

Winy Mass (MVRDV)

Datascape

1996

Beyond chaos

How to deal with the moral in an era where architecture has been overoccupied by chaos theories, that function as rhetorical hideaways and mythical retreats ? Should architecture still aspire to expressing « chaos » even when it is already surrounded by it ?

Massive uniqueness : the final extravaganza

Everything can be made, every object is imaginable, nothing seems strange or extravagant anymore.

What should we make Under these circumstances ? Do we still aspire to the ultimate extravaganza ? Are we suffering from « object fatigue », a consequence of the multitude of objects competing for our attention, all these buildings clamouring to tell us something ? In our search for the « one-off » in a veritable slew of the « unique », the expression of the individual object has become ridiculous : in a massive « sea of uniqueness » the individual object simply ceases to exist. In this massiveness, architecture bifurcates : on one side it introverts, which leads to a stronger emphasis on the rôle of the interior. On the other side architecture becomes synonymous with urbanism.

Majorities

The lion's share of the building production is concerned with the banal and the normal. In our desire to be avant-garde, this signifies an all-absorbing massiveness, a prescribes expérience, a pasteurized reality. Why are we still not interested in it ? Are we afraid of the banal in ourselves ?

It has become the emblem of something that is past its peak, a vivid illustration of the twentieth century dilemma : in our search for the unique we all make or find the same things ; desiring en masse the authentic and exceptional, it all turns out banal.

If we regard this phenomenon ironically, we are denying all its humanity. The way we look down on it, must be the same as the way the Victorian bourgeoisie looked down on the working classes, with contempt, mixed with shame. Now as then, a Dickensian type is needed to give back to banality that human face.

Urbanism

When architecture becomes urbanism, it enters the realms of quantities and infrastructure, of time and relativism.

Things come, things go. Events take place in apparently unorganized patterns, the very chaos of which possesses hidden logics, allowing « gravities » to emerge from within this endless tapestry of objects. These gravities reveal themselves when sublimated beneath certain assuèd maximized circumstances or within certain maximized constraints. Because of tax differences the borders between Belgium and the Netherlands are occupied with vast numbers of villas generating a linear town along the frontier. Market demands have precipitated a « slick » of houses-with-a-small-garden in Holland. Political constraints in Hong Kong generate « piles » of dwellings around its boundaries. The popularity of white brick in Friesland causes a « white cancer » of housing estates alongside all the villages. In its desire for a cosmetic nineteenth century identity, Berlin forces its new buildings into tight envelopes. This pushes larger programmes underground, turning the Streets into mère componenets in the midst of vast programmes. Monumental regulations in Amsterdam limit the demand for modern programmes, generating « mountains of programme » invisible from the street behind the mediaval façades. Throughout the Ruhr, accessibility demands create virtually enclosed types of infrastructure precipitating a string of linear towns. In la Défense in Paris, to avoid the High-rise rules massive programmes manifest themselves as ziggurats with 18 metre High accessible « steps » so that all offices can be entered by the maximum length of the fire ladders. Psychological issues, anti-

disaster patterns, lighting regulations, acoustic treatments. All these manifestations can be seen as « scapes » of the data behind it.

Extremities

If « progress » remains the main reason for « research », the hypothesis remains the most effective way to deal with it. In order to understand the behaviour of massiveness, we have to push it to the limits and adapt this « extremizing » as a technique of architectural research. Assuming a possible maximization (the word « maximum » already implies rules), society will be confronted with the laws and by-laws that it has set up and that are extrapolated with an iron logic. It will begin questioning these regulations. The protection of certain areas push programmes to the left-over corners of our countries. Do we want that ? More comfort raises the issue that we are becoming dépendent on it. Do we want that ?

More massiveness and higher densities leads to the question of whether we still should use noise in another way. And so on.

Datascapes : sublimized pragmatism ?

Under maximized circumstances, every demand, rule or logic is manifested in pure and unexpected forms that go beyond artistic intuition or known geometry and replace it with « research ». Form becomes the result of such an extrapolation or assumption as a « datascape » of the demands behind it. It shows the demands and norms, balancing between ridicule and critique, sublimizing pragmatics. It connects the moral with the normal. Having found the opportunity to criticize the norm and the moral behind it, it constructs a possible « argument ». Artistic intuition is replaced by »research » : hypotheses that observe, extrapolate, analyse and criticize our behaviour.