture has left the formal inconsistencies of the previous generation behind: he says that while Peter Eisenman's deconstructive volumes were simply a façade for geometrically regular sections and Rem Koolhaas stuck his folded surfaces in modernistic boxes, his own architecture applies the idea of topological space to the whole building for the first time.

Seen in this way, solving a formal problem is made into a general subject for architecture.

Form becomes a fetish that covers up all other aspects of architecture; this is expressed in a monoculture of "extravagant form" that uniformly determines the field of architectural production, especially in the context of the distinguished Anglo-American architecture schools. But extravagance is a temporary source of attraction that has to consume itself in order to be effective. One sign of wear and tear is the increasing homogenization of built architecture, which is already reflected in convergence in the way it is treated by the media (see the new edition of the 1999 and 2000 ArchiLab catalogues recently published by Thames & Hudson, and Peter Zellner's survey "Hybrid Space", also Thames & Hudson 1999). As it becomes increasingly available, "extravagant form" is increasingly losing the discursive potential to constitute an avant-garde. Following the cycle, familiar from the computer industry, of professionaliziation, reduced prices and increasing market distribution, computer systems that are still exclusive today - like Catia, which is so far used only by Frank Gehry, along with all the manufacturing processes based on it – will increasingly be taken for granted as a component of architecture's technological infrastructure.

Demoralization of form

The clandestine aura that surrounds digital formal worlds today will disperse when they become available on an everyday basis (as the Apple Macintosh myth faded when the system was cloned by the mass product Windows); they simply become an additional design option in the catalogue of what is feasible. The BMW Pavilion at the 1997 International Motor Show in Frankfurt am Main shows that this process is already well under way. The pavilion, whose double-curved wall surfaces were created from the digitally animated "force fields" of the cars on show, was designed and built by the major Frankfurt practice ABB. ABB had previously tended to find a niche in the territory of "Corporate Architecture", so that it would be hard to accuse them of harbouring avant-garde ambitions. The decision to use Blob architecture for the BMW Pavilion (and for its successor at this year's International Motor Show), is based less on architectural vision than on the strategic calculation of using the Blob's image factor to convey a sense of being "Brand New" for BMW's own branding.

Along with this availability comes the idea that every form is equal in value. A complex Blob and a plain box will be worth the same as each other by some stage, and live with each other in a state of "peaceful co-existence", to paraphrase the final phase of the Cold War. Ultimately this post-dissuasive stage of the avant-garde and the end of its "form wars" leads to a de-moralization of form, absolutely in the spirit of Nietzsche's idea of "extra-morality".

This revaluation of form as a strategic dispositive was crucially initiated by Rem Koolhaas in recent contemporary architecture. Systematic consideration of his work reveals the instinctive con-

fidence with which he used a whole variety of formal paradigms according to the formal goals that he was pursuing at the time, without then necessarily committing himself to them stylistically. As an amoralist, Koolhaas does not believe in form any longer, he simply uses it. This secularized formal understanding also seems to play an important work in the oeuvre of those architects who - more or less obviously successors to Koolhaas – work with the "datascape" method. This approach, mainly pushed forward by MVRDV and the Design Research Lab (DRL) of the Architectural Association, grew out of critical analysis of the semiotic and linguistic design processes that peaked in the 70s and 80s, mainly in the architecture of the American East Coast (including Tschumi, Eisenman, Libeskind). In contrast with the approach of applying a theory like this from the outside, this younger generation wanted to develop the formative potential of architecture "from the inside", using their own preferred resources. And this leads to the almost obsessive drive in "datascape" architecture to precede design by comprehensively mapping all conditions and forces already latently active on the site or of some influence to the future project (e.g. traffic patterns, ambient noise levels, soil contamination etc.).

Research as an aesthetic?

The potential of this approach lies in an architecture in which form is not imposed a priori, but developed from existing conditions. An architecture that is able to permit a plurality of formal languages that has never existed before, and able to dispense with the myth of "good form" once and for all. But architectural production, which tends to use "datascape" implicitly or explicitly nowadays, often does not redeem this enormous promise. Even though consistent application would be bound to arrive at different results in different situations, and would by definition not be able to come up with any particular style, the majority of datascape projects share a compromising stylistic uniformity. Mysteriously, datascape seems to be unavoidably shackled to continuous surfaces and topologically morphed landscapes (this is particularly the case with FOA and some of the DRL research). In this way, something that is actually a promising approach is reduced to the status of yet another formal and aesthetic project. As such there is no doubt that it has certain qualities, as did its predecessors, but just like these it fits in with the atavistic tradition of an architecture of the artistic that wants to shine because of its formal originality, and throws the architect back into the role of the artist-architect, long thought to have become a thing of the past.

But as there is no recognizable social utility value for architecture for architecture's sake, it is not surprising that the social demand for architecture is falling. Its sphere of activity is shrinking increasingly to the limited "architectural conservation areas" maintained by protectionist intervention from the state: public competitions

or other targeted promotion measures for young architectural practices of the kind commonly seen in the Netherlands. But those mega-environments that blend formerly separate function like shopping, entertainment and leisure into new programmatic hybrids are almost always created without any input from architects.

If architecture wants to involve itself in creating this reality – and that would be a task for today's avant-garde –, then it must position itself appropriately. Every previous avant-garde has constituted itself as such by having a particular vision. To the avant-garde of the 1920s this meant a social utopia whereas the 70s and 80s avant-garde was based on a formal project. These options are not available to the avant-garde of today, and there is a great deal to suggest that it should reconstitute itself by adopting a strategic vision. Rather than continuing to search for new formal processes, it will now primarily have to invent strategies anchored in the economic and social reality of our day, and that can be actively involved in designing it.

Designing operative conditions

Up to now, architects' professional practice has been largely confined to interpreting pre-defined programmes spatially. As these programmes are increasingly becoming fixed as standard typologies, architects are needed less and less to put them into architectural practice. They are being replaced by commercial building firms, which are already superior to traditional architectural practices because the range of services they can offer is much more comprehensive.

Of course it is possible to regret the loss of this market segment for architecture. But it would be just as legitimate to ask how rewarding it is for architecture anyway to decorate developer-optimized ground plan types architecturally (Frank Gehry's Düsseldorf Zollhof complex comes into this category). But this alleged loss of the sphere of commercial building could in fact release architecture for a much more active practise: it could create its own programmes in future. And here it could use those particular abilities that only architects have at their fingertips: the fact that they can organize event structures in space and time thanks to a highly developed sense of three-dimensional imagination. If it is to be able to exploit this strength to the full, architecture must put up a fight to wrest the appropriate creative authority back from those parties in the market-place who have been wielding it in their stead so far: the developers, project managers and scenario planners. Only when architecture has critically assimilated their operative vocabulary will it be able to shift away from the reactive situation in which it is currently trapped and back to an active position. Seen in this way, creating operative conditions for architecture turns out to be a kind of meta-project that will first have to create a basis for the "actual" architectural work. Overall, perhaps architecture has to put itself forward from the second row today, flanked and partially camou-

flaged by other abilities (Event Design, Interior Design, Event Marketing, Product Design and a specific form of enterprise consulting). But this does not imply that the question of form would then be irrelevant. There is no doubt that form will continue to be a vital dimension of architecture. It is just that it is no longer an isolated fetishistic object in the foreground of architectural discourse, but operates as part of the interplay of all planes of architecture. In a certain sense it is going through a revaluation similar to one that took place between two key works by Marcel Duchamp. With his "Nu descendant l'escalier" (1916), Duchamp drew a saturated development of formal experimentation as such to a conclusion. But with "Fountain" (1917) he was entering completely unknown territory. In the first case, form is still playing the part of the prima ballerina, it is celebrating its own performance. In the second case, form seems to disappear behind the anonymity of the industrially produced utility object, leaving behind a trail of questions and doubts that is still the motor driving contemporary art, right down to the present day. It would be a happy accident if contemporary architecture were to have its basic assumptions shattered in a similarly profound way. And then questions about the avant-garde would no longer be taboo.