

'We need a more revolutionary approach'

Vermeers wanted

Ekim Tan interviews Floris Alkemade, the veteran designer at Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), who argues for an innovative future for European city centres. For more than a decade he has been building up a unique portfolio of city centre projects in Lille, Almere, Essen, Paris and many other cities in Europe and Asia.



OMA's proposal for Les Halles: next generation solutions.

'Just like Johannes Vermeer used to draw inspiration from ordinary scenes of everyday life, we should be able to capture the culture of our time. It's foolish to repeat the cultural elements of the past.'

Ekim Tan, Delft University of Technology / Urbanism, freelance designer

Illustrations: Office for Metropolitan Architecture (unless indicated otherwise)

Floris Alkemade has no doubt that the European City is a distinct entity, with deep Roman and Medieval roots. It clearly differs from the American City, which is not necessarily organised around a centre. In fact, in most American cities all the attraction has already moved to the periphery. But even in Europe, much growth now takes place between the cities and many cities have undergone a process of decentralisation. As the boundaries between town and country are blurring, scholars like the American professor Christine Boyer argue that it is pointless to use old-fashioned terms like 'centre' and 'periphery'. Indeed, all around the world the urban periphery is becoming denser, and the traditional central or downtown areas are increasingly envious of their peripheral counterparts, with their

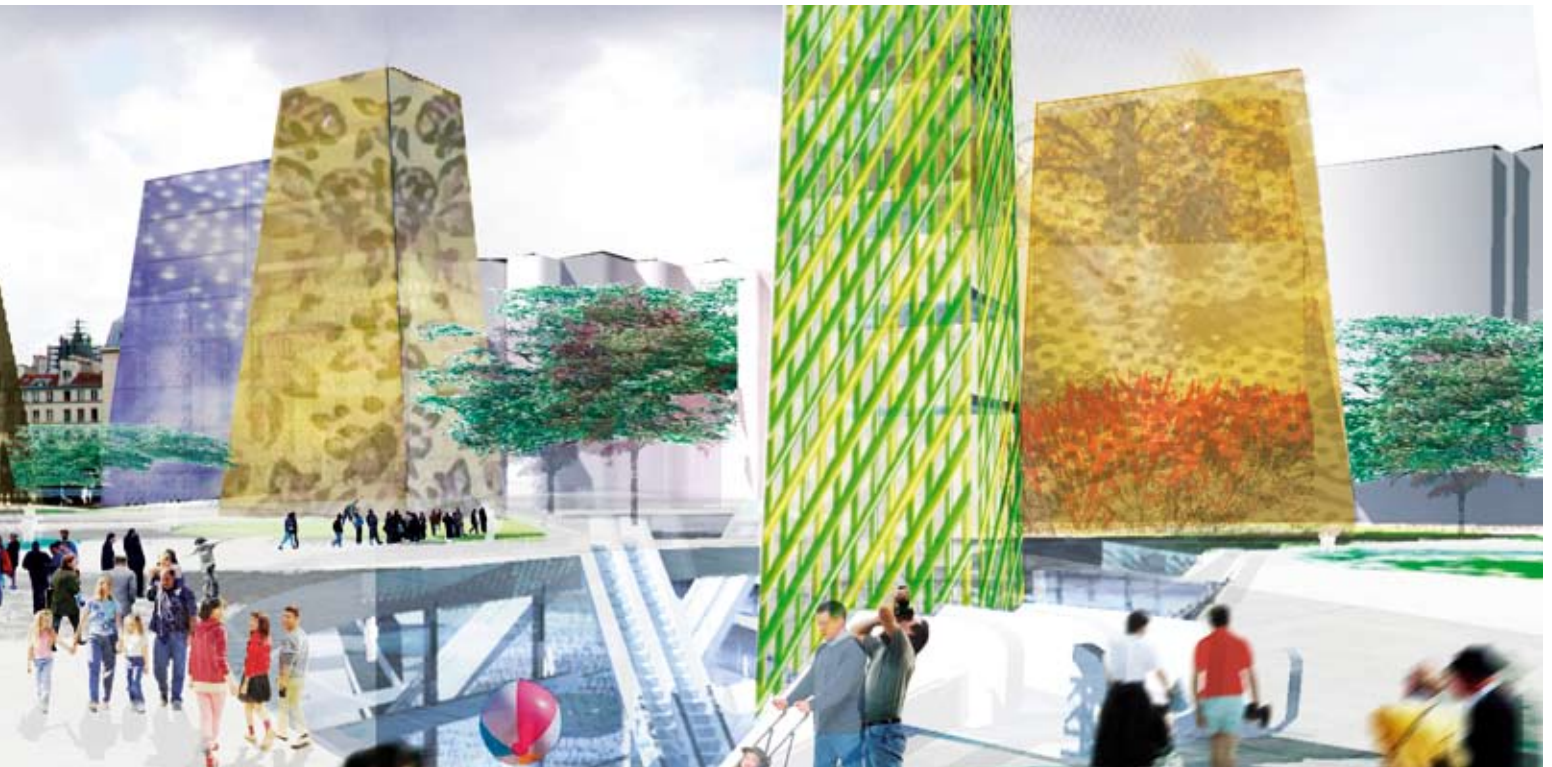
larger shopping malls, alternative housing settlements and less congestion. 'Nevertheless,' asserts Alkemade, 'there is resistance to give up the centre. In my opinion, despite this erosion the urban core will maintain its key role here in Europe.'

And the European city definitely differs from its Asian counterparts, where history is a more marginal component in definitions of urban identity. Even in cases where history matters, there is a huge gap in understanding. 'Take Singapore, for example. The city has just built a totally fake historic China Town, for the sake of authenticity, alongside the existing one, which city officials consider to be run down and overused.' At the same time, these acts are evidence of a changing approach in Asia. 'After all, concern about the identity of the city core may be a sign of luxury!'

PRESERVATION TRAP

Coming back to the issue of preservation here in Europe, Alkemada adopts a critical stance towards absolute preservationism. ‘We need a more revolutionary approach. European cities are different, and they are trying to be different. However, copying historical forms creates only frustration. We have to find modern ways to respond to today’s needs. In the design competition for Les Halles in Paris we tried to find next generation solutions. We definitely opened a public debate on preferring modernity to a fake historic condition.’

historic neighbourhoods, with an array of 21 towerettes emerging from different depths. A good example of how this would work is the Centre Georges Pompidou. This avant-garde urban intervention shows that people are open to a new language, if done in the right way. They love it. Ironically enough, under the current building regulations in Paris, a project like this would not be possible today. There seems to be an increasing desire to preserve heritage, but I am sure it is a dead-end street. Within ten years people will regret this as much as they regret what was done in 1960s and 1970s’.



Les Halles, once the food-and-meat marketplace of Paris, is today an urban void, also known as the ‘belly’ of Paris. Beneath the surface lies a busy transport hub for metro and fast suburban rail services and a bulky shopping centre, the whole complex consisting of four underground levels. It is said to be the largest railway station in Europe, with 800,000 travellers a day. In the early 1970s, the steel-and-glass markets were torn down and replaced by 12 pavilions, but these were never popular. The city government is trying to reinvigorate the area again. It was the subject of a widely debated design competition in 2003 that sought to resolve the design triangle of complicated uses, the historical context and the infrastructure. OMA was one of the four international finalists, together with MVRDV, Jan Nouvel and David Mangin of SEURA. The winning entry was Mangin’s scheme, which was deemed to be the most economically feasible, but was also seen by some as a rather conservative proposal. Although OMA’s proposal was not selected, Alkemada argues that blending the old and the modern was the right approach. ‘We proposed opening up the deepest level of Les Halles to the sky, making both the transit and commercial centres visible from the surrounding

‘In a way, there are fashions in preserving particular time layers in the city. At the moment, waterfront transformations are highly regarded, and who knows what will be next.’ Alkemada points out the relativism in discussions on historic conservation. ‘In 1985, Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen was closed down. At that time, everyone found it ugly and wanted to see it demolished, but by 2002 the whole site was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site. Unbelievable, this shift in 15 years!’

EUROPEAN CITY ETHICS

In their struggle for survival, European cities always seem to refer to a set of basic requirements for success. Every city centre must:

- have culture and art – no one has the right to live in a culture-free city;
- have retail, mainly organised around pedestrian movement – trade fed by car traffic can be segregated in the downtown areas;
- offer a clear routing for its visitors – getting lost diminishes the quality of the experience and reduces shopping activity.



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Almere, the Netherlands: new centre in a New Town. (photo: Charlotte Bogaert / Hollandse Hoogte; design by OMA)

Given these ‘ethical’ notions, cultural preservation, pedestrianised shopping and legible routing are the inevitable one-liners. But can cities do without them? What about a culture-free city, a shopping-free city or a routing-free city?

A culture-free city?

‘The city is synonym with culture, no matter what. Of course you can acknowledge different kinds of cultures. To me combining high and low cultures has always been very captivating. For example the popular TV show Big Brother was invented in the Dutch new town of Almere, east of Amsterdam. The show spread all around the world in a short time. That is already a cultural value to be taken into consideration. Just like Johannes Vermeer used to draw inspiration from ordinary scenes of everyday life, we should be able to capture the culture of our time. It’s foolish to repeat the cultural elements of the past. This raises the question of how to think about new towns with thin layers of history. A relatively short history may sound disadvantageous, but it is not. A new town like Almere has a free playing field to invent new cultures. Existing cities have the richness of their multi-layer cultures, but their challenge is to re-invent and re-interpret the use of this historical culture.’

A shopping/pedestrian-free city?

‘Obviously, shopping has its own physics. Sixty per cent of what we buy is impulse buying. That is the simple trick – if more people pass by, more people will see your products and more will buy them. This relies on there being no barrier between wanting and buying. From the retail point of view, therefore, pedestrianisation is important. On the other hand, the Calvinist notion that everything to do with the automobile is by definition bad is a poor basis for the development of an urban centre. For example, in Almere we first

proposed a direct car connection on the Weerwater, the lake that is geographically in the centre of the new town. The reaction we got was that people would actually use the road! But why not let people experience the lake and the centre by car as well?’

A routing-free city?

‘Last week I was in Milan. At one moment I found myself walking in the outskirts after midnight without a map and my cell phone’s battery was finished. It was really nice to get lost and experience the city as unpredictable and endless. But yes it is true that exactly these conditions contradict what city planning normally is about. From a commercial point of view, readability is significant. But then again, getting lost is part of what a city is all about. To my mind, a city should also be ugly, unsafe and unpredictable.’

(UN)PREDICTABILITY AND THE CITY

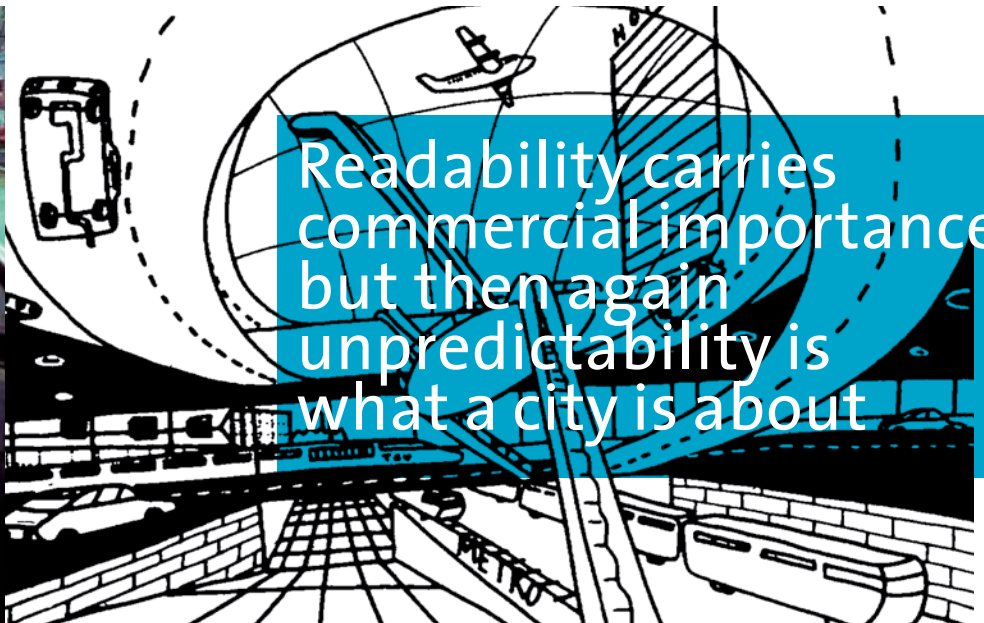
Talking about (un)predictability, Alkemade comments that designers and planners overestimate their influence on the city. ‘Almere was planned as an anti-city. Despite that, it became bigger and bigger and its autonomous growth forced it to become urban. The same happened with its nature. Oostvaardersplassen was planned to be a business park, but instead it became a one of the most important natural environments in Europe. Even the main developments were not always planned.’ Can unpredictability be part of a development strategy? ‘One way is simply providing a well organised machine that also creates special conditions. A grid, for example. Organise it and then let go! But the city should not be just any city.’ So how does OMA deal with unpredictabilities and special conditions? OMA took an influential role in shaping the core in Lille and Almere – the first a historic city centre in France and the other a thirty-year-old new town in the Netherlands. What were the underlying

design 'ethics' demanded by Alkemade? Lille was put firmly on the map as an important hub in Northern France between Paris and London by Euralille, the peripheral high speed train (HST) station. 'In Euralille, the synthetic new city was and wasn't part of the old town. That was the hardest thing to explain to the city council about realising this utterly complex programme located on the site of old city walls.' Until the end of the 1980s, Lille was a historic industrial and provincial city. It has gone through a substantial transformation, boosted by a mammoth development programme including the HST station, a World Trade Centre and 100,000 square metres of space devoted to retail outlets, offices, parks, residential buildings, hotels and cultural facilities.

centre as a point in space. 'Even in Los Angeles, of all places, it is possible to find similar instincts for centrality. In Universal Studios Hollywood, for example, a parking garage was built some distance from the theme park. People had to walk this distance. In time, some shops appeared. Then people needed shade and a second layer of development was added. This in-between zone was gradually filled in with offices, schools and shops. Without realising it, they were inventing the walking city centre.' Doubling Almere's new centre by adding an underground layer was the Alkemade's trump card. A multi-storey car park underneath the city now serves the upper shopping layer, allowing a large supermarket to be incorporated into the scheme, which otherwise would have been impossible.



Lille Europe under construction, back in the 1990s.



Euralille: hypermodern central environment on the edge of the old centre.

Readability carries commercial importance, but then again unpredictability is what a city is about

'Our reaction was to create a kind of hypermodern central environment on the edge of the old centre. Instead of copying the old centre, we added a band of modernity around the historic city. Besides this contrasting language of forms, we proposed multiple linkages of mobility and functions between the existing and emerging new city. This subtle connection organised mainly around the infrastructure between the old and the new city became the key to the project.'

Alkemade's approach in Almere, as opposed to the contrasting modernist attitude in Lille, is a centralistic downtown scheme. At first sight, this approach sounds very unlike OMA; why create a traditional central core for a new town that emerged in reaction to the city? 'Our first reaction to creating a centre was, why? To us, Almere was proof that you could live without a centre. But in the end, there is an unavoidable need for centrality in European cities.' For a new town like Almere this discussion must have been rather sensitive. Although Almere emerged as an antithesis of city in the mid 1970s, it later switched back to being a city with a traditional

DARE TO CHANGE

Running through Alkemade's projects we can detect acceptance of and adaptation to change, capturing the contemporary culture and avoiding the monoculture of form and development programme. 'Today, the dominant development model, adopted by many cities without even realising it, is to create a centre as a theme park. Even in Amsterdam, which has an untouchable 17th century image, constant change has been unavoidable. Interestingly, while the building facades represent this identity, they are only envelopes that cover what is really going on inside.' Indeed, behind the well preserved facades of the stately canal houses there is a vibrant economy with the most advance services. 'After all, the only way forward is to modernise the existing city. You must dare to change. In the late 1960s our mindset was much more open to change. In Europe there now seems to be a very conservative mindset. We really need to tackle this. We have no other option than to have a strong believe in our own time and intelligence.'

Reactions to: tan@novaterra.net