



Harpa, Reykjavik Concert and Conference Hall designed by Henning Larsen Architects Photography by Nic Lehoux



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Evolution: From Super Dutch to Super Danish

It seemed to us that there may have been something a little one-sided about Winy Maas' quote in the faculty press release. He is quoted as saying, "Copy paste... and sometimes better" about the undeniably exciting new wave in Danish architecture. Surely, we thought, the Danes must have another story?

BY BRIGITTE O'REGAN

Just to test the water, Bnieuws sent out a set of questions to the architectural firms invited for the DK@BK Capita Selecta Lecture series organized by guest professor Jacob van Rijs. Together with Nathalie de Vries and Winy Maas, he is founding partner of internationally renowned Dutch office MVRDV. Little did we know that this idea of simply copying the super Dutch generation of the 1990s is a particularly sensitive subject within the Danish architectural world. This is partly because there is some truth to Winy Maas' double-edged comment. But also because, in many ways, what the Danes are up to now can also be seen as quite different to what happened here in The Netherlands in the 90's. The following is our attempt to represent the Danish point of view.

Let us begin with the scholarly **Boris Brorman**

Jensen [BBJ]. BBJ, is an architect, intellectual and educator based at **Aarhus School of Architecture**. He has carefully observed the evolution of Danish Architecture since the beginning of his studies in the late 1980s. He saw the death of the urbanism department at his university, the public disenchantment with "redundant box architecture" and inward-looking architects lost in self-referential theoretical mazes. He was part of the first wave of young architects seeking inspiration in Holland in the 90s. BBJ has also been involved in training many of the architects behind what now described as the "New Wave" in Danish architecture. While many of this talented generation also worked as interns in Dutch offices.

"Seen from a Danish perspective, the new wave did something important for the cultural role of the architect in Denmark. These young firms actually managed to transform the status of architecture and urbanism in our society.

The new wave was a refreshing reaction against Danish mainstream architecture of the 1990s, which was in a kind of double crisis. One prevailing nonspecific box recipe with redundant facade variations was all the profession seemed to be able to offer the built environment. The legitimacy of architecture was more or less reduced to a question of like or dislike, where ordinary people had no say because of their bad taste. Danish architecture of the late 1990: was stuck in a cul-de-sac of self-referential rhetoric detached from a broader cultural discussion. This has changed due the influence of these young firms."-BBJ

And then one could also argue that due to the influence of Dutch firms such as MVRDV, West 8 and OMA the cultural role of the architect has changed in Denmark. However the matter isn't so straight forward. BBJ is the first to admit that the impact of such architects has been profound in Denmark. He even adeptly draws the parallels that could have allowed such a phenomenon to flourish in The Netherlands and Denmark but not, for instance, in the United Kingdom, Germany or Belgium. What the two countries perhaps hold in common is a long standing planning culture, and a generous and culturally engaged welfare state. But, he warns us, what has happened in Denmark is not a reproduction of what happened in the Netherlands in the '90s.

But hang on a second; before we go further,



MVRDV





The Museum of Liverpool designed by 3XN Photography by Adam Mørk

what actually did happen here in the '90s? Well... to grossly, and unfairly oversimplify: PRAGMATISM happened. Pragmatism can be seen as an attitude that arose from disenchantment of inability of the technocracy and theory in architecture and planning to remain relevant to what was happening in reality. It is characterized by an emphasis on cross-disciplinary research into the circumstances of a given assignment. Pragmatism is associated with a conceptual and diagrammatic approach accompanied by a journalistic style of communication, attributed by BBJ, to Rem Koolhaas. In the 90s this new dynamic approach to design was taken up by a generation of young Photoshop and render savvy Dutch architects whom evocatively spread its presence across the globe. In this way, the avant-garde in architecture was able to reassert its relevancy.

Martin Krogh, is one of the Danish New Wave, now himself a successful architect and co-founder of **ADEPT**. ADEPT is a young firm now collaborating with MVRDV in Denmark. He has come a long way since he worked hard on competitions as an intern at MVRDV 10 years ago. He asserts that if there is anything the Danish inherited from the Dutch it is pragmatism. *"The Dutch architects made pragmatism avant-garde. Conceptualism they would say. They became the heroes for my generation. Winy Maas and Jacob Van Rijs were my idols. They still are."* In one powerful anecdote, he explains: *"One day, after handing in MVRDV's proposal for the NYC Olympics - where I did the images - Winy came to my desk and asked if I could help on the deadline for the Market Hall hand in. I had not slept for 36 hours and could see that the work would require another all-nighter. I told Winy that I would do it if he would do one conceptual sketch for me that would explain the whole NYC project. It took him less than a minute. Yet I felt I had won."* Yet Krogh also supports BBJ in his stance that what is happening in Denmark is different. Martin Krogh expresses his exasperation, *"Is the obsession of copyism a very Dutch thing? I remember the fights ten years ago between OMA and MVRDV about who made the concepts first. The patent in "content" and the almost war feeling between the workers. I once showed up at MVRDV wearing an OMA*

T-shirt and did not have a pleasant day. In Denmark we are friends with our competitors. We have debates and parallel competitions where we share our work and ideas."

When the Romans made Greek-looking sculptures, Roman sculpture might have appeared similar. But what it did, what it meant, and even how it was made had important fundamental differences. The same could be said of contemporary Danish Architecture. Take for example the graceful longstanding firms **3XN** and **Henning Larsen architects** who have creatively and professionally evolved with time. They have adopted pragmatism in research and design, but they hold on to humane principles that have always compelled them. These are principles, which many argue are missing in the approach of some Dutch offices that are labeled as cynical. This cynicism seems especially evident in the work of Dutch guru Rem Koolhaas who rejects "an overdose of good intentions". "Through the past fifty years our focus has been on basic architectural means such as daylight, human scale and spatiality. These are the foundation stones of our company and our practice. We are working with context-based design. The surroundings, local culture and climate to a building or a larger development are probably our most important inspiration," states **Jacob Kurek, partner at Henning Larsen**. **Kim Herforth Nielsen, founder of 3XN**, explains. "When 3XN designed the Muziekgebouw/BIMHUIS in Amsterdam, we were also inspired by the same conceptual way of thinking - probably because it was situated in a master plan designed by OMA. However, we were just as

much influenced by the Danish way of putting human values at the center of the design. This is the added value of today's contemporary Danish architects. [...] In this manner, 3XN has developed its own expression and architecture, which is distinct and certainly not a copy-paste of someone else's way of doing things. Dutch architecture fifteen years ago was, as I see it, working from more of a conceptual form play. The focus was less about daily life and interaction amongst people, but rather about composition and functionality without a particular contextual connection." Central principles explored in Danish pragmatism include public good, context, sustainability and a tradition of high quality detailing in design

"The Danish pragmatism is indeed a little 'happier' than the Dutch variant, but hey, aren't they the happiest people on earth?"

In a reaction to the discussion, **Jacob van Rijs** rejects the cynicism label when it comes to the work of **MVRDV**. "Our work has sometimes ironical elements and refers to aspects in society that are important for us to comment on, combining theory and practice. This is less strongly visible on the Danish side, I must say. [...] The Danish pragmatism is indeed a little 'happier' than the Dutch variant, but hey, aren't they the happiest people on earth? But that does not make us cynical..."

