UNStudio:
Architecture between Art and Airport

[DIETER DE CLERCQ]

UNStudio,
New Amsterdam
Plein & Pavilion,
New York City,
2009

New York will be celebrating its 400th anniversary in 2009, and to mark the occasion the city will acquire a tangible expression of its Dutch origins. In early February 2009 it was announced that the Dutch architect Ben van Berkel (1957-) will be building a pavilion there. That pavilion will stand on the precise spot where the Dutch colonists came ashore four hundred years ago, at the southernmost tip of Manhattan. It is to be completed by the end of September 2009.

That it should be Ben van Berkel who is to design this building is not particularly surprising. He is the first Dutch architect to be given the chance to build a skyscraper in New York. And so he joins the series of 'starchitects' who have got a foot in the door in Manhattan, a list which includes Herzog and De Meuron,

Jean Nouvel and Rem Koolhaas. His design for the block of luxury flats at Five Franklin Place in the popular TriBeCa district is going to be hard to miss. Van Berkel has ornamented this twenty-one storey tower with thick bands of metal that narrow, widen and twist in a seemingly random manner. From a distance it will look as if the building has been swathed in a shining satin ribbon, all ready to be unwrapped. In reality, as these bands pass around the building they function alternately as the railing for a balcony, a frame for a panoramic view and a shield against the sun. The building consists of three separate layers of flats that differ in size and amount of light. The lower ones facing the surrounding houses are conceived as loft dwellings with double-height storeys to make the best use of the natural light. The flats higher up, the 'city homes', which rise above the surrounding houses, are deeper in colour and have a different texture. Above these again, the three-storey penthouses have – in addition to a fabulous view and spacious terraces complete with jacuzzi – an open fire, a private lift and an outdoor kitchen. It seems there is little sign of the credit crunch in the top echelons of the New York housing market.

UNStudio, Five Franklin Place (facade detail with balconies), New York City, 2007-2009 (© Archpartners 2009).

UNStudio, Five Franklin Place (outdoor space), New York City, 2007-2009 (© Archpartners 2009).

The building as one point in a whole

The work produced by Van Berkel and his partner, the art historian Caroline Bos, is extraordinarily varied; from furniture design, interiors and buildings to urban development plans and major infrastructure projects. Their work is characterised by streamlined, curved forms, sharp angles and inclined planes. This architecture undulates, bends and folds in a variety of ways. And this is certainly the case with Five Franklin Place. But however handsome, extravagant or complex Van Berkel and Bos' designs may be, to really understand them it is important to realise that the built objects are only individual points in

UNStudio, Five Franklin Place (loft entry), New York City, 2007-2009 (© Archpartners 2009).

a broader, ever-changing context. After all, those designs emerge from and fit themselves into a new image of the city and a modified view of the architect's role in the building process. They see the city as a dynamic force-field in which a great many parties exert an influence on the design. For them it is essential to the building process to take seriously the views of all those concerned – from property agent to structural engineer and contractor – and to involve them in the design as early as possible.

Van Berkel and Bos call all these influences the '*mobile forces*', and once brought together in a synthesis it is these that ultimately shape the design. Their architecture is the result of a design *strategy* that encourages input from a variety of disciplines and makes use of design models: a series of principles or *leitmotifs* that help in the selection and implementation of the right parameters and which can also be transferred from one project to another. Van Berkel and Bos try to assemble all the data about a project, which the computer then combines into synthesis in the form of a diagram that orders and generates the design.

Diagrams

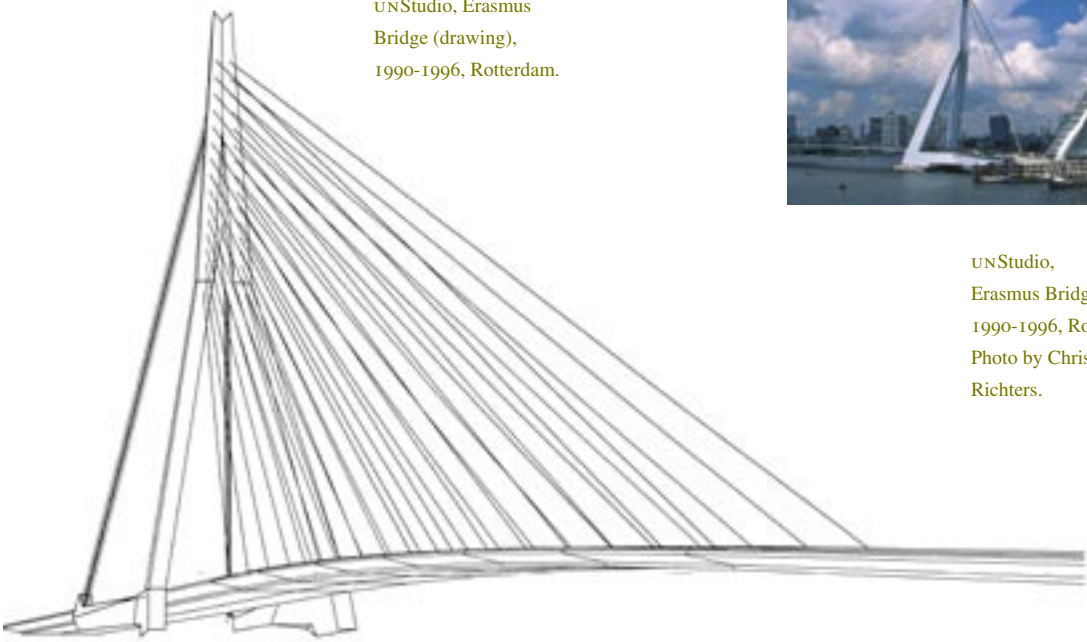
For Van Berkel and Bos diagrams are a sort of benchmark for the communication and the 'models' of the final project. They conceive these diagrams in the manner of Gilles Deleuze, as a characteristic, schematic plan that coincides with a specific social and societal force-field. A good example of this sort of

UNStudio, Möbius House (exterior), 1993-1998, 't Gooi, the Netherlands. Photo by Christian Richters.

diagram is the panopticon prison, which is highly stratified and contains a multitude of levels of meaning: *'A diagram is composed of concretised situations, techniques, tactics and functions'*. The diagram is not a blueprint for the design, nor can it ever be directly applied to architecture; it is an intermediate form derived from the actual design and its material configuration.

The diagram that forms the basis for what Van Berkel and Bos called the Möbius House (1993-98) is, of course, the Möbius strip. The Möbius strip not only

UNStudio, Erasmus Bridge (drawing), 1990-1996, Rotterdam.



UNStudio, Erasmus Bridge, 1990-1996, Rotterdam. Photo by Christian Richters.

structures the organisation of this house into an extensive circulation with no beginning or end, it also organises the cycle of sleep, domestic life and work. The twisted figure-of-eight diagram was also a decisive factor in the choice of materials and the spatial sequence of internal and external walls. As in the Möbius strip, inside becomes outside and vice versa, so that facades turn into internal walls, and glass and concrete swap places with every change of direction. In Van Berkel's more recent projects the computer is brought into the design process earlier and earlier. Van Berkel had his first experience with mathematical design models when working on the Erasmus Bridge in Rotterdam (1990-96), a commission which brought him international renown. The computer made it possible to communicate with structural engineers and contractors alike on the basis of the same information while still keeping the complexity of the project under control. This bridge is an example of the integrated design approach in which the design is constantly modified and fine-tuned. Its unusual asymmetrical shape and height of 139 metres make of it a highly idiosyncratic sculpture that has a character all its own when viewed from any of a variety of angles.

A different spatiality

The history of UNStudio – United Network Studio – is rooted in the Van Berkel & Bos architectural firm, which was founded in 1988. In 1999 the firm's name and organisational structure was changed, and since then it has presented itself as a sort of network that facilitates the best possible communication between a range of specialists in the fields of architecture, urban planning and infrastructure working on various projects in teams of varying composition. The firm's emphasis on the organisation of processes acknowledges the differing circumstances in which architecture comes into being. The increasing complexity of architectural projects, the building and legal conditions in other countries, alternative design techniques and innovative production methods have led to the development of new working strategies. The design process is dynamic, non-hierarchical, and is constantly being challenged by technological developments. Over the years, UNStudio has made increasing use of the possibilities of digital technology. On this point, Hans Ibelings writes in his book *Contemporary Architects of the Low Countries*: *'The firm's new architecture is an amalgam in which requirements, construction, infrastructure, circulation, form and space merge seamlessly together.... Van Berkel and his staff do not see spatial models and diagrams as a scientific basis, but as sources of inspiration for an architecture with a sort of spatiality different from that which has been common up to now.'*

This approach is well expressed in recent creations such as the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart. The organisational structure of this extremely complex building is based on constant changes in the visitor's orientation and a dynamic alternation between inside and outside. The shape of the building is that of two interlocking spirals, corresponding to the building's focus on the motorcar. The idea for the design came from road-building; in this case the architects were inspired by the lobes of the cloverleaf junction at the nearby motorway intersection. The 'twist' that circles the atrium and connects the various floors makes for a gradual transition in which the various planes merge together. This makes it hard to define where one level changes to another; the multiplicity of curves means there is hardly any distinction between vertical walls and hori-

UNStudio, Mercedes-Benz Museum, 2001-2006, Stuttgart. Photo by Christian Richters.

zontal floors. The lines are infinite, running into the distance or being absorbed into planes; there are quite simply no redundant points. This car museum is not an example of computer-generated architecture, which often comes up with entirely new spatial dimensions which, when put into practice, are often a poor reflection of what was promised on the screen. In this building, with this function, the single-surface approach is so entirely logical that it is hard to imagine how it could have been designed any differently. The building is the ultimate symbiosis of form and function, in which the organisation of the building and the objects exhibited blend into one another.

Experiential Architecture

Unlike many architects of their generation, at UNStudio they have no need to cling dogmatically to any particular idiom or theory. Although Van Berkel and Bos have expressed their views on architecture exhaustively in various articles and books, it is above all the buildings themselves that – often literally – unfold and develop their ideas. They generate new forms of organisation and elicit contrasting interpretations, thus expanding our understanding of them. UNStudio creates experiential architecture, '*architecture between art and airport*', as Van Berkel and Bos themselves put it. They see the network of airports as a hyper-condensed city where fiction and reality are constantly clashing, as a hectic and transient world where commerce reigns supreme and where such emotions as fear, happiness and sadness are experienced to extremes. At the other end of the spectrum is art, which is associated with purity, contemplation and reflection. It is in this area of tension between the sublime and the commonplace that UNStudio's experiential architecture unfolds for the viewer, user or occupant. ■

www.unstudio.com

Translated by Gregory Ball

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