

## *Notes on The Hague* – Mitchell Rasor

*We are living in a time of profound transformation taking place in different domains, which cannot fail to have far reaching consequences for contemporary architecture. This is an appeal to architects to warn them against becoming dispersed between the science of the engineer and the inventiveness of the sculptor, thereby making themselves superfluous, and encourage them to face the new conditions head on, eyes open.*

- Constant Nieuwenhuy (1956)

*Modernists seem to be so disorganized in their ideas that they are quite unable to realize anything so coherent and complex as Windsor or Poundbury; the situation is so critical that Andres Duany and I have discussed for a while designing a modernist town simply to show them how it is done.*

- Rob Krier (2001)

In an age of the decentralized and disorienting war on terror, the revitalization of the Central Station area in The Hague, including Meyer en Van Schooten's proposed redevelopment of the Babylon building complex as New Babylon, is a welcome return to the good old days of trench warfare. In The Hague, the styles and the ideologies of Brutalism, New Urbanism, Modernism, Neo Modernism and even an echo of the Situationists' Unitary Urbanism are comfortably entrenched around the perimeter of Central Station. Commuters come and go across the Julianaplein with no idea they are caught in the ideological cross fire of so many views on the city.

Babylon, a 1970's mixed use building including a shopping mall, food court, hotel, movie theatre and office tower, is the domestication of the city resulting in the suburban mall typology, a "paralysis" of urban/suburban spatial distinctions according to Debord and an ambiguous, "dialectical standstill" for Benjamin's flaneur whose urban street devolved into the phantasmagoria of the department store. The once mobile flaneur now gets dropped off at work by his mom and stands tamed behind a counter, thoroughly enjoying his employee discount on suits and shoes.

Babylon was developed as a kind of utopian pleasure dome in the manner of its prehistoric namesake now in archeological ruins 50 kilometers south of Baghdad. Even though Babylon is dense with program, a city within a city, the area around Central Station remains static, caught in an urban/suburban hostage crisis. Neither the ancient or contemporary Babylon has aged well. As Robert Smithson writes, "Our future tends

to be prehistoric," and the archeological renderings of Babylon as imagined in its glory days are reminiscent of the stacked, ziggurat configuration of Babylon's masses and the Piranesian interior food court with escalators cutting angles across the mirror encrusted hyperspace. Babylon feels like a utopia in ruins, a monument or museum devoted to shopping. An activity I normally enjoy.

The Netherlands is part of the European Union, a later day Pax Romana. The Romans built the first modern roads and constructed Hadrian's Wall to protect and define civilization. The Dutch built dykes and monumental sea gates to deflect the north sea and by 2006 will have the most modern land transportation know to man, the HSL-Zuid, otherwise known as the TGV high speed train.

The Hague has the only dead end Central Station in the Netherlands, but the TGV is not going to bypass this rhetorical battleground of planning and architecture. The TGV is coming, filled with tourists and businessmen of the new economy. Like Tony Blair says, The Third Way or the highway.

The coming of the TGV has renewed the market's faith in the financial viability of the city center, even while countless office buildings in the suburban zones of the conurbation of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague collectively known as the Randstand remain vacant, spent shells from the speculative zeal of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century economic boom. This Bruegelesque landscape of the blind following the blind is reminiscent of a mid rise low-density version of the Tower of Babel parable. According to Genesis II, the Lord was appalled by man's self organizing pursuit to build a tower in Babylon reaching heaven. And like the Old Testament dispersal of mankind and his incomprehensible languages across the face of the earth, the economic crash left a dispersed landscape of see through buildings, bankrupt developers and a new housing class: anti-squatters, people hired like guard dogs to keep real squatters from finding purchase on the edge of town.

Train fans are not the only ones excited by the coming of the TGV. Developers and cities are creating alliances to build new train stations. A new station for the TGV will be built in southern Amsterdam near Meyer en Van Schooten's ING House. Meyer en Van Schooten won the competition to design the new Central Station in Rotterdam. The Hague Central Station and surroundings is seeing new projects by Cesar Pelli, Michael Graves, Rob Krier, OMA and Meyer en Van Schooten.

People will now be able to travel between select cities at 300 kilometers per hour, blurring the intervening landscape into abstract patterns and at times falling into total darkness in a seven kilometer long tunnel passing under the Green Heart of the Randstad, a quasi rural landscape engulfed by historic cities, VINEX suburbs and clogged highways. After passing through the pastoral zones, people will arrive at new glass cathedrals, train station commissions unprecedented since the first wave of great stations over a hundred years ago. These are new buildings, but programmatically they are as if The Hague Central Station and Babylon were melted into one building, providing one stop shopping for leaving, arriving and everything you might need in between. The trip between cities will now take half as long as before and that is cause for celebration or at least conurbation.

This wave of new train stations is awakening long standing architectural debates, further entrenching ideologies of style, form and urbanism. No where is this more apparent than the Central Station in The Hague, where styles and approaches to architecture and urbanism are literally taking sides with Rob Krier and postmodern new urbanism to the west and OMA and Meyer en Van Schooten's neo modernism to the south and east. The balance sheet and the news from the street may be informative once Meyer en Van Schooten's New Babylon and OMA's Julianaplein building are complete and can be compared to The Resident, the master planned area by Rob Krier featuring buildings by Krier, Pelli, Graves and Soeters.

It should be noted that in the design wars shouting match, Rob Krier and Rem Koolhaas are the most vocal advocates for their work in the context of greater narratives. Roberto Meyer and Jeroen van Schooten may not raise their voices above the level of their buildings, but their work clearly articulates their interest in the needs of today and tomorrow, heading Constant's advice "to face the new conditions head on, eyes open". If we let the buildings speak for themselves, New Babylon is a dynamic grouping of towers twisting or standing tall, wrapping the original Babylon without squeezing the life out of it. Krier's The Resident seems to be the one project of the two all twisted in knots about what it wants to be.

A recent visit to the neighborhoods surrounding Central Station in The Hague on a rainy Easter weekend would have disheartened even the most ardent architectural tourist. The area around Central Station has a hopeless feeling, even knowing that in a couple years Parisians will be swarming like bees with every TGV arrival. Central Station is straddled by a rectangular, concrete poker faced building. The station hall opens on to Julianaplein, a giant bike rack of a place that was probably the left over formwork for the poker face building looming over Central Station.

To the north of the Julianaplein is a half attempt at a road, across which is a large picturesque park called the Maliveld, extending east to become the Haagse Bos. Looking across the plaza to the Maliveld there is nothing inviting about the place. A few mothers push their strollers in dazed circles and a city worker feeds Prozac to the ducks. To the left of Central Station is a pedestrian superhighway called the Turfmarkt leading to Richard Meier's patented white City Hall. In reviewing my photos of the area not one bench can be seen the entire of length of the Turfmarkt and there are more windows boarded up with plywood than pedestrians. To the right of the Turfmarkt is The Resident, Rob Krier's new urbanism rebuttal. Leaving the narrow alley leading to the large interior court of The Resident, a vision of cupcake like buildings opens before you. In the pictures there is not one pedestrian in this pedestrian friendly place. Everyone must have taken the tram out to the suburbs for a more stimulating walk along the highway.

Due east of Central Station is the promising sounding Anna van Beurenplein. I don't know who she is, but she must have been a Nazi collaborator because this plaza is actually one of the most ugly parking garages east of the Mississippi. Anna's plaza is surrounded by service drives for the Central Station and at the back of the garage is a 1970's style pocket park that looks like it was designed by Hideo Sasaki on autopilot. On top of the parking garage is the turn around for the City trams, about 50' feet in the air. This makes no sense seeing that this is about 50' above the average ground elevation in the Netherlands.

Back in front of Central Station, framing the Julianaplein to the east is Babylon, the site of Meyer en Van Schooten's New Babylon. This is a very cool building in an Elton John 1970's sunglasses kind of cool way. The building is made of reflective black glass modules with rounded edges and white trim, stacked to articulate the hotel, office tower and central food court, where lawyers come to eat during court recess. I don't know who designed this building, but I saw the almost exact same building for IBM's Dutch headquarters, but in the white with black trim model parked south of Amsterdam.

Inside Babylon is sort of like being inside Elton John's head when he wore really bad sunglasses and a comb over. All the surfaces are covered in mirrors, calibrated to induce maximum visual immersion and the commodification of space. The Dutch are the tallest people in the world and the low ceiling is like a funhouse room with a forced perspective. Half priced merchandise lines the passageways. Coca Cola umbrellas push up and bend at the ceiling. Elevators cut across the baroque space of fluted columns and emergency exit signs reflecting to infinity, violating good taste as well as building codes. There is a three-screen cinema and a reformed flaneur handing out free cheese samples behind a counter of gourmet foods. Tucked away in a corner is a bank of elevators accessing law

offices. Somewhere above this circus maximus is a lawyer calmly drafting extradition papers for a Dutch architecture student caught smuggling drugs at the Kandahar airport.

Babylon is like the Biosphere, but even less sustainable. It feels very American. You could be in a mall in Atlanta or Dallas or Minneapolis. It is a tear in the space-time continuum, a mall within a mall, a portal to a time when design was tacky and daring and still cool. Babylon was plopped down on the site, about the same time we first saw Kubrick's black monolith being beaten by monkeys with sticks. Actually, Babylon was completed in 1978, ten years after the release of 2001: A Space Odyssey. But it could be the setting for a Kubrick movie where culture takes its own life.

Meyer en Van Schooten's brief for the project is to add approximately 80,000 SM, including 200 units of housing, to the existing 9,000 SM of retail space and 16,000 SM of office space while maintaining the 144-room hotel. According to the MAB website, "In February 1973 The Hague City Council formulated an Objective Memorandum for the site. The purpose of the memorandum was to develop the site in a way which would form an integrating element in the inner city, both functionally and visually." The project never achieved this integration with the city. It is a suburban meteorite, a Trojan horse filled with dehydrated soccer moms to weak to fight. An awkward skywalk connects the second floor of Babylon to the upper floor of the Central Station. The building is in a key location and should have made the interior "urban" program more civic through articulated forms engaging the urban setting, the street, the park and Julianaplein. It should be noted that most of the buildings in this area are self-possessed and the streets lacks charisma. New urbanists always want to blame the modern forms of architecture for killing the city, but inhuman traffic engineering and poor street design is more often the problem than not.

Meyer en Van Schooten's approach to the project is to wrap the building in upright and cantilevered towers without blocking sun exposure to the existing building masses and protecting existing views from the upper floors. The new towers and cantilevers look like they are doing a very public snake dance around a very shy building. Looking at the series of massing study models for the project and the logic of the tower placements and twists, one is reminded of the complicated modeling and imaging surgeons study in preparation of separating conjoined twins. But in the case of New Babylon, the project is a careful operation of joining two buildings and making sure both survive the process.

All buildings have complicated inner workings and environmental systems, but New Babylon is fantastically complicated and one can almost forget the surrounding city when analyzing the relationship between Babylon and New Babylon. And to a certain

extent, Meyer en van Schooten had to focus more on the buildings as isolated entities in the urban situation rather than a nuanced interface with the city. It is as if they entered a chess game mid way and carefully took count of the situation and the underlying strategies of previous moves making it their game.

Babylon is a dark, uninviting building or may be it is so bad it is cool like aviator sunglasses. But by adding even more mass and more height Meyer en Van Schooten manage to make the building more transparent, inviting and a counterpoint to the situation. Babylon just sits there like a stack of broken eight track tapes. New Babylon will create a more articulate skyline, cantilever a wake up call to the park across the street, bring transparency to dark tinted, adult book like store fronts and open up interior spaces filled with daylight inviting to pedestrians. The most critical change to the project is not formal, but a change to the program by adding housing units.

Julianaplein is currently a void in front of Central Station framed by Babylon to the east and an Alison and Peter Smithson style building to the west. Not that the street passing along Babylon and Julianaplein is of great character, but OMA's proposed building, touching down on Julianaplein with a series stocky legs forming large civic arches, will pull Central Station out of its shell and make Julianaplein a better open space by taking space. OMA's building is remarkable, possibly the best sculptural form ever proposed by the office. The new buildings by Meyer en Van Schooten and OMA will be two of the most interesting contemporary buildings in The Hague, making the adjacent Krier project look even more the urban imposter.