

Fulcrum

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the cruelty of modernisation.

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Fulcrum: *To accompany your Public Works exhibition you write about an absence of social ideology in contemporary architecture. In a way, though, even if one has a very clear social ideology it's not clear for whom or how one might pursue it. Given the contemporary condition, and weakness of the nation-state, do you think it is still possible to work for the civitas or civic realm?*

Reinier de Graaf: It is still possible to pursue an ideology beyond personal success as an architect and beyond personal recognition as an architect.

When you pursue an ideology to improve or change the world you must ask: what are the specific ingredients that we have today to achieve that? We can be sure of not having a strong public sector; we will not have a strong nation-state. To turn those factors around would take so long, no living architects would be around to see it. The weird thing is that, in terms of pursuing the good, the architect has become dependent on the initiative of exactly the same parties that are generally assumed to be those society must curtail. We're dependent on the private sector, which are generally the parties that the public sector fails to force (in terms of regulation) to display good behaviour. However, without private initiative nothing happens. All large urban projects, and London is no exception, are entirely dependent on it.

F: *Does this mean architecture has to operate as a Trojan Horse?*

RdG: Yes. It almost needs to infiltrate. By definition it needs to engage with entities that are not representative of the people, not elected, not public bodies, and... almost... change the system from within. Of course, engaging with something doesn't mean endorsing all of its mechanisms.

F: *The morality of architecture is extremely complex. Once you start to reject one client, you're automatically forced to reject all clients... or have no specific client. The context to Public Works is a photographic reproduction of the Undercroft at the Southbank. There was a long "community" struggle to save the Undercroft. One often hears, especially young architects who revel in*

the "participatory" claim they have no single client, but rather that their client is "the community" at large.

RdG: The main difference is representation. The "community" has no legal delegate that represents them, in a form in which certain forms of checks and balances are present.

Community is the most abused term in the history of architecture.

It was used by Team X on the left of the spectrum and by New Urbanism on the right. It's become fluid. When I studied architecture, sociology was banned from the curriculum. Liberated from any accuracy or rigour, the term became a vehicle for practically whatever architects felt like.

F: *There is one OMA project that comes to mind, the "City Shop" — part of the Stadskantoor project. The intention was to frame the citizen as the consumer of a state service, rather than a social contributor. This seems to preference the rights of the individual rather than the responsibilities of the citizen?*

RdG: Yeah. But the project isn't happening, and that's maybe the most significant fact. There are many small municipal buildings that already function in this manner. Since this was an extension of the main town hall in Rotterdam, it was an ambitious attempt to experiment with this model at a large scale.

In a weird budget-driven decision, the element that was most prominent in the competition was eliminated. They decided to go ahead with the building, while very strangely the essence of the building was retroactively removed. That produced a very interesting situation. Given everything that had happened, it was too late to revert the design. We had created a space that was so powerful, it was in fact more powerful than the cause it had been meant to serve.

The building had been widely published, there had been public consultations and votes, so we couldn't change the design. We had a massive quantum of public space without the public to occupy it. This put a strange pressure on the authorities to persuade other parties to occupy that space with the same degree of publicness as the public. It will become a kind of commercial space, but one with so many ifs and buts that the commercial space has to act like public space.

This relates to our whole argument about shopping, which is the vehicle of the public sector to promote culture and public space, ironic though that might sound.

F: *This only makes sense within the logic of neoliberal commercial activity.*

RdG: Well, I think anything can be neoliberal... it's almost a redundant word.

F: *On the contrary, I am using it very precisely. Neoliberalism is not a monolithic ideology, but rather a process, maybe more correctly described as neoliberalisation (see Fulcrum #65 with Neil Brenner). It accords with general forms of capitalist models that concern constant accumulation. But neoliberalism is a wealth redistribution imperative. For the last forty years it has operated, often through ownership of housing, to absorb wealth from the middle and lower classes and redistribute it towards the top. When I use the term neoliberalism, I am referring to a very specific process.*

RdG: Do you think that redistribution is an agenda? An unavoidable effect of a system that promotes economic growth? To what extent is undesirable asymmetry a by-product of what may be the only workable economic model? Or to what extent is it the recall of the economic model, and to what extent does the economic model promote redistribution to the so-called "1%"?

F: *I'm not anti-capitalist; it does seem to be the best model we have yet for organising, on a global scale, the distribution of resources in society. But I also think the current model is not the logical consequence of the acceleration of capitalism. It's a very specific agenda, which was pursued by a very specific group of people at a very key moment in history. It began to rise at about the same time, incidentally, as the Pimlico School building you mention in your writing was being constructed. There are diverse factors involved in the proliferation and popularity of neoliberalism, but no, it is not at all inevitable, nor will it be the end state of capitalism.*

RdG: The changes to the Stadskantoor all took place under the governance of the left. Really, there is no choice between left and right. There is only the neoliberal agenda. The only difference is that a right-wing government executes reform slightly faster than a left-wing government. The agenda is the same.

F: *This part of the more general contemporary crisis in democracy: the collapse of the political spectrum and an absence of choice. I am interested in the Stadskantoor and the Southbank because of architecture's current poverty of aspiration and vision.*

RdG: You've said we shouldn't idealise the welfare state, but I do. Very deliberately — although privately I lived through it, and I know there's a subtle story to be told. I think its legitimate to idealise things in hindsight, especially at the moment there's no hope in hell that they will become relevant. Our method is also an intentionally counter-intuitive one, on almost any topic. We work in Russia, for example, and when we do we idealise certain moments of communism.

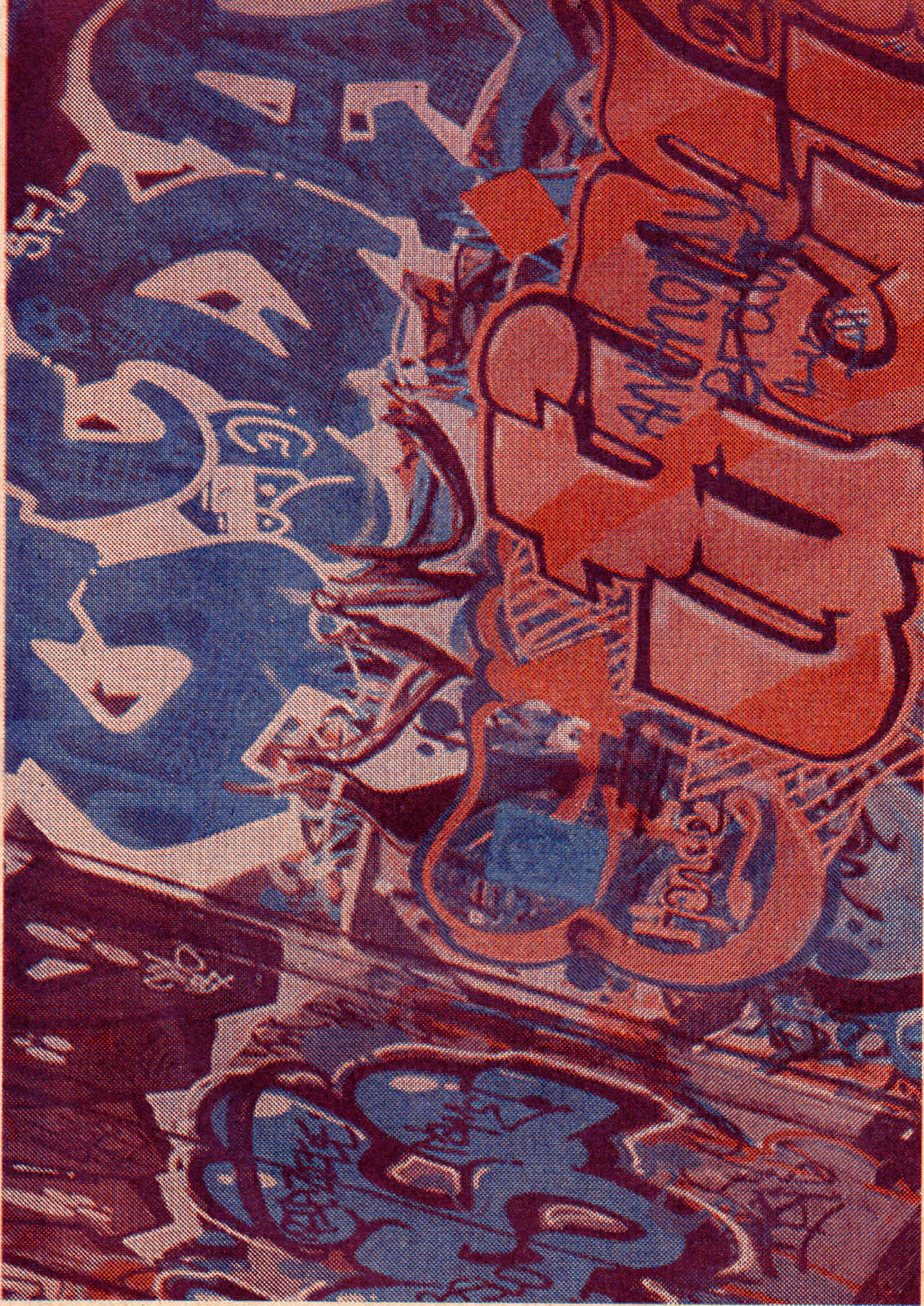
F: *Ellen van Loon was at the AA recently. Someone asked, does OMA do modern architecture? She wasn't sure. I suggested the appropriate term to describe OMA's architecture is ruthless.*

RdG: That's an interesting term. Of course, modernisation is inherently wedded to cruelty. The maelstrom of modernisation has an undeniably cruel element to it. That's why, when Team 10, who were modern architects, launched the "community" in the 60s, they placed themselves on the wrong side of history.

The community precedes society, it's a more primordial form of organisation that was evoked by the right very often in the wake of a big society that had supposedly failed.

The claims of the big society were modern claims, that we would organise relationships on the level of the state and in an institutional way, rather than a tribal way. That was an essential part of the evolution. Team X joined the forces of those attempting to break that down, in favour of partial interests. There is a general trend for most offices that call themselves modern to fetishise a modernism without cruelty, and revel in the illusion that you can have modernisation without harshness, even imposed on yourself. OMA is a modern office because ruthlessness and modernity, to some extent, go hand in hand.

Reinier de Graaf is an architect and Partner at OMA. He supervises the work of AMO, the research and design studio counterpart to the firm.



Southbank graffiti (detail)