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The Artificial Landscape: Contemporary Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape architecture in the Netherlands

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The Artificial Landscape: Contemporary Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape architecture in the Netherlands

Abstract
Dutch designers are accustomed to working on land that "is not a natural given but exists by virtue of human ingenuity and technology in water management." For the Dutch the idea of "artificial landscape" is not new. It is-and always has been-the point of departure for design. As a result of this perspective, the projects depicted in The Artificial Landscape are more than an overview of recent Dutch work in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. They are also a fresh, vital body of work that can educate nations that are comparative beginners at engaging synthetic environments.

Disciplines
Architectural Technology | Environmental Design | Landscape Architecture | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

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REVIEW

The Artificial Landscape: Contemporary Architecture, Urbanism, and Landscape Architecture in the Netherlands
Edited by Hans Belting, Ann Hoogewoning, Ingrid Oosterheerd, and Ton Verstegen
Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2000
Hardcover, $50

Reviewed by Heidi Hohmann

Dutch designers are accustomed to working on land that "is not a natural given but exists by virtue of human ingenuity and technology in water management." For the Dutch the idea of "artificial landscape" is not new. It is—and always has been—the point of departure for design. As a result of this perspective, the projects depicted in The Artificial Landscape are more than an overview of recent Dutch work in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. They are also a fresh, vital body of work that can educate nations that are comparative beginners at engaging synthetic environments.

From the very first page readers find that designers in the Netherlands are working at a level that is, if not more creative, then at least less burdened by formula than designers elsewhere. In form and content the 100 or so projects by about 60 firms all have a high "wow factor." The reader is treated to an inflatable dike, a series of floating "bus stops" for water taxis, a wind farm of international scale. Buildings warp and fold in the landscape; homes with submerged garages float in harbors, and provinces completely redistribute land among holders in pursuit of agricultural and scenic protection. Projects of all scales and disciplines show an amazing restraint and cleanliness of form—a manifestation, no doubt, of the Netherlands' now-famous second coming of Modernism. Yet the projects exhibit none of Modernism's typical monomania. Many projects have a sense of whimsy. For example, the design for a heat-transfer station provides a mundane building with a skin that functions as a recreational climbing wall—with handholds arranged in a Braille pattern. Other projects reflect Dutch social liberalism. An examination of how legalized prostitution might influence urban redevelopment is one such project. Unlike so much work in the United States nostalgia for a mythical past is nowhere to be found.

This is not to say there is no reference to precedent or classic Dutch typologies; the windmill, dike, and polder are all represented. But they are types transformed by technology or use, as in a neighborhood in which traditional stolp farmhouses "mutate" into new urban-housing forms.

The coolness factor extends to the book's graphics. In particular, the projects are, in the words of the book, "extremely mediagenic," with many designs described in digital renderings that are almost indistinguishable from photographs of built work. Overall, the bold use of text and vivid cyan-magenta-yellow color scheme complement the outspoken, matter-of-fact tone. But the strongest organizing graphic device resides in the realm of text. Each project is given a clever title—Michelin Man, Swirling, Snacks—that becomes a dominant visual and conceptual element. Although the projects are ostensibly organized by firm, the nicknames cleverly unify the projects, subjugating the identities of individual designers to collective "Dutchness." Unfortunately, the clever brevity of the names mirrors a lack of depth in the project descriptions. These are limited to one or two congratulatory sentences, frustrating readers who yearn to evaluate the projects more fully.

If the project descriptions lack depth, the authors compensate with a series of well-written topical essays. These essays explore the unique social, political, and economic constraints that inform design in the Netherlands, imparting an education on the way culture and process affect design. The Netherlands' national consciousness about the importance of good spatial design is discussed, as is the government's financial support in the form of subsidies for firms and projects. Constraints to creativity are also considered. One essay discusses how consensus, required in Dutch polder democracy, stifles creativity. Another describes how affluence and hedonism have made Dutch design overly pragmatic. The self-critical aspect of the essays is refreshing. Not many glossy design books willingly admit their content is "less spectacular in execution than in conception."

Compared to the topical essays, which flow through the projects, the final section of the book on Dutch design theory is disjointive, a mass of small, dense text in a sea of compelling imagery. Contrary to the idea that Dutch design is a new holistic design practice combining urbanism, architecture, and landscape architecture, a contributing editor disabuses the reader of the notion that Dutch designers are truly able to—or want to—synthesize the various disciplines into a unified pursuit. He concludes: "In recent years the Dutch debate has been more about urbanism, landscape architecture, and planning, than about architecture. Although this has been enormously enriching for architecture, it should not be taken to imply that architecture can survive simply by importing elements from its environment. At any rate, that is an untenable stance for an architecture that sees itself as a system: It exists by virtue of the distinction between system and environment."

"Dutch Modernism and its legitimacy" continues this anguished cry by lamenting Dutch architects' loss of power in shaping society, space, and process and their relegation to the role of arbiter of aesthetics. Such sentiments make the reader think that the book really is, in the end, about architecture. After all, about two thirds of the projects are buildings with little or no site work. In contrast, the essays by Adriana Geuze, Michelle Provoost, and Frits Palmboom do manage to look beyond buildings and stylistic labels to entertain contextual, systems-oriented ideas about humans, traffic systems, and cities. But these essays are not enough.

In the final analysis what is missing from The Artificial Landscape is a potent engagement of the idea the book is supposed to be about: the landscape. At the beginning, the authors state that the Dutch have realized that "landscape is not nature." Although this is indeed a lesson that some readers need to learn, the problem with The Artificial Landscape is that it does not state in a meaningful way what, then, landscape is—or what it might be. Instead, the projects provide answers that are meager and ironic: fake metal tree stumps at an airport, wood planking in a plaza purported to represent nature, fully mature trees sprouting on balconies not large enough to support their root masses. Such landscapes are certainly artificial, but are they intelligent? How much more significant these projects would be if, instead of seeing nature as object or symbol, they saw it as an ecology.

Readers of The Artificial Landscape will notice this absence of a systems-based view of landscape—a failing shared by many of the projects. This failing is, in the end, a comfort because it shows that Dutch designers, while they may have much to show the world, still have much to learn and reconsider.