

## **Convention: Virtue not Foe**

### **Outline peter drijver**

‘Tradition Today’ embodies a workable banner for this conference. Tradition Today doesn’t mean to reflect the state of the art of any ‘Traditionalism’ it is about progress. Traditional architecture and urbanism is generally understood by architects within very limited style definitions: pitched roofs, masonry, vertical windows and so on. The Stuttgarter Schule represented by Bonatz and Schmitthenner, the Bossche School represented by van der Laan and Pouderoyen and the Delftse School by Granpré Molière and Berghoef are some examples. But tradition itself is by definition no ~ism, it has no ‘style’ in itself. ‘Traditionalism’ as such exists but it is regression since it rejects all evolution and development. Tradition Today is not about regression but about avant-garde. It is about the urge to reconsider beauty and convention in finding form in european towns, cities and rural areas, in finding layered design strategies to find a way out of our own planning problems, ecological problems and enhance the quality of life. As we speak of conventions we speak about a status of ‘normality’ we all respect and support, about conventions that bind us. In our field of work Convention forms a bridge between typology and use, between planner and citizen, between physical urban framework and urban life itself.

### ***Tradition and invention***

So, is Tradition by definition restricted to old fashioned forms? Not at all. Tradition has been defined by the italian architect Bontempi as a set of working inventions. No more, no less –we teach our pupils and children working solutions and since building is expensive it builds upon experience, on trial and error. Over time these solutions naturally evolve. Some solutions become obsolete and will be forgotten, others simply stay. This is where Tradition touches Christopher Alexanders definition of traditional architecture.

#### ***QUOTE:***

*All traditional architecture that is, almost all the architecture built in Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Africa, Turkey, Iran, India, China; this dazzling wealth of forms, representing building, and art, and design for several millennia is our heritage; and it is important because, regardless of its particular style, nearly all*

*these buildings exemplify, in one way or another, a deeper thing: the presence of living structure. It is this living quality which inspires us, and which we, rightfully, must consider as our heritage and our great teacher. It is great, and it is a great teacher, because it shows us the existence of a fund of living architecture and asks us and inspires us to emulate that fund, in our own way, and to become part of it with our own buildings, in our own time.*

*The presence of living structure* makes us all aware of the vitality and complexity of our cities, towns and villages where many people are involved in cultural and economic dependancies. The art of living together of *polis* in *politics*, in large and multi-facetted communities as cities and towns and the way we express this in our built environment is possibly among the greatest achievements of mankind. The fund of living architecture is something to learn and understand as professionals in order to ponder our own contributions.

In biological evolution species evolve in order to survive. In our daily habitat construction apparently survives when its beauty, comfort and solidity clearly inspires consecutive generations to maintain that construction. This hints at the intelligence of economy, technology and beauty in existing building simply because of their obvious succes and since this success can be a matter of centuries and not generations there is a hidden wisdom and knowledge of our cultural conventions.

### ***The Town, the Moat and well beyond***

A hundredandfifty years ago a law made it legal for cities to take down their fortifications. Since then, consecutive urban extensions around the historic town produce all over Europe cities that consist of different yearnings. Each and every ring characterized by a then contemporary ideas of planing, urban design, economy and architectural articulation. Keeping these urbanized areas as a working Metropolis in shape, keeping a sound framework that helps us to find our ways inward or outward brings up the challenge to our generation how to transform these rings without losing their identity. It is our generation that spoiled a good part of the 19th century rings in our overzealous ambitions of city renewal in the late seventies. It is our generation that should train a keen eye on the relations between urban morphology and

architectural form since this is not barren land here between these terms. Over time these rings should be stratified by building initiatives and minor corrections –not by tearing whole areas down but by tailormade renewal. Moving towards those distinct characters of rings means knowledge of our disciplin and a lean hand to enrich and layer the qualities of those areas.

Since we're more aware than ever of the necessity of enlightenment the question can be brought up how to promote it in the existing neighborhoods and year-rings. Rather than a Shock-and-Awe treatment we have to strive for overlapping strategies, evolution of conventions rather than juxtaposition of conflicting, contrasting worlds.

### ***Nostalgia, arcadia and romance***

Traditional building as practised now in our country is mainly focused on the buildings' image as part of its value as a product on a middle-class market. Most projects have still a fifties suburban mission for monofunctional housing since our planning is mainly unchanged from fifties car-dependent mobility politics. Last decade many architects saw their housing commissions dwindle when state-driven housing practice ended. Although these architects still have all government related commissions they try to understand and explain why these terrible traditional looking projects are so popular in our country. Nostalgia –*Heimweh, nostalgie* or homesickness– is generally pointed at as a feeling that is embodied in these traditional homes. However nobody can be nostalgic or can be longing to the 17th century where life was extremely tough and homes were expensive and uncomfortable. Nobody can be nostalgic to the thirties where unemployment reigned and where Germany gave birth to a frightful power. But if it is not nostalgia that drives traditional architecture, what does?

Traditional building –the presence of living structure– includes romantic or even arcadian building as opposed to the self-declared modernist building today that practices hard forms, hard materials, tight details of contrasting materials and hard expressions for the public realm and the private domain. In our country from the eighties and nineties a design-practice evolved that is based on its own terms, that does away with context, social settings or even social goals. *The way in which architects, eldersmen, advisers and critics decided about the looks and fittings of*

*everybody's habitat until a decade ago was a late offspring of a soviet housing policy as developed in the sixties from industrial housing productivism.*

In hindsight Tradition Today and the projects we focus on at this conference are not at all related to Traditionalistic, truly regressive design strategies. Although the architectural and urban forms start from convention rather than invention, these projects express the social urge for restating the quality of our habitat. If there are parallel projects to recall to both Poundbury or Brandevoort I would like to bring up the projects of early russian constructivists where the utopian and practical touched in a handful of built projects that opened up new perspectives of modern urban life. Goals and expressions might be different, the inclusive design strategy of economy, social life and aesthetics are the same.

Back to the self declared modernist clichés that are being built all over our country in towns, cities, suburban areas or villages. That ruin historic listed buildings by breaking up walls and rooms and rape them with glass boxes and stainless steel fittings, for sake of being of its own time.

These examples might look a caricature but amongst these is a newly built house in the village of Rijen clearly illustrate this practice –from the project where last month a couple died because of asphyxiation. Compared to its Art Nouveau neighbor it looks alien, socially handicapped with a lack of empathy. It is this alienation that defines the distance it creates from the conventions with which we want to co-exist with our neighbours. The way the front door of the house is emphasised is not the expression of a warm welcome nor status of the owner: it looks as if it has been designed for the blind that find the front door merely by following the veneer of the garden wall. Compared to the stark architecture of Zonnestraal it looks ridiculous boxy and frightfully closed. Compared to Dudoks Town Hall it looks unelegant and without the detail and ornament that could provide a relation to man. Compared to the West Coast case study houses it looks closed to nature and its amenities. What traditional architecture embodies is that the building and its setting in its urban or rural habitat are a desirable place to be. And this can be done by means of our discipline from all ages. When Art Nouveau rejuvenated traditional building and endlessly repeated neo-styles it was considered to be commercial and trendy. However it proved to be a valuable contribution to the diversification of historic

centres just because of the ways it respected size, scale, craftsmanship and architectural detail the size of your hand.

### ***Convention and innovations***

Social conventions are ties between morality, ambulatory forms, local typologies, morphology and architecture. Building bonds between different religions and cultures – be it Mediterranean, Asian or African – within our Dutch culture is a challenge for every city and town in Western Europe. This is where everyone's home and place are the most essential startingpoints for any individual to deal with any new culture.

Postwar housing, its artificial implementation of a neighborhood philosophy and its abstract urban form deliberately broke away from traditional town planning and the traditional social bonds and communities as built in streets, lanes and neighborhoods. Theodore Dalrymple clearly analyzed why the modernist postwar suburbs provide a climate where these social alienation is facilitated.

Social conventions provide an extremely intelligent and strong framework that hold up our cities and towns despite the fact that the economic reason for living together in high density completely changed its character in the last fifty years. It is not the mediaeval market that ties us to the cities nor the industry that fills up our workers districts, but it is the far more complicated web of networks of services, amenities and labour that urbanizes our planet.

As formgivers we have many chances to innovate without losing our public.

Two schemes for a shopping area illustrate this. Koolhaas Almere is a shopping area for pedestrians with free standing housing blocks above. The maggots with shopping bags have no relation to the apartments above. It seems that lessons have not been learned from the shopping areas from the sixties and seventies.

Soeters Nootdorp Scheme has conventional streets with shops below and apartments above. It has even a piazza with restaurants. In order to make it tick they built an innovative carpark to revive this proven typology.

As supervisor for the design of a new railway we strive for a conventional image for railway stations, bridges and fly-overs. We had a contest this summer for a new railway bridge near Hattem and Paul Wintermans design has won. Next year this

bridge will be built: a typical railway bridge just as elegant as timeless and conventional.