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Design Artefact versus Process[es]

FilKafesi | De Olifantenkooi

The unceasing and yet inconclusive intellectual debate amidst architects and thus scholars whether the artefact itself or the process through which the artefact is at stake, must be of the primacy of design has long been in our agenda as it constantly reverberates in architectural praxis, discursively and/or materially. Seemingly this workshop is no exception since neither the participants nor the mentors, along with those of overarching impulses of the organising institutions, Tsmd, Architectuur Lokaal, the state agencies and such, seem to have reached a decisive verdict as the workshop presented its outcomes in different tones and styles by the end of a three-day-long international event in Amsterdam.

However, albeit the said difficulty in that discrepancy, I would like to stand firm in order to present my scholarly preference in how an architectural praxis must be well-devised in reference to the long-lasting elements of critical theory — knowing that it surely captures its own prejudices towards the economy-politics of our current cultural climate in which we are compelled to design and alter it. Therefore, my argument is simple: it is our prime responsibility to design the process first, and delay the end-product as long as possible to be able to deepen our analysis over the pre-given conditions, physical or not, as well as to challenge the so-called economically most feasible, or politically most attainable incentives initiated by local and/or global power-holding parties.

I firmly believe, it is exactly this deliberate choice that would involve a much complex process [perhaps processes and such 'designerly' and/or 'scholarly' tools], which could have the capacity to masterly over-run the current orthodoxies in urban and architectural programs, forms, styles, and tectonics as it, without a question, yields unconventional *archetypes.* Here, I may argue that we seem to have two thorough paths: One is rather conventional and yet feasible and secure [even workable, manageable, winnable] in market terms, whereas the second path provides an ample room for challenging fixated norms and canons and the standards of the governing institutions. The second path will certainly bring-forth un-orthodoxies; and thus, it will enhance our capacity of engagement in order to produce more utopian visions, perspectives and even ideological standpoints. As a result, what we need is in fact more than an immediate end-product, but rather a process[es] through which, even under overwhelming pressure of the working capitalist system, we are still able to engage with a multi-relational network of participants, let's say stakeholders, via open-ended proposals, visionary incentives and sometimes imaginary constructions.

As one of the invited mentors of this international event, it is perhaps my paramount responsibility to choose the second path, not just for the sake of playing the devil's advocate, but as I truly believe that of my own political foundation, in order to voice-up alternative positions, which might render the least desired/needed/expected processes/procedures. It is, therefore, not my preference to select the so-called 'best project' out of five proposals; neither is my task to point out the most financially liable and/or administratively sustainable enterprise/scheme, presented so far. As per demanded my intention is rather to further our discussions over the design processes with prospective reflections in any means possible as we deliberately delay the end-product, and thus to socially and politically engage with the surrounding issues, specific to the city of Breda [perhaps it is more global, nowadays] as equally as our professional engagements at length.

Henceforth, I will very briefly touch upon each group's proposal within the said outline and explore their ways of engagement with the given task: In this respect, the first proposal, The Dome City, is an attempt to reverse the general trend in current urbanisation by emphasising the notion of "emptiness". Imposed by the current economic system and now a common thread to our decaying urban environments, the group questions how the Xeroxed urban and/or architectural programming in fact dictates nothing but a sheer empty building-stock, mainly in city centres, because of the increasing number of vacancy in retail and other rental spaces — 30 percent of all stores in the old city of Breda is now redundant. As a result, the group suggests a permanent function with a flexible use; that is a new 'Market Place', all connected through green boulevards.

The second group, Panopticon Life and Sustainability, rather questions the historical/iconic value of the prison as an ideal form of power, of course, in respect to its significance since the Enlightenment. And yet, it reversely assigns a new 'role model' for more sustainable future, as the Panopticon becomes an urban gaze-centre [control centre] and the Dome itself turns into a sphere of multiple receptors, all scattered within the city for the sole purpose of monitoring environmental quality. Programmed as an educational park for sustainability, the whole facility as well as the Dome is now a "social metaphor" by itself as it masterly reverses the historic attributes of the notion of "gaze" from 'centre-to-periphery' to 'urban-to-monument'.

Titled Radical Inclusion: From Present to Free-zone, the third group, on the other hand, rejects the idea of conservation just for the sake of conservation, or any commercially viable function; and thus, instead of money-value, it seeks for an alternative system that could topple down one of the fundamental contradictions of Capitalism: "the contradiction between use-value and exchange value". This is one of the most radical utopian visions presented and I believe that the proposed notion of gift-economy and the related 10 Rules [the Ten Commandments] in order to regulate the communal life through sharing/bartering certainly provides an un-orthodox system that

calls for an alternative architectural program as well: the most needed master plan fades out as the existing tissue is now flexibly zoned for communal life, each is utterly free, and the building-stock decays by time as the Panopticon is now being run by the nature's own course.

The last two proposals share the same essential architectural element that is 'water' and thus they seem to be very compatible even though their primary urge differs in many respects. The fourth group, [The] Well, begins with the Dutch history as it goes into such narrations as 'fighting with nature' or 'water defence line', and attempts to re-emphasise that quality by giving a full significance to water again — why not history repeats itself. Not only as parts and parcels of Panopticon, which in return, re-functions the Dome, the water is now more visible in public sight [in the Dome, in the Panopticon, in the surrounding urban tissue and even in the entire city] as it brings a new social value [well-fare], as it re-landscapes the morphology [well-structure], and as it re-programs the city and thus the facility [well-ness]. The final proposal, on the other hand, departs from the notion of Reflection as to inquire for 'whom the Panopticon should be designed'. For them, however, the answer seems to be very easy; "not for city branding, but for the people of Breda". As a result, rather than emphasising financial/property ownership as another fundamental contradiction of Capitalism, the group masterly apprehends the the concept of 'cultural ownership'. However, the term 'dialogue' is to provide a viable exchange amidst different stakeholders; the 92 percent of Panopticon is now left to developers in order to enhance its multi-layered values [use and exchange] and only 8 percent [the Dome] is to utilise water as an instrument to reverse what water and Panopticon would achieve the best; reflection — inside-out.

To sum up so far; I must say that each group not only comes up an interesting array of driving visions, but also proves that not the end-product itself as an outcome of sudden, rushy decisions, and yet slower procedures [bureaucratic, professional or academic] through which process design could be possible, is of extremely and thoroughly significance — the quality of each proposal is due to the fact that they are not opt to merchandise immediately

their imaginary worlds as mere commodities for the market expectations; rather, they attempt to further a possible "utopian dialogue" in order to overcome all the shortcomings of 'capitalist urbanisation' under which we have been immensely affected for a century or so. In close tune with those of 'emancipation and socialist utopia' as masterfully pioneered by Karl Marx in mid-19th century, Henri Lefebvre, a contemporary Marxist urban geographer, also urges us that "dialectical urbanism" is one essential tool to be able continue our rightful battle with capitalist incentives over cities as it constantly promotes emancipatory urban utopias. However, we should not forget that even though every utopia must captures its spatiality of which spatial fixation is an essential feature of social constructions, an emancipatory utopia must be temporal at the same time. The state of temporality is to provide an unceasing dialogue/dialectic between the fractions of ideas, values, ideologies, and beliefs [not to forget the material substances of our existence] through which our social, political, or perhaps professional engagements with the current problems in any forms and content, do not cease to exist.

Notes

This is a revised version of an assessment talk, originally presented in an International workshop in Breda-Rotterdam-Amsterdam, organised by the Architectuur Lokaal of Holland and TSMD of Ankara, between 25-29 March 2015. As the counterpart event of Saraçoğlu Mahallesi Workshop exercised in Ankara by both parties in December 2014, this second venture targeted one of the three original Panopticon prisons in Holland, which has been recently shut down by the government. The main Dome as well as the whole facility is now under immense pressure for urban transformation by the state and local institutions because the site is in a strategic part of downtown Breda — not to forget the iconic and architectural qualities of the facility, built around the late-19th century and now listed as one of the most prestigious architectural monuments in the nation. This brief assessment captures some of the insights of a two-day-workshop and of a commentary delivered after the final presentations of each group. For further reading of the event, please see: http://tsmd.mailerlite.com/g4s9z6/6171277265/s7n8/