Versatile and Comprehensible

The Work of Soeters Van Eldonk

The work of the Soeters Van Eldonk firm of architects has many facets. Some of their designs can be recognised from miles away. There's the new Zaanstad city hall, for instance, an amplified take on the local tradition of building wooden houses and painting them green. Other works are barely noticeable, however, such as their treatment of the corner of Warmoesstraat and Sint Annenstraat in Amsterdam. If you don't pay very close attention, the fact that Warmoesstraat has acquired a new façade will pass you right by.

Architecture that is both exuberant and understated, elegant and serious, is typical of the firm's work, but Sjoerd Soeters and Jos van Eldonk and their co-workers are always on the lookout for something that suits the location, the residents and the client and that is tailor-made to fit the building's function. If circumstances demand a modest application, then the firm's solutions are as unobtrusive as possible – such as the apartment block on the Brouwersgracht in Amsterdam, which looks more like a warehouse than the ones that were there already.

No matter how diverse their oeuvre, it's clear that the work of Soeters Van Eldonk is far removed from mainstream Dutch architecture today, with its modernist inspiration.

Form follows function

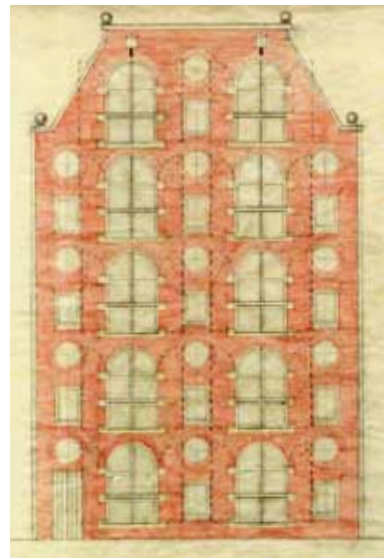
The firm was founded in 1979 by Sjoerd Soeters, who took Jos van Eldonk as his partner in 1997, and it does produce distinctive architecture. But for Soeters Van Eldonk, the form of a building is less important than the contribution it can make to the way a city functions. Even though the firm designs such unusual buildings as a city hall composed of magnified Zaandam houses, a theatre in Heerhugowaard inspired by a red cabbage or apartment blocks with gigantic swans on the roof, their main purpose is not to enrich the world with such buildings. These structures are a - sometimes unconventional - means of forcing environments to make room for ordinary everyday life. How a city, a city centre, a residential district or a village is put together, how new buildings fit into the environment, how public space is organised, how routes run, how a diversity of

Castle Leliënhuyze, Haverleij Den Bosch. Courtesy of Aluphoto.

functions can be combined – in short, how the built environment can be made liveable – all that is more important to Soeters and Van Eldonk than architectural expression. Since a structure's exterior is not their top priority, where that's concerned they're quite happy to go a bit overboard on occasion.

Soeters and Van Eldonk want their architecture to be comprehensible. They don't make buildings that sit in autistic silence or deliver monologues; their architecture enters into a dialogue with the environment, it 'listens and responds'. In that respect, their work is not only *architecture parlante*, to quote an eighteenth-century French concept, but it's also *architecture entendante*. They want their architecture to relate well to the people who use the environment, and they do this by referring to it, expanding on it and responding to what is, or was, already there. They make their architecture comprehensible by having it speak an intelligible language, drawing on the traits and peculiarities of the context in which the project is located. The Austrian architect Adolf Loos once defined architects as bricklayers who have learned Latin. If we follow that definition, we might say that since almost no one speaks Latin any more, architecture is having to contend with being unintelligible. Soeters and Van Eldonk want to do their bricklaying in an ordinary language that everyone can understand.

Brouwersgracht, Amsterdam.



Sketch, Brouwersgracht, Amsterdam.

This can be done by applying the adage 'form follows function' in its original sense, not as the hackneyed expression that is sometimes used to characterise functionalism in architecture. When the American architect Louis Sullivan coined this phrase at the end of the nineteenth century, he did not mean that buildings ought to show how they are engineered – that the weight of a floor is borne by columns or walls – but that buildings must express their nature and character. In line with the French *architecture parlante*, he argued that a tall building, say, should be designed so that everything, down to the smallest detail, emphasises the building's height.

When 'form follows function' is understood as Sullivan originally meant it, it becomes an argument for expressing the character of a building through its form, composition, size, location, ornamentation, symbolism and all the other means that the architect has at his disposal. You can take this very literally and build a hot-dog stand in the shape of a hot-dog, to cite a well-known postmodern example, but not every building lends itself to such a literal interpretation. Usually more subtle means are needed to articulate what a building is, and thus make it meaningful and recognisable rather than meaningless and interchangeable.

Cheerful environments

For Soeters and Van Eldonk, it is essential that architecture be comprehensible because architecture belongs to everyone. Architecture is there on the street, which means that everyone is affected by it. The fact that some people may be bothered by it, and it is the architect's responsibility to avoid this as far as possible, is sometimes forgotten. But not by Soeters and Van Eldonk. They do their best to ensure that their buildings don't have 'sides' and 'backs', where most of the time there's little going on. After all, the public domain means most where buildings look towards the street, thereby showing their public faces. So Soeters and Van Eldonk try to give their buildings as much frontage as possible.

Blaauwlakenblok, Amsterdam.
Corner Warmoesstraat.
Photo by Scagliola-Brakkee.

Shopping Centre Parada,
Nootdorp. Courtesy of ING.

They surround them with features that are oriented towards the street, while elements that have no relevance to the street, such as car parks, are incorporated within outwardly-oriented functions. Wherever possible front doors open onto the street as effective contributions to street life. So when it comes to creating a meaningful and well-functioning public space, the most important factor isn't the logic of the individual building but the logic of urban life. And of course the same goes for villages and neighbourhoods; no-one there wants to look at the backs of buildings, either.

With most architects there's no point talking about cheerfulness, but Soeters and Van Eldonk think otherwise. For them cheerfulness, homeliness, friendliness and familiarity are important. No-one in their right mind would argue that a cheerless world is a better world, yet few architects dare to admit that their aim is to produce cheerful environments.

According to Soeters and Van Eldonk, architecture has to be connected with the location so that people can feel at home. This can be done by seeking out

City Hall, Zaandam.
Photo by Scagliola-Brakkee.

the individual character of the place, which can be understood as a combination of what is there now, what used to be there, what is usual in that locality, the street scene and the landscape. Getting to the bottom of a place is not an exact science but a quest to discover how new architecture can link up with the environment. The method is always and everywhere applicable, and in that respect it is universal. For Van Eldonk and Soeters, however, the results are always different, say, because the sum of the characteristics of a place is different every time.

When their starting point is the context, their object is not to to use architecture to make a place unique. It's just the opposite: to bring out the uniqueness of the place in the architecture. When you connect with an area's individuality its character is strengthened. When you build on what is already there, what is new can appear to be only natural.

Bricoleurs

The means that Soeters and Van Eldonk use to make environments seem natural and matter-of-fact, to animate a town or city (if it's not a matter of all-out reanimation), often teeter on the border between conventional and unconventional. Ordinary means are sometimes used in an unusual way, unusual solutions are achieved by ordinary means. This is typical of the firm, and it gives Soeters and Van Eldonk a very specific position in the spectrum of contemporary architecture and urban design: tradition and history play such a major role in their work that its radically innovative quality is not immediately apparent; on the other hand, it is so obviously unconventional that it is difficult to fit it into a school such as contemporary traditionalism.

What further sets them apart is that the scale at which Van Eldonk and Soeters work often lies somewhere between architecture and urban design. For them the essence of the commission matters more than the individual building but less than the development plan. This is urban design that consists of buildings and architecture with an effect that extends beyond the boundaries

Sydhavn Sluseholmen, Copenhagen. Photo by Scagliola-Brakkee.

of the site. What Soeters and Van Eldonk do is achieve an interaction with the built environment and comes close to 'tinkering with the city', although in their case there are none of the negative connotations that messing about with the city might imply. Messing about with what is already there fits right in with Soeters' and Van Eldonk's preferred role as architects.

Soeters and Van Eldonk are engineers who have learned how to tinker, who have rediscovered an uninhibited inventiveness after completing their analytical training as architects. Both of them feel a greater affinity with the *bricoleur* than with the *ingénieur*, to quote a distinction made by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss distinguished between the engineer who works according to a set plan and the *bricoleur* or handyman who improvises. The handyman uses concrete, second-hand materials to make something that is needed at a specific moment. New forms emerge, even though innovation as such is not the goal. The engineer's design is based on one clear, basic idea, while that of the *bricoleur* elaborates on a variety of different ideas. The engineer works 'from the top down', starting with a system and adapting reality to suit it. The *bricoleur* starts from haphazard reality and adapts his plan accordingly.

The difference between the *bricoleur* and the *ingénieur* is reminiscent of another problem-solving classification described by Isaiah Berlin in *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, a book that Soeters often quotes. The hedgehog has one strategy, a total solution to every problem: as soon as danger approaches, the animal rolls himself up into a spiny ball. The fox, on the other hand, has no all-embracing solution; for every problem he encounters he comes up with a different idea. The aim of Soeters and Van Eldonk is to unite the characteristics of the fox and the *bricoleur* by devising an appropriate response for every problem instead of approaching every problem in the same way.

The 'tinkering' of Soeters and Van Eldonk is part of an architectural tradition that reached its high point in the nineteenth century, when this approach was used to devise suitable forms for all manner of new types of building. Historical styles and examples were used to develop buildings for completely new purposes such as railway stations, factory buildings or big apartment blocks.

The way Soeters and Van Eldonk work follows on from this and frequently shows a close relationship to it; for instance, in their use of the traditional idiom of the Zaan region's green wooden buildings for the unprecedented stacking of bus station and town hall, in the basilica-like covered car park at the heart of the Nootdorp shopping centre or the castle-like housing in Haverleij. Each and every one of these is an example of the kind of *bricolage* that was so popular in the nineteenth century.

Agreement by mutual promise

What goes for architecture also goes for Soeters's and Van Eldonk's approach to urban design: there, too, they manage to come up with unconventional solutions by playing around with everyday elements. An example of this is the canal that runs uphill in Zaandam, a city-centre canal that had been filled in and was to be excavated once again. This canal, which seems to break the laws of gravity, forms a natural escort for pedestrians as they walk from the city centre to the raised square where the entrance to the city hall is located.

Soeters's and Van Eldonk's pursuit of what is natural results in a preference for urban environments composed of clearly-defined streets and squares, surrounded by façades that are (or appear to be) a succession of separate buildings. In these environments the pedestrian has precedence. Motor traffic is relegated to second place. On-street parking is reduced as much as possible, with vehicles mainly restricted to underground car parks or buildings, supplies for shops are delivered to the back of the building and the intersection of motor and pedestrian traffic is kept to a minimum. In this respect Java Island, the centre of Nootdorp and the centre of Zaanstad all follow the same plan: they consist of spaces made for people, not for traffic.

Defining an urban space is made easier by the absence of the car. With no cars streets can be made narrower and squares smaller, which usually helps to demarcate a clearly defined shape and boundary in which opposing façades are not too far from each other. This makes for more pleasant surroundings. Most people are more comfortable in a clearly defined space than a boundless openness, just as they find variety more attractive than uniformity, and activity better than emptiness.

Another way to get in touch with the ordinary is by listening to the wishes of clients and users. Soeters and Van Eldonk are not the sort of architects who think that client input gets in the way of an uncompromising design. They don't see compromise as giving in. Rather, they adhere to the original Latin meaning of a *compromissum* as an agreement through mutual promises. These days almost no one still regards a compromise as an agreement from which both parties benefit, certainly not in architecture. Soeters and Van Eldonk do not see the design and building process as a battle with clients, future users and local residents as their opponents. Naturally, a new building is not just for the client or the people who live nearby, nor is it just for the user. There may be more important interests involved: the city, society, the arts – even eternity, if need be. These may all be reasons why the architect should listen to his own conscience. But architecture begins with a client who wants something and is willing to risk entrusting the realisation of this desire to a designer. Soeters and Van Eldonk see the *compromissum* as an incentive to create something that is more scintil-

lating, more beautiful and better than the client, the neighbours and the users could ever have imagined.

The fact that the people who commission a building are rarely the ones who occupy it has created a gulf between the architect and the user. Because of this architects have of necessity more and more done their best for humanity as a whole while all too easily failing to consider the individual human being.

To escape this trap, Soeters and Van Eldonk make every effort to get to know the flesh-and-blood people behind the abstract notion of 'users' and to try to understand what moves people, what their priorities are and what they lack. This requires not only design talent but also good listening skills.

It also requires a grasp of the whole programme of demands and underlying ideas and assumptions, a willingness to be influenced by the situation and the environment, getting to know the users and their expectations and dreams, searching for the meanings that can be distilled from all this and exposing the secrets that lie hidden in the commission. What this leads to in the end is not *making* a form but *finding* a form, to quote the distinction made by Hugo Häring to which Soeters has so often referred.

As Soeters and Van Eldonk emphasise, finding that form is a matter not just of drawing but also of calculating. Costs and profits, direct and indirect returns, are crucial factors in the design process, especially when the designs are more complex. If something seems too expensive, cutting costs is always an option, but so is searching for ways of increasing the profits. That was one of the things that Soeters and Van Eldonk discovered in the plan for Mariënburg in Nijmegen: that it could be improved in two ways – by expanding the scheme and by reducing the public space. This not only resulted in more rentable square metres of floor area, it also made the streets and squares more compact, adding to the conviviality of downtown Nijmegen.

The ordinary within reach

A central theme in the work and thinking of Soeters and Van Eldonk is how to make architecture and urban design comprehensible and natural. That sounds simpler than it is. Naturalness is difficult to achieve in both architecture and urban design. There are few examples of this kind of naturalness, few traditions that have held up after two centuries of modernisation. The idea that something is good because that's the way it's always been done has been utterly demolished by a century of avant-garde iconoclasm. And even though the avant-garde has been pronounced dead, after that demolition it's no longer possible just to return to the naturalness of yesterday. That it's possible for something like a vernacular to exist, a way of approaching buildings that is the sum of the materials to hand, available techniques and skills, climate, habits and customs: this has perhaps become a romantic utopian dream after all the shocks of the New and a far-reaching globalisation. The paradoxical way in which Soeters and Van Eldonk use unconventional solutions to try to bring the ordinary within reach and attempt to graft architecture onto the environment clearly shows just how far today's architectural culture has moved from the ordinariness that was once so ordinary. ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier