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van Reeth

and the Demands of Architecture

Precisely because he has always resisted originality, Bob van Reeth (1943-) is now one of today's most original architects. He does not fit into any school or movement, not even that of the traditionalists who reject all schools and trends. He was like that when still a student in the mid-sixties; he did not rebel against existing systems but went in search of the places where architecture could still be found in its freedom and necessity. He knew the fundamental strength of architecture from the brickyards of his native region, the banks of the Scheldt between Temse and Niel, and discovered its imaginative power in the sometimes bizarre outbuildings that proliferated behind conventional blocks of houses.

He was still a student at the St Luke Institute in Brussels when in 1965 he was responsible for the renovation of a jeweller's shop with accomodation on the Paardenmarkt in Antwerp. He left the skeleton as it was. It gave him an anchor in the street, the necessity that inspired his imagination. He showed the possibilities within the existing structure, both inside the flat

Bob van Reeth, *The renovated jeweller's shop on the Paardenmarkt in Antwerp* (1965).



and, most strikingly, in the shop front. With a nod to Brutalism, then enjoying its heyday, but at the same time defying it, he gave the raw concrete straight from the formwork crystalline shapes that contrasted sharply with the frameless tall glass display windows in which the jewellery and watches glistened. The free-standing framing of the unusually high door gave an additional emphasis to the access to the free space of the shop. The door handle was a huge watch. The mastery with which an unknown architect here handled the whole spectrum of architecture, from constructional ingenuity, programmatic tours de force and nods to prevailing fashion to contrasts of scale and even humour, came as a complete surprise and immediately brought Bob van Reeth to the forefront. It is indicative of his approach that he continued to work on this building; in 1994 a penthouse apartment was added under a semi-circular dome.

A little later, in 1966, Bob van Reeth showed that his mastery was not restricted to small-scale projects but was equally evident in a complex assignment involving business premises and living accommodation in an open meadow. The former offices of the publisher Walter Beckers in Kalmthout were converted and extended by Bob van Reeth, also over a number of years. The building had a clear structure which was used in playful way, as if here the unchanging and lasting elements of architecture had entered into an alliance with its changing and provisional manifestation.

But it was not these two early projects that determined the course of Bob van Reeth's turbulent career. They were no more than an overture indicating the level of his ambitions. His true manifesto was seen in the Botte house in Mechelen, built in 1969, and the conversion into his own home of a house in the Klein Begijnhof in the same city. The directness of the Botte house was challenging. This was no longer architecture in the normal sense of the word. A concrete skeleton outlined the structure, within which one could improvise to one's heart's content. No formal design had primacy. The final result was determined by a process of gradually taking possession of the structure and making it one's own, a process which by its nature had no end. Bob van Reeth approached the existing house in the Klein Begijnhof in the

Bob van Reeth, *The Botte house in Mechelen* (1969-1971).





Bob van Reeth, *The new wing of the Onze Lieve Vrouwe College in Antwerp* (1973-1978).

same way. This design kissed goodbye to every conventional idea of a house. It was intended to restore freedom to the dwelling-place. Living in this kind of non-architecture becomes a real adventure, the discovering of an unknown world in and around oneself. This spontaneity in building, which referred to the 'all power to the imagination' idea of the late sixties, should not, however, be viewed simplistically and reduced to its superficial, somewhat chaotic appearance. Even in the earliest works the freedom of the architecture was already underpinned by a strong, geometrically controlled structure. This was a precondition for that freedom.

This was what his imitators, of whom there were many, failed to understand. On all sides triangular windows and other features from the Van Reeth repertoire began to appear; but the austere mastery behind the brilliant improvisation went unrecognised. The quirks and jokes were there, but not the disciplined expertise through which architecture rose above gratuitous playing with form to become the construction of a real world.

While the Van Reeth style flourished during the seventies, Van Reeth himself had moved on in his exploration of an appropriate architecture for the age. While the structural aspect became still more autonomous, increasing attention was paid to a more controlled form that would express this structure. With his taste for lapidary definitions, Van Reeth characterises his work as the building of ruins, what survives of the experience of a building and can be continually reinterpreted. In this minimalist statement one recognises the approach evident in the buildings already discussed. But in the subsequent evolution of his work structure and form were to become more and more closely related.

One project marks a turning point in this development, the first large building Bob van Reeth designed. At the Onze Lieve Vrouwe College (a secondary school) on the Rubenslei in Antwerp a worn-out classroom wing

which had been added to the classical-style complex with its neo-Gothic church was to be replaced. Van Reeth made his new wing, for which the first design dates from 1973, a tribute to the classical architecture in which it was to be integrated. While in his early work the fragmentation and differentiation of the elements tested the unity of the structure to its limits, in the new approach the emphasis was on the clarity of the volume and the balance between the planes. But within the confines of these new requirements Van Reeth still could not resist playing games with the differentiation of the components. Facades were created with their own rhythm and articulation, alluding to a Palladian-style tranquillity. Inside, behind these facades, the constructional inventiveness and lively playfulness of interrelated spaces were given free rein, to an even greater extent than in the early work. Convention and law now vied with vitality and spontaneity. The tranquillity gained was not dead but full of tension.

The new wing of the Onze Lieve Vrouwe College no more belonged to any particular movement than the earlier work. But, just as the jeweller's shop on the Paardemarkt acknowledged Brutalism without being part of it, so this design was not insensitive to what was going on in the real world, not just in the world of architecture. The introduction into the work of a marked awareness of form was bound up with the rediscovery of the historical dimension of our culture and with awareness of the cultural dimension of architecture. Bob van Reeth has continued with the development that began here. He has been increasingly concerned with the ordering and control of chance, while ensuring that this ordering and control confirms chance as a vital principle rather than excluding it. His plans have been based less and less on repetitive or associative structures, tending instead towards the closed quality of geometrical figures with symmetrical development around a central axis. However, the geometry has never become absolute. It has remained a geometry of experience. The architecture, however autonomous it became, has never let go of the link with the reality of dwelling. This vital ambiguity is characteristic of all Bob van Reeth's work from this point on, and of the whole development of his oeuvre. This makes his work intriguing but unamenable to simple, fashionable interpretations.

After an unfortunate period in which for various reasons one project after another was not carried out, he had a new debut, as it were, in the mid-eighties. The impact was even greater than in the sixties. The Van Roosmalen

Bob van Reeth, *The café-restaurant at the Zuiderterras in Antwerp (1987-1991)*.





house (1985) on the Scheldekaaien in Antwerp, with its explicit references to Adolf Loos' house for Josephine Baker, became a huge popular success. It enjoys the kind of national and international fame few works of architecture can claim. Van Reeth also designed a café-restaurant on the quays of the Scheldt at the Zuiderterras (1987) and a large office building, though the latter was never built. The Van Roosmalen house and the Zuiderterras café seem like a new profession of faith. Inspired by the maritime architecture of pleasure boats, the designs are stripped of all gravity. Architecture appears as a mobile, almost transparent phenomenon whose dynamics are restrained, as in a dance, by the geometry of the figures.

It would have been unlike Van Reeth, however, to care greatly about this success. While his lighter work was causing general amazement, he was building on sites in the centre of Antwerp that had lain empty for decades and creating an inconspicuous but carefully considered architecture that drew no attention to itself but ensured that the urban pattern would be restored in that vital location. At the same time inside the walls of the historic Averbode Abbey a new office building (1991) was under construction for the publishing company located there. It links up with the anonymous urban architecture of Antwerp and with an underground extension to the existing monastery library. In 1994 the publisher's offices won an award for 'best business premises'. These buildings not only reveal the range of possibilities in Bob van Reeth's architecture but also throw light on his approach, which is primarily concerned not with the originality of an oeuvre but with the question that each new assignment asks of architecture.

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Translated by John Rudge.

Bob van Reeth, *The underground extension to the library of the Averbode Abbey (1991)* (Photo by Lautwein & Ritzenhoff BFF).