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Reaching Out

How to Increase the Social and Cultural Value of Architecture?

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"I don't just want the kids building a model and then going home with the idea that architecture is easy. The professionals here have been exiled to the attic." – The scene is the re-opening of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) in June 2011, and it is clearly not only words of praise that are being uttered. Many colleagues have expressed decidedly critical views of the new program. The transformation of the NAI into a "Museum of Architecture" with a renovated foyer and readjusted exhibition program has above all been the consequence of a desire to strengthen the social significance of architecture. That made it necessary to solicit the interest of the public. And thus the professional architect was displaced from the centre of attention. Architects now shared the new NAI with children and with members of the public who might rarely give a thought to architecture, or who may have been giving it their conscious attention for the first time. Considering the original profile of the Institute and the drastic budget cuts that are imminent in Dutch cultural policy, the shift in emphasis was carried out with mixed feelings and triggered divergent reactions. And while the vexed tone was sincere, it also exhibited the perspective of an inward-looking professional community. Although every square centimetre in the Netherlands has been designed by architects, urban planners and landscape architects over the centuries, the better part of the population is unaware of this; architecture and urban planning are felt to be abstract matters and are dismissed as difficult. Even if our everyday surroundings are defined on every scale by architecture and urban design, their social impact remains something on which the public either cannot or would rather not reflect. Particularly in times of economic recession, Dutch society's faith in the value that architecture adds is deplorably low. Architects find themselves at a great remove from the rest of society. They hardly communicate, or communicate only with insiders; moreover, the architectural icons of the past decades hardly express an intention to serve the public good. Architecture is not even a topic of discussion in the media, unless the point is a search for the ugliest building in the country. In short, if architecture wishes to gain in cultural, political and economic influence, architecture has to be "unlocked" – in the broadest sense of the word – for a non-professional public and in an intelligent and appealing way. Hence the NAI ceased to attempt to provide everything for everyone, instead making a selection based on different needs and expectations. The following article deals with the thematic underpinnings of the re-orientation of the NAI.

A "rich" architectural climate

It is natural to ask what can be so new about an institute that was founded in 1988 and opened in a new building in Rotterdam in 1993. An institute that once again became a subject of discussion in mid-2011, given that from January 1, 2013 it was to be absorbed into The New Institute (Het Nieuwe Instituut) for Architecture, Design and E-Culture. The fusion of NAI (architecture), Premisela (fashion and design) and the Virtueel Platform (e-

culture) was above all a result of deep budget cuts made by the Dutch government. However it also has to do with efforts to market architecture and design as parts of the creative industries.

The present mood fades in comparison with the ambitious '80s and '90s, in which the foundations were laid for a world-famous architectural climate. In 1991 the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, together with the Ministry for Building, Planning and the Environment, published the first position paper for architecture, 'Space for Architecture' (Ruimte voor architectuur) with the aim of stimulating the architectural climate between 1991 and 1996. The paper smoothed the way for the establishment of infrastructure for a whole series of architectural institutions. The Netherlands Architecture Fund was founded, as was the postgraduate program in architecture at the Berlage Institute. Although the NAI had already been around since 1988, the opening of its own dedicated building represented the public face of architectural policy. Meanwhile, in the wake of the NAI, numerous architecture centres arose to strengthen the architectural discourse at the local level. All of these measures cleared the way for a new generation of architects, urban planners, landscape architects and historians. Through designs, exhibitions and publications they engaged in an intensive period of self-reflection, research and theoretical production. The economic prosperity of the 1990s gave architects the freedom to push the boundaries both of their field and of each brief. Moreover, numerous attention-grabbing projects were actually brought to construction. In the mid-nineties offices such as West 8, MVRDV, OMA and NL Architects gained international recognition for their challenging and provocative design ideas, which they proposed in response to extremely complex processes and assignments.

It is this period which is now looked back upon as the heyday of Dutch architecture, particularly by policy-makers. Characteristic of this perspective is that emphasis is chiefly laid on the architect's market position. In view of the economic difficulty of the era, it sees in iconic architectural works – which are rarely critical and seldom site-specific – an internationally marketable product. The social and cultural embeddedness of architecture barely plays a role in the discussion on the subject – resulting in a diminishing system of funding support.

Museum for architecture

Its activities, but above all the comprehensiveness of its collection, made the NAI into one of the largest architectural institutions in the world. Actually, the collection was much older than the institute itself; older even than the three cultural institutes that in 1988 amalgamated to form the NAI: the Netherlands Architecture Documentation Centre (Nederlands Documentatiecentrum voor de Bouwkunst – NDB), the Architecture Museum Foundation (Stichting Architectuurmuseum – SAM) and the Foundation for Housing (Stichting Wonen). Architectural drawings by significant architects had been collected as early as the end of the nineteenth century. The collection comprises around 500 archives documenting the work of Dutch architects, urban planners, professional organisations and degree courses. Highly regarded figures such as H.P. Berlage, P.J.H. Cuypers, W.M. Dudok, J.J.P. Oud, G.T. Rietveld and T. van Doesburg are represented – and not merely by competition entries: entire firm archives have been left to the NAI, including models, sketches, diaries and correspondence. This enables investigation of individual projects or thorough research into the total output of individuals and firms. Among the new acquisitions of the collection are the archives of T. Bosch and M. van Schijndel, as well as the early work

of OMA and MVRDV. These archives can still be consulted and investigated in the public library of The New Institute. The library also holds more than 35,000 books on architecture and related subjects, plus a broad range of (inter)national architectural journals.

Beyond the reorganisation of administrative functions and the accessibility of the collections, the 1998 amalgamation gave rise to a further challenge: the organisation of exhibitions, readings, debates and increasingly, under the influence of several very different institute directors, a wide-ranging international and pedagogical program. In the period between 1993 and 2013 the NAI made the transition from an outfit known mainly to the international circle of specialists to a well-regarded institute with exhibitions on architecture in the broadest sense of the word.

The art museum as emancipator

Within the world of museums, architectural museums do not possess a long history. For decades, beginning in the early twentieth century, it was art museums that formed the physical environment and context in which architecture was exhibited. It is not surprising, therefore, that the very same conventions were called upon in attempting to introduce the public to the history of architecture. This took place on the one hand by means of the systematic presentation of significant architects in solo exhibitions, on the other by the modes of display, namely by exhibiting visually impressive artefacts, such as models (placed on pedestals), sketches, competition designs and photos.¹

However, these two perspectives are rather circuitous ways to exhibit the built environment. The larger part of what surrounds us internationally is informal and thus built without the help of star architects. And the exhibition materials are only derivatives of that which is found outside museum walls. Drawings and models simply lack the physical vitality of space, scale and time. Nonetheless, this mode of display still predominates.

The street

Although the NAI has never repudiated this "classical" form of display and selection, since around 2007 it has looked for more direct ways to enter into dialogue with its audiences. In this way the hope was to get closer to the physical environment of people's lives and to activate the engagement of the viewer in a pleasurable way. How can an architecture museum, and in particular an architecture exhibition, position itself in the field of social, political and economic forces so that with its questions or theses it resonates with the public? With a public, namely, that is co-responsible for the shaping of our built environment. With a public that is extremely diverse, and comprises designers, project developers, public servants, property developers and builders, but also inhabitants and users.

Although the last several decades have actually shown a number of experiments with the architecture exhibition qua medium – both in relation to the content and to the spatial design – this has not automatically resulted in a closer relationship to the public or with a larger target audience. Particular attempts in this direction have included the progressive architecture exhibitions in the Van Abbe Museum in the period from 1964 to 1973. Director and architect Jean Leering used the exhibition as a means of raising awareness about

¹ The 1932 exhibition *Modern Architecture: An International Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York is considered to be one of the first architecture exhibitions in the West; the curators Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock presented selected buildings above all by means of models on pedestals and large, representative photographs.

processes of social change. In only a few years, he shifted the emphasis from monographic exhibitions taking a rather static approach to the original, to exhibitions that mobilised installations in order to enable a larger spatial experience, that demanded the audience to play a more active role, and that selected their designs on the basis of thematic considerations.

One series of exhibitions still placed the work of architects Adolf Loos (1965), Hans Scharoun (1968) and Antoni Gaudí (1971) on centre stage in a classical fashion. Exhibitions on Vladimir Tatlin (1969), El Lissitzky (1965/66) and Theo van Doesburg (1968/69) began experimenting with the reconstruction of installations and the erection of scale models in order to provide visitors with a spatial experience. The exhibition on the Cityplan Eindhoven (1969) by the firm Van den Broek en Bakema was also important. It not only involved the presentation of an enormous model (1:20 scale) of the project at eye level, visitors were also asked to submit alternative ideas, which were later discussed at a public event. As such, the audience was given the chance to break free of its passive role. Experimentation reached a climax in the exhibition *The Street: Forms of Community (De Straat. Vorm van samenleven, 1972)* of which the themes and conception of which perfectly matched the atmosphere of the time. In contrast to other countries in which post-modernism was beginning to coalesce as a new architectural tendency, the discussion in the Netherlands remained focused on democratisation-processes, social engagement, participation and on human-centred design.

The exhibition explicitly focused on the use and the design of the street in an ever more complex society. An interdisciplinary working group designed the exhibition. Observing that the social use of the street is diminishing, the group sought to put the street back into a political and cultural arena. Everyday experiences were invoked in an attempt to encourage an active response from visitors, the aim being to break with the style of art exhibitions that were only intelligible to experts. In the end, the exhibition consisted of hundreds of photos mounted on building-site fences, street furniture in the form of benches, cordons and traffic signs, with pot plants standing in for nature. Slides with synchronised sound and films and videos were shown.

The reaction from both press and public was largely negative. The exhibition's concept was felt to be unclear and the amount of information presented overwhelming. One visitor expressed the following reaction: "Maybe the museum world feels that this is a great advance, an exhibition like this with a social theme. It might be fashionable but it has hardly anything to do with social engagement."²

Cross-pollination: curation – education

Maybe we should have taken this criticism more to heart. But starting from the belief that engagement is possible and necessary, the curation department of the NAI proceeded down its own path of experimentation and learning on the way to bridging the gap between museum and audience. Several public events and exhibitions between 2008 and 2010 distanced themselves from pure consumption and in different ways invited visitors to play an active role and to make contributions of their own. Audience members were viewed as producers, not consumers. The aim was to encourage an inquisitive attitude. Visitors were to be encouraged to look at their environment with different eyes, in the hope that in that case they would also value it more. For years the education department applied this

² Presentation by Diana Franssen, *The Street: Forms of Community*, April 19, 2006, Van Abbemuseum. See the report "¿Museum in Motion? Conference Proceedings: Boekpresentatie" (<http://libraryblog.vanabbemuseum.nl/category/livingarchive/museum-in-¿motion-conference-proceedings>).

consciousness-raising approach, introducing children, adolescents and adults to architecture, and subsequently a similar attitude was introduced in other programs.

Beyond this, the event series has sought to achieve integration wherever a particular subject matter has been distributed across different programs such as exhibitions, readings and education. Thus the education program and readings and discussions no longer took place as secondary offerings within the content of the relevant exhibition, but were promoted to public offerings in their own right.

A more beautiful Rotterdam!

Organising a pedagogical design competition in 2007-08 was decisive for my own personal attempts to locate the limits of the public events program. For five months, around 60 pupils from five secondary schools in Rotterdam's "problem neighbourhoods" put their heads together over the question of how architecture could improve their neighbourhood. In the media there was constant talk about problem districts – but did the pupils feel the same way about the places they inhabited? Should their neighbourhoods be different – and if so, how? With this initiative, the NAI hoped to encourage young people to reflect on the role of architecture. During the competition, pupils were able to discuss their district with one another, but also with architects and neighbourhood managers. What did they particularly like about their environment, what did they dislike? What role did architecture play in that? The pupils were invited to develop a vision of their built environment and to present a trailblazing design for changes.

The pupils were given a crash course on the architecture in their neighbourhood and investigated the immediate surroundings of their school in the company of an architect and a neighbourhood manager. A week later they received a visit from an architect at their school; he informed them about how he worked and they were able to ask him questions. Then at a workshop they learnt how best to present their plans, and produced their first models. With this preparation behind them, the participants had three months to develop their design. Since the project took place exclusively in the neighbourhoods in question, the pupils only encountered the NAI building at the official presentation. The creativity and inventiveness of the pupils was astounding; one could easily see how excited and rightly proud they were to present their designs.

Experimentation phase

In an effort to establish a more contemporary, critical and dynamic program around architecture in the broadest sense of the word, and for a broader public, consciousness-raising of the kind that had been deployed for *A more beautiful Rotterdam!* (*Rotterdam Mooier Dan!*) was developed further. The event *Shape Our Country* (*Maak ons land*, 2008/09) was the most daring of these experiments.³ For six months, not just professionals

³ In 2008, the exhibitions *Happening*, *My Public Space*, and *Archiphoenix* – the Dutch contribution at the 11th International Architecture Biennale in Venice – were shown. *Happening* was an architectonic object by the architect Wiel Arets, which functioned in the evenings as a set and podium for concerts, theatre performances, discussions, dinners and performances. The eight kiosks of *My Public Space* were stationed around the city of Rotterdam. In relation to eight selected cities they provided answers to the question: how public is our public space? The conceptual impulse for *Archiphoenix* came from the fire of May 13, 2008, that destroyed the faculty for architecture at the Delft University of Technology. *Archiphoenix* functioned as an international discussion platform. During the opening week the NAI invited the entire international architecture community to reflect on architecture's burning questions by means of a series of readings, podium discussions, interviews, a workshop, and speed dates.

but above all a general public took part in a discussion about the design of their environment, reflecting on the question: what should the Netherlands look like in the future? Can the spatial design of the Netherlands once again become an ambitious task that is pursued with passion? And besides all the conflicts, can we also discern a range of opportunities? The spatial requirements of transport, living, working, leisure, green spaces and water needs are in fact larger than the Netherlands itself; and besides these, we are also influenced by changes in the climate and the world economy. Not just the government but also market actors, designers and the population were called on to propose innovative solutions and supply compelling ideas. The event rested on the conviction that innovation and change are a matter not just for specialists but for all those with good ideas. Potential partners, moreover, were engaged in an exploration of the degree to which the most innovative plans might actually be realised.

An important theme during the conception of this event was personal contact, treated as a means to generate dialogue between the general audience and professionals, and in order to show visitors both the causes of the problem as well as solutions. The exhibition thus functioned as a workspace in which visitors (whether individuals or groups, laypersons or professionals) could initiate conversations and present their visions of the spatial design of the Netherlands. The debating game *The Making Of* was one of the most important elements of this process. Professionals, non-professionals, and pupils were given five hours to come up with a proposal for realising a particular spatial design goal. After presenting the plan, each team was responsible for responding to the objections and arguments of other players. Monthly networking dinners with experts from various disciplines, a monthly call for collaborators published in the well-known daily *De Telegraaf*, and weekly visits by civil society groups invited either to play the game or organise meetings, all guaranteed an overwhelming flow of ideas and suggestions for improving the spatial design of the Netherlands.

Lessons

In the above examples the attempt to get the public actively involved was often taken to extremes. But the result tended to be the opposite of what was intended. The majority of visitors felt little need to develop ideas of their own while visiting the institute. Rather they wished to see what they were used to seeing: a beautifully designed exhibition with extraordinary models or drawings. The professionals often felt the same way. Participation scared people off. The experiment ran too quickly for its audience. The desire to serve all target audiences simultaneously meant that public relations communications led to confusion and repelled the general public and professionals equally. In terms of the content, it became clear that it was a mistake to try to translate local engagement, whether at street or neighbourhood level, as in *A more beautiful Rotterdam!*, to an abstract national level: the concrete cases, the well-calibrated channels, and thus also the general public were all missing.

So what worked well? Never before had so many ministers from different ministries participated in NAI events or so many organisations collaborated with the NAI in bringing to light the need for better spatial design in the Netherlands. The desire to communicate in a substantial way with a broader public was energetically supported by all of these organisations. Thus they anticipated what has since come to be called the participatory society: a government that increasingly shares its responsibilities with business, research institutions and citizens. The networking dinners, the debating game, the podium

discussions, the happenings too: all these events were successful and brought a mixed public together in unusual combinations. Included were many experts from different fields who had never visited the NAI before and who were impressed by tailor-made solutions such as these.

New NAI Now

After years of experimentation and a drop in visitor numbers, the NAI was facing a dilemma: how could a scholarly institution demonstrate its expertise nationally and internationally while remaining accessible as a museum? One of the most important lessons was that it is simply not possible to please everybody. Each activity needs to be aimed at a very definite target audience and the topic, atmosphere, tone and selection of images as well as the spatial and graphical design need to be oriented accordingly. No more everything for everybody and all at once. This means recognising, too, that although architecture certainly can interest a broader public, the limits of this niche are quickly reached. Therefore target audiences were redefined: professionals, cultural consumers, teachers and tourists.

In May 2010 the NAI was closed for a long-planned renovation of the foyer area. The renovation had already been on the agenda for ten years. Initially it had been intended to provide the educational program with a more prominent location in the building and to enable the welcoming of more groups. On account of the lessons I have just described, 2011 saw an intense period of reorientation, a new marketing and communications policy, and the transformation of the building. The aim was to enlarge the NAI in several ways. In a literal sense, by means of an easily accessible lobby area, which with its improved and more spacious café, terrace and bookshop, as well as the new outreach area, means that a larger public space is accessible free of charge. And also in a metaphorical sense, by adding new exhibitions such as the *Hands-on Deck (DoeDek)* and *Dutchville (Stad van Nederland)* to the already substantial offerings, in order to enable a wide audience to encounter architecture.

Hands-on Deck

With the aim of getting newcomers to the field of architecture – above all families and also teachers – excited about the topic, a new area was set up in a prominent position in the centre of the building. The *Hands-on Deck*, accessible free of charge, was designed as an informal landscape in which anybody who wants to can engage in a hands-on experience. Visitors were able to build and design things both physically and digitally, on smaller and larger scales. Building blocks were available with which large edifices could be quickly created. Four interactive tables provided Lego and space to work on a virtual building foundation.

Dutchville

The permanent exhibition *Dutchville* was focused on the universal love-hate relationship to cities. Set off by atmospheric lights and recorded sound, the exhibition consisted of nothing but models and spatial installations, the aim being to let architecture be experienced through architecture. Models from the NAI collection functioned as actors in a play representing the positive, but also the negative sides of a city. Through a headset, the visitor was able to follow the discussions of six characters talking about the projects on display. The conversations made it clear that multiple truths regarding our built environment exist side-by-side, and that the subjects of controversy are not exhausted by the familiar question: beautiful or ugly?

Popular

As much as *Hands-on Deck* and *Dutchville* answered to the tastes of architectural “beginners”, it became clear that the possibilities for reaching a larger target audience by means of an exhibition about architecture are extremely limited. And thus it is not surprising that one of the most successful experiments seems to be an architecture app. In 2010 the NAI published the app UAR (Urban Augmented Reality) in Rotterdam. While walking through the city, the user is provided by UAR with texts, images, 3D models, archive materials and films that provide information about what cannot be seen. The city as it once was: buildings that used to stand here, on display. The city as it might have been: models and plans for buildings that were never built. And the city as it will one day be: impressions of buildings that are under construction. With the help of modern technology the app connects, in an extremely logical fashion, materials from the collection with physical reality. Of course, as much as we might experiment with forms of display, this is something that is hardly possible inside the walls of a museum.

For years the museum world has witnessed a robust debate as a consequence of the far-reaching popularisation of offerings through the introduction of interactive exhibitions, blockbusters or complete experiences. Is an art museum a place for marketing, or should a gallery visit be above all a voyage of discovery that calls for effort? This discussion often overlooks the fact that a distinction has to be drawn between leisure-time spent in an amusement park and the accessible stimulation of an active dialogue that may be offered to an audience. Every attempt to bring fine art or architecture closer to the visitor is quickly dismissed as a genuflection at the altar of commerce or mediocrity. Is the belief in architecture as a discipline undermined by an accessible exhibition, by apps or chances to build and play with physical models? Surely not. Architecture could benefit from a naive journalism that picks its way through conventions and clichés and serves up crude narratives precisely in attempting to present the intricacies of the subject. As such, architecture deserves a wide-ranging discussion involving more than just experts. The task of a public institution is to bring people of all ages and with different interests into this process, while ensuring that its programs are tailor-made and executed with intelligence and integrity.