

Essay & Reporting

Written for & published in *Architecture Boston* magazine,
Generations Issue May/June, 2006

Hed: *Solving for X*

Dek: *Calculating Idealism Among Young Architects*

By Thomas de Monchaux

"We were going back and forth," the student was saying over the whir of the digital projector, which showed an array of glowing cubical rooms floating over a dark corner of a distant borough, "between being cynical and being optimistic." The setting was a recent final review for a mandatory housing design studio. With its faint whiff of virtue (the site was a dilapidated block in a dispossessed neighborhood), and of tedium (496 identical units, all to ADA-standards), housing occupies a distinctive place in design curricula otherwise often concerned with the spectacular and hermetic.

These exact categories, cynicism and optimism, seem to be the standard tropes for describing the sensibilities of successive generations, ever since *zeit* met *geist*. Generation X, that famous demographic either discovered or invented, but incontrovertibly defined in the novel of that title by writer-turned-occasional-industrial designer Douglas Coupland, is distinguished by a late-Cold-War nihilism and malaise. "Back in the late 1970s, when I was 15 years old," he wrote, "I felt [...] a mood I have never really been able to shake completely, a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination." The generation that

follows, though, is a different story. As a recent Kellogg School of Management marketing study summarizes: "The rising millennial generation is bringing with it a backlash to tradition. In comparison to Generation X, which older generations looked upon as disillusioned, rebellious and pessimistic, Generation Y-ers seem to embody the optimism and idealism that baby boomers themselves held dear."

The story is familiar: the Greatest Generation fights the Depression and World War II; the boomers invent rock-and-roll and *Doonesbury*; the Gen-Xers lapse into grungy slacker resistance; and the Gen-Yers bounce back. Technology and psychopharmacology figure in. So do 1968 and 1989. Even discounting the alarming abecedarian terminus implied by the lettering of those later generations, this ur-narrative is of course as specious as any cultural myth. Every generation is a moving target and protean in character, and the temporal grain of cultural shifts is surely finer than the 20-year postwar pixel. Yet this story is one we seem to need in order to describe the short and convulsive century just passed. And like every good story, it's been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Underemployed pre-graduate students of the early 1990s could see Ethan Hawke, Winona Ryder, and their avatars in films like Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites*, Cameron Crowe's *Singles* or Richard Linklater's *Slacker*, and know how to live.

Movies, music, literature, fine arts, and other cultural products and artifacts can be easily interpreted to illuminate the demographic story. Architecture, however, has always been an awkward fit. This must be in part because architecture seems, thanks to its feudal social networks and vast body of required knowledge, to have ever been an old man's game. Ever since Philip Johnson infamously described Frank Lloyd

Wright (who at the time had another 20 years and arguably his best work before him) as, "the greatest architect of the 19th century," architects have tended to hit their productive if not theoretical peak well after middle age. Every famous architect is 10 or 20 years older than one casually expects. Frank Gehry is 77 this year. Zaha Hadid is 58. *Enfant terrible* Thom Mayne is 62. As is Rem Koolhaas.

Moreover, every big new building, given the necessary time between genesis, gestation, groundbreaking, and move-in date, is at least 10 years older than one thinks. Gehry's design for Bilbao, like the novel *Generation X*, was first published in 1991. God knows when the first draft, or something like it, was first drawn. So, there is a continual time lag between the material culture of architecture, and the ambient cultural sensibility into which it is constructed. The great paper architects the '68-'89 period between the Age of Aquarius and the End of History are only now designing airports, cultural centers, cities. It's as if the films of the 1970s were only now being released.

What it would mean to live in a world where *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver* were the Oscar contenders of 2006 is an open question. Further suppressing this demographic time lag between architects and their moments of production is of course another timeless and timely generational story in which, instead of boomers and X-ers, Modernism and Postmodernism play the central roles. The notion that successive cultural, economic, or technological moments require and inspire their own formal languages in design is of course nothing new: one effect of these counter-demographic narratives of stylistic change (in which changeling architects like Wright and Johnson appear at every stage) has been to provide insulation between the micro-history of successive

design formalisms on the one hand and the macro-history of successive generational sensibilities on the other.

That is, until the Dutch. Just as today's emerging professionals, the demographic heart of Generation X, were finding their way into architecture school in the mid '90s, the observant, deft, clever, funny, and ruthlessly phlegmatic architecture of Koolhaas and his (generally younger) contemporaries was suddenly universal and irresistible. Visiting Dutch faculty energized American design schools. People developed an otherwise inexplicable interest in polders. A nation smaller than Wales became an architectural superpower. A narrow but deep formal vocabulary of tweaked boxes, courageous cantilevers, and ribboning surfaces became, and often remains, the new normal.

Demographically speaking, this phenomenon was the work of a postwar generation, the contemporaries of the American boomers: Koolhaas, born in 1944, is at the very oldest edge of the demographic; UNstudio principals Ben Van Berkel, born in 1957, and Caroline Bos, born in 1959, are at its heart; MVRDV partners Winy Maas, born 1959, Jacob Van Rijs, born 1964, and Nathalie de Vries, born 1965, are toward its trailing edge.

And yet, translated to an American context, these boomer-age folks became the generational equivalent of the world's coolest dads: confirming and amplifying in architecturally discursive terms the caustic X-er mordancy of their students and admirers. Who could resist a Big Mac of sliced and stacked landscapes (MVRDV's pavilion for Hannover Expo 2000), or a skyscraper for pigs (the same firm's 2001 proposal for agricultural development)? One thing they shared was a

feeling for the sublime bluntness of statistics: the margins and appendices of Coupland's *Generation X* are as full of them as those of Koolhaas' epic monograph, *S, M, L, XL*. Within the American landscape, both X-ers and Dutch designers nursed a loving hatred for the marginal and placeless environments to be found in and around malls, strip malls, convenience stores, gas stations, big-box venues, parking lots, and especially the edges of airports—what Koolhaas would later term “junkspace” was in many ways already the essential X-er habitat.

Around the turn of the millennium, the astringent rhetoric and quietly comic affect of much Dutch work offered a tonic to the easy piety and priggishness, sentimentality and self-seriousness that could characterize the tone of late Modernist and Postmodernist stylists alike. During a late-'90s crit at one East Coast architecture school, a visiting Dutch starchitect memorably described one project, an earnest but under-realized homeless shelter, as “maybe a little too Anglo-Saxon.” Although the Continental irony that was part of this astringency may have left some of its breeziness back in that distant era before politicized terror and incipient ecological catastrophe were the urgent news of the day, its complement in the X-er sensibility, Coupland's “mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination,” remains potent. To be sure, a certain sharp-eyed realism mixed with a healthy dose of cynicism is potentially a great thing. Anyone who fell in love with Bogart in *Casablanca* knows that. Like Bogart in the final scenes of that film, much Dutch work, in its humanist fascination with the experience of the architectural subject and occupant, comes to be profoundly idealistic. And much of the pleasure of Dutch design is its liberation of Modernist formalism from the weighty conflation of ethics

and aesthetics with which it has been charged since the days of Gideon and Hitchcock.

So what's the problem? Perhaps it's that the student in that housing studio felt that it was even possible to imagine himself casually picking up and dropping optimistic and cynical positions, like a browsing shopper, rather than feeling the need to commit to either. This simultaneous assertion and disavowal of one's own work is a hedge, revealing the alarming way in which the complex cynicism of older European practitioners maps not only onto American X-er disengagement, but also onto the deep conservatism of students now in architecture school. Well-disguised as the quasi-ironical critical distancing from one's own practice that we see in Dutch design discourse, this uncommitted student work is perhaps more a calculated stance to, well, avoid sticking one's neck out. Studio teaching that often continues to resemble a form of hazing no doubt inspires this caution and conservatism: even in our enlightened era, many studios see cruelty mistaken for authority and rage for rigor. Many juries include a touch of ancient bloodsport. This archaic mode of instruction engenders a certain infantilism in its subjects: M.Arch graduate students generally in their late 20s and early 30s, who in the outside world are responsible voters, drinkers, and potential draftees, revert within this atmosphere to the casual juvenile cynicism that is the familiar armour for adolescence. Of course, this extension of adolescent thinking into nominal adulthood is, *pace* Coupland, an essential Generation X phenomenon. It may be that until architecture schools outgrow this mode of teaching, they may find themselves not only amplifying the X-ish tendencies of today's early 30-somethings, but turning every generation of architects into a Generation X. At present,

the problem is that with the addition of Dutch cleverness to the curriculum, a posture of mere calculating cynicism acquires an unearned gravitas and pedigree. The problem isn't genuine quasi-ironical critical distance. The problem is fake quasi-ironical critical distance engendered by fear.

Of course, to genuinely choose and commit to either optimistic or cynical practice would be, strangely, an act of idealism. Which reminds us that these two attitudes, cynicism and optimism, are not in fact direct opposites: cynicism opposes sincerity; optimism opposes pessimism. And that leaves us with a lively matrix of sincere optimism, cynical pessimism, optimistic idealism, idealistic pessimism, pessimistic idealism, and optimistic cynicism. It may be that the current war for hearts and minds, in design and elsewhere, is between idealistic pessimism on the one hand, and optimistic cynicism on the other. The latter vibe might be found in the Massive Change project, an optimistic manifesto for design's world-saving potential assembled by no less a figure than sometime Koolhaas collaborator, boomer graphic designer Bruce Mau. Describing the venture recently in a lecture at Parsons The New School of Design, he talked about being "in conflict with a mood that was going around that was incredibly negative and pessimistic and cynical." He added, "Today is probably the best time to be alive. If you wanted, I could give you the statistics."

Thomas de Monchaux is a writer and designer in New York City whose favorite bands are The Who and Summer Lawns.