

O, OASE, OH

THE NAME EQUALS PRESENTATION

OASE. A more appropriate name for a journal about 'architecture, urban design and landscape' seems inconceivable! The actual intention comes to the fore, undisguised, however these disciplines are represented in its pages. Its name contains its thirst-quenching argumentation and its hunger for more. An oasis is a fertile place, but one concealed in a barren hostile landscape. Is this a case of preaching in the desert?¹ Does it deal with the city as a desert, the limitless metropolis, within which architecture appears as an oasis? Nietzsche has the Devil make Zarathustra² choose between the weak-willed return to the city or the brave defiance of the desert. For the desert wanderer, there is no defined destination. To leave the city behind, like the past, means to surrender to adventure, which moves forward without goal or object. Does architecture lie hidden within the defiance of this danger? When it comes to leaving behind certainties and discovering a new potential, yes! The thousand Nietzschean perspectives then coincide with the 'negative horizon', to paraphrase Virilio.³ An unexpected oasis: he who thinks he sees water and, filled with false hope, bites into the sand of the mirage is still counting on the salvation he expects to be granted. No, this is about an unconditional surrender, love perhaps, passion! Tschumi once remarked, 'If you really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit a murder.'⁴

A search that goes beyond Adorno's predilection for the goal and 'exclusion of goal-setting'⁵ ends the idealising quest of Percival. The oasis in question here offers no salvation, no comfort, and does not represent an answer to catastrophe. A refuge for the desperate, as in 'the gothic novel',⁶ perhaps. Tzonis's 'hopeless arcadia'⁷ and beyond the 'end of architecture'⁸ described by Bekaert. A place beyond.

Nor does the architecture of the oasis contain the origin of architecture, the 'primitive hut' put forward by Rykwert, from Laugier to Viollet le Duc.⁹ Aristotle, in the trio of 'cave, hut and tent', saw the last as the moveable habitation of the nomad.

A hut, on the contrary, is static. In terms of origin of the hut, as well as of the oasis, one is dealing with a reconstructed 'beginning', a fiction that 'has never existed', as Derrida observed.¹⁰ This must be an oasis in which false ideals vanish like mirages and the presence of architecture appears nomadically.

The journal *OASE* is actually conducting a nomadic debate, one that constantly shifts the 'parameters' of criticism, as Tafuri advocated.¹¹ Similarly, Eisenman¹² has clarified the immaterial and Grassi¹³ the material presence of architecture. Besides 'the stone and the word', *OASE* also focuses on the image. The critique of normative 'visual quality' and 'fossilised building standards' in government architecture policy was defined by reopening the discourse about self-evident 'speak-

1
See *OASE* 33, C.J. Christiaansen, 'Woestijn, centrum en periferie', 51.

2
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathoestra* (1885).

3
Paul Virilio, *L'Horizon négatif. Essai de dromoscopie* (Paris, 1985).

4
Bernard Tschumi, 'Advertisements for Architecture', 1978.

5
Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt, 1966).

6
OASE 43, 1995.

7
Alexander Tzonis, *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment* (Boston, 1972).

8
Geert Bekaert, 'Het einde van de architectuur', 1967.

9
Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise* (Cambridge, 1993).

10
Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (London, 1980).

11
Eric Bolle, *Afscheid van wat nooit geweest is* (Groningen, 1982).

12
Peter Eisenman et al., *Five architects* (New York, 1975).

13
Giorgio Grassi, *La costruzione logica dell'architettura* (Padua, 1967); see also *OASE* 28.

ing architecture' and pluriform 'style'.¹⁴ *OASE* is conscious of its theoretical independence without becoming elitist. After all, ever since Cacciari thematised commentaries on the metropolis, restraint is appropriate. He considers architecture to be defined by the 'schism' that has arisen between the metropolis that has become 'consumption' and the 'intellectual'.¹⁵ In describing the world as a desert, after all, architecture risks becoming arrogant and unrealistic. Such a description polarises the disciplines of urbanism and architecture. Perhaps we should situate ourselves somewhere between the pronouncements of Rossi, 'the architecture of the city' (as a social work of art), and of Koolhaas, 'where architecture is (in the way), nothing else can happen'.

OASE also expanded the design work along the way. More and more it was nurtured by a secret Benjamin-esque search for the 'sanctuary of art and intellect'. The answer to the contemporary problems of banality, multiculturalism, globalisation – pragmatic matters, in short – was found in an oasis manoeuvre, where 'negative thinking'¹⁶ becomes productive and *realpolitik* is fulfilled by Koolhaas, among others. There where the 'negative confirmation' of compromising conditions turned into its opposite.

In this way, *OASE* contains distance and engagement, a place of critical reflection and thematisation of the building towards architecture. *OASE* also means the stimulus to 'shudder'¹⁷ in the sense of ecstasy, and where possible, poiesis; both form a critical distance, according to Lidy van Marissing.¹⁸ With Adorno, we think of 'illuminating things for a moment'. With Baird we say that because of 'post-utopian pragmatism'¹⁹ and 'image hedonism', critical interventions are imperative.

The 1990-1996 period is also defined by a dark sense of futility and increasing unease.²⁰ After all, these years of punk and social unease can be considered the extrapolation, but above all the inversion of the oppositions of the 1970s, the dogmatising critique of the 'capitalist conditions' of architecture and 'imagination in power'. Following the resourcing of history in the 1980s, the 1990s dispenses with postmodern aberrations in order to maximise the motto 'everything goes' as Baudrillard's 'simulacrum'.²¹ In risky critical fashion, the 'modern' was turned over to the stretched potential of liquid technology and fluid capital. The conflict with architecture, instead of affirming its futility, was detonated.

All of this coincides with the track *OASE* follows during this period. If we think of the complex of editorial tracks, we see a series of conflicting subjects. 'The architecture of reason' (Terlouw) and 'Atlanta' (Koolhaas), architecturalalia such as 'the corners' (Bachelard) and 'the sensory nature of architecture' (Meuwissen), poetic themes such as 'the gestures of things' (Wortmann) and 'intimate immeasurability' (Sturkenboom), to end with philosophical theoretical considerations such as

14
See *OASE* 28, 42, 30, 29, 42 and 31, respectively.

15
See *OASE* 42, including Van Nieuwstadt's adaptation of Cacciari's thesis.

16
See *OASE* 30.

17
See *OASE* 29 and 30.

18
Lidy van Marissing, *Het gedroomde leven. Een denkbeeldig onderzoek* (1979).

19
George Baird, "'Criticality" and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, 2005.

20
Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, 1992), notably the essay 'Dark Space'.

21
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris, 1981).

'The architecture as a fable' (Van Nieuwstadt on Cacciari) and 'The historical project' (Tafari).²² With this train of inertia, one anticipates an international course that will dominate during the following period. A course of globalisation in which *OASE*'s intellectual resistance is examined globally in the themes of 'tectonics', 'autonomous architecture', 'ornament' and 'historiography and design practice' and 'literature'.²³

FROM *O O O* TO THE INVERSION AND DISRUPTION OF DESIGN

OASE seems, in the course of 25 years, to have returned to its original position. Having started with the three Os of its Dutch subtitle, *Ontwerp, Onderzoek en Onderwijs* – design, research and education – the journal, following its student publication phase, was marked by an instrumental approach. The objective was to clarify the methodology of the architectural programme at Delft University of Technology. In architectural culture, 'plan analysis' was paired with a paradoxical 'cross section'. For even as Colin Rowe's 'transparency'²⁴ was taught, in reality the by now lifeless power of Modern Building thundered forth. Conversely, the Faculty of Architecture at Delft further disrupted architectural culture by pushing through a democratisation process via the radical pamphlet *de elite*,²⁵ taking the journal *O*, published by (the same) SUN Publishers, along with it. Once it was realised that the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater in Delft, there emerged, along with the name *OASE*, a journal that began to evolve from an instrumental and politicising approach to a reflective one. In putting its literary and philosophical name to serious use, architectural design was henceforth seen as an expression of an architectural culture. The writing became contemplative, an expansion of the empirical approach. Rational argumentation and research into original materials were linked with criticism. Delft University of Technology was editorially dominant, but Eindhoven University of Technology, through its staff,²⁶ partly thanks to Kees Vollemans, was not without influence.

In the 1990-1996 period, with the contributions of Nijenhuis, 'The Passion for the Hiatus', and Bekaert, 'Eupalinos ou l'architecte',²⁷ a restrained visual power was also on the rise along with the philosophical content, in part through the typography of Karel Martens, celebrated as a prize winner with words like 'personal and painstaking'.²⁸ *OASE* never degenerated into the glossy approach to which many architecture periodicals surrendered due to design practice and the broader audience ever since Postmodernism. Instead, *OASE* reached a pinnacle of integrity without resorting to the dogma of scribes or iconoclasts. On the contrary, visual culture was thematised and problematised by examining its functioning. If we ask which periodicals evolved as architecture tracts

22
See *OASE* 29, 33, 34, 39, 40 and 44, respectively.

23
See *OASE* 62, 65, 69 and 70, respectively.

24
See *OASE* 31.

25
Stielos, *de elite, een analiese van de afdeling bouwkunde van de technische hogeschool te delft* (1970).

26
Such as Pieter Jan Gijsberts, Joost Meuwissen and Gijs Wallis de Vries.

27
See *OASE* 28 and 40.

28
Beginning with *OASE* 28.

during this period, then *Archis*, under Bekaert's editorship, and certainly *OASE* qualify. Among other things, through a convincing historical anchoring by Erik Terlouw, Endry van Velzen, Kees Vollemans and Gijs Wallis de Vries, but also through the theoretical rhetoric of writers like Geert Hovingh, Joost Meuwissen, Wim Nijenhuis and Harm Tilman. In the process, *Oase* established an independent and expert position within the disciplines of architecture, urbanism and landscape design by establishing the sovereignty of a 'sanctuary of art and intellect' in the interaction of architecture theory, architecture history and architecture criticism. When *OASE* stretches this sanctuary for a trivialising contribution by Gijsberts (the inundation of the gaze) and a humorous article by Sierksma (anecdotal architecture), it is clear that the journal is both 'subscribing to' (*inschrijven*) and 'deregistering from' (*uitschrijven*) its time.²⁹ To ensure that *OASE* continue to escape contemporary development mechanisms based on the three Os mentioned above, Tafuri's adage, to examine current events from a historical distance in order to take the discourse beyond even the *Fragwürdige* (dubious), remains. During the last period, from 1997 to 2007, *OASE* has established an even more international profile, but the demand for historical reflection continues to set the agenda.³⁰

In short, *OASE*'s progress runs from student publication, through a period of growth, to maturity, to finally explore the world. It is comparable to Vasari's *Le Vite*.³¹ The mature state has been reached through a process, starting out as the house organ of Delft University of Technology, then orienting itself via translations towards a discourse broader than design, and finally to participate, via the call for papers in the debate that evolved via graduate research, international publications and symposia. Incidentally, the articles selected by *OASE* from the 1990-1996 period do open up the possibility of escaping from a discourse that is merely tributary to design practice and the *Zeitgeist* connected with it. The authors reject all compromises in order to create a critical distance through their sovereign position. They are a testament to the shift from the instrumental and utopian notion of design to a position of independent criticism aimed at revealing the intrinsic functioning of architectural culture. The term 'intensive coherence'³² opens up a new perspective on the metropolis, in order to describe this reality generically and flexibly.

A PAINFUL ANTHOLOGY

The contributions by Erik Terlouw, Geert Bekaert and Wim Nijenhuis are painful to the reader. A farewell to the peaceful oasis. They address the idea of 'beyond', a period that no longer tolerates division into periods.³³ Selecting a few anniversary contributions out of 25 years of production seems to make time evaporate in order to find *OASE*'s critical odour

²⁹
See *OASE* 34 and 39.

³⁰
Op cit. (note 26).

³¹
Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de 'più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (Florence, 1568).

³²
The term, notably explained by Deleuze in 'Folding' (in *Architectural Design Profile* 102), is part of an architectural debate among Jeffrey Kipnis and Greg Lynn, Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, etc.

³³
See *OASE* 44.

through distillation. *OASE*'s anniversary thus becomes a celebration of edited source material, reasoned manifestoes, in short a shopping list of intellectual pleasures. These are not messages from the world of arguments, in which the familiar categories of past and future are relevant; rather it is about bringing a transhistorical thinking up to date. For instance, through the 'Architecture of Reason',³⁴ beyond the 'positive and arbitrary rules' of Perrault, Terlouw points out above the decline of the Platonic idea of architecture, and subsequently 'taste', which jettisons its rational explanation through Ledoux. He argues that 'an architectural language that is not judged as to a predetermined content, but as to what it makes possible . . . as a formal, complete in itself and already meaningless, yet ordering and designing instrument.' Bekaert's adaptation of Valéry's text, 'Eupalinos ou l'architecte'³⁵ leads to the following pronouncement: 'Yet all the delicate care for the durability (*la durée*) of the building expressed in the care for detail is nothing compared to the attention Eupalinos displayed when he worked out the emotions and the vibrations of the soul of the future viewer of his work.' Nijenhuis³⁶ uses Virilio's perception of time to provoke 'transhistoricity', besides the conventional notions of syn- and diachronous time, the vanishing of the perspectivist and finite view of time and space. This is about the filmic 'hiatus' in which we become conscious of a world that is 'separate from memory' in order to 'challenge our expectations'. 'Time, stripped of dimensions . . . has no end.' Such a 'sudden' time 'interrupts the habituation to continuous time in a normal progression in reality and thereby generates mental processes and the passions related to them'.

Has this architecture debate lost its object as an artefact? No, the building appears as an architectural statement and retains its validity as a mouthpiece for rhetoric. Thanks to reflection, the debate has been intensified, but also expanded. Bekaert, for instance, has Valéry observe that 'it is the architect who transforms seeing into the visible'. The result is 'a completed building that presents us, at a glance, with a sum of intentions, inventions, insights and powers'. Quoting Germain Boffrand, Terlouw makes the connection between architecture and building: 'The detailing of the mouldings and the other elements that comprise a building are to architecture what words are to an oration.' Nijenhuis, finally, shows us the Fiat factory in Turin so admired by Le Corbusier, but beyond what Jencks terms his 'tragic perspective', the building and its test track is situated in Virilio's perspective, that of speed and vanishing. A posteriori we see the building differently, yes, 'every observation leads to optical illusion'.

OASE AS HOST

As a journal, *OASE* has also provided a podium for a number of favourite writers, including Michel van Nieuwstadt and many designing, teaching and researching writers such as

Jurjen Zeinstra. Van Nieuwstadt invites, as it were, Cacciari, who had not only floridly summarised his articles himself, but more importantly, edited them himself.³⁷ Should we say that his ‘aesthetic and philosophical questions’ largely coincide with *OASE*’s agenda, specifically ‘to become an exile in one’s homeland’, an exile in search of the nearly exhausted sources of the intellect? Should we also note, however, that the article ‘Houses of the Future’ (Zeinstra)³⁸ risks resorting to the utopian rhetoric of design? Fine, it is an ‘exploration of the limits of the discipline’ through ‘extremely fascinating experiments’ such as those of the Smithsons and Archigram. Yet would it not have been interesting, with Cacciari in mind, to adapt the text in order to update it with current experiments, via Kiesler’s Endless House, Van Berkel’s Möbius House and Lebbeus Woods’s New City, for example?

OASE consisted of a fairly constant and sometimes alternating series of hosts who, in addition to consulting and balloting their guests, also seasoned their texts in the kitchen themselves. Their expertise is that of haute cuisine. They merit praise for a balanced series of articles, translations and editorials. They measure up without question to leading architecture journals. A comparison with journals that set out to document and describe design practice falls short a priori, because *OASE* is about a definitive disengagement from the codes of the practice of the profession. This necessary detachment allows an unbiased yet critical discourse about architecture based on a dynamic complex of perspective in cultural science and aesthetic philosophy. In the process, *OASE* has gradually carved out a position and incorporated the capacities of such journals (some of them no longer extant) as *Lotus*, *Daidalos* and *Oppositions*, such as their capacity for theoretical thematisation, historical situation and substantive polemic, respectively. *OASE*’s relevance is increasingly grounded in the capacity to formulate productive rather than operational criticism. A criticism that is sufficient in itself by relying on its sovereign position to examine architectural culture from the inside as well as the outside, based on history and theory as well as on a perspective beyond the familiar, the unpredictable.

THE EDITORIAL LANDSCAPE

Let us sketch the landscape. ‘Splendour is tragic’, ‘The green grass . . .’, ‘Fence, labyrinth and cave’, ‘Periphery of the heart’ and ‘Architecture on the rocks’, ‘An excess of sensations’, ‘Cornfield and poppy’, ‘Shadows in the green . . .’.³⁹ A series of narrative introductions and articles with a literary bent. Let us compare the landscape of all the texts in *OASE* to those of the anthologies of, among others, Michael Hays,⁴⁰ Hilde Heynen et al.⁴¹ and Kate Nesbitt.⁴² The first two limit themselves to identification and reading advice, the third might inspire *OASE* if we set the *OASE* editorials alongside her introduction.

37
Op cit. (note 35).

38
See *OASE* 32.

39
See, respectively: *OASE* 40, Gijs Wallis de Vries; 33, Philippe Panerai cs; 34, Michiel Riedijk; 35, Juliette Bekkering; 34, Willemijn Wilms Flot; 39, Johan Meyer; 42, Joost Meuwissen; and 43, Dirk van den Heuvel.

40
K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, 1998).

41
Hilde Heynen et al., *Dat is architectuur. Sleutelteksten uit de 20e eeuw* (Rotterdam, 2001).

42
Kate Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (Princeton, 1996).

If we situate the ‘small editorial narratives’ within her larger narrative, they should ‘light up’ like pearls. Her work covers the period from 1965 to 1995 but represents a possible agenda for *OASE* on its way to issue number 100. Her thematisation is admittedly somewhat categorical, but *OASE* can use it to outline its rhetorical landscape, as Hays does carve in Deleuzian style on the cover of his book but fails to elaborate in terms of content.

The ‘compilation of editorials and articles’⁴³ from the 1990-1996 period can be seen as an emergency landing in the desert. Saint-Exupéry’s little prince would hear various fragments of a strange civilisation: ‘the collective longing of architects for an individual course-setting in architecture’ answers the ‘storm of irresistibility’ as a result of trendy ‘images’ by opposing it with ‘gravity and self-evidence’. Back to a ‘speaking architecture’!⁴⁴ Moreover, the question of ‘form’ must be faced, as well as the ‘tectonics of resistance’. Does the ‘intelligent membrane’ (of Kas Oosterhuis) offer a solution?⁴⁵ The ‘cryptic demand for a collective identity’ in government policy documents on architecture and space must provide an answer to the ‘pluriformity’ observed by Jencks and the NAI.⁴⁶ What’s more, the ‘shudder’ may be an instrument to ‘appeal to the individual without the mediation of a convention’. Nor does the ‘end of the avant-garde’ mean that architecture should dress up as Pop Art in order to appeal to the ‘masses’ through ‘medium and technology’ – perhaps via ‘hardware’ in relation to ‘freedom’ and ‘software’ in relation to ‘identity’? In any event, a ‘master plan’ (by Richard Meier), which led to ‘a shocking mediocrity’ in Antwerp, should be avoided. ‘Architecture should contribute to a broadening of the mind.’⁴⁷

Isn’t all of this a ‘prison’ that, according to Bachelard, is ‘as familiar as it is hostile’?⁴⁸ And doesn’t the unbridled excess of Koolhaas’s ‘Atlanta’, together with the evocation of the ‘underground cave, Rome’ not point to a necessary ‘internal quality of urban design’ as a consequence of the negation of the ‘external’? If, along with the pilots of *OASE*, we surrender to these metropolises, these designed deserts, yes, then we see the architecture of oases, a complex network entailing the challenge of intensifying architectural rhetoric. These countless Bergson-esque ‘moments’ even take us beyond the *Fragwürdige* to keep rediscovering, via the ‘mental builder par excellence’, the power of ‘poësis’.⁴⁹ O, *OASE*, Oh, let the plea, in its simply constructed theoretical force, not be swept away to the four winds, but instead go bravely forth to explore, in a ‘clairvoyant’ way, Virilio’s⁵⁰ view of today’s ‘desert of chaos’! Perhaps Vattimo’s nomadic ability could lead the way: the ‘weak thought’⁵¹ that, devoid of a ‘solid foundation’ continues to interpret the flowing character of reality.

43
Compiled by Filip Geerts and Marc Schoonderbeek, among others.

44
See editorials in *OASE* 28, 29 and 30.

45
See editorial in *OASE* 29.

46
See editorial in *OASE* 42.

47
See editorials in *OASE* 32, 35 and 39.
48
See editorial in *OASE* 33.

49
See editorials in *OASE* 33, 34, 40 and 44.

50
Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events* (Cambridge, 2002), with an introduction by Bernard Tschumi.

51
Gianni Vattimo, ‘Il pensiero debole’ (Milan, 1983).