

Dirk van den Heuvel Interview I with Samuel Penn October 2014

Samuel Penn: You co-curated the Bakema exhibition for the Dutch Pavilion at the Biennale this year. In the publication you mention that you've established a new institute which has opened up an archive of material previously held by the NAI. Other than the theme set by Rem Koolhaas for the Biennale (Absorbing Modernity), what made you decide to look at Jaap Bakema specifically? There seems to be a interest today in looking back at this period.

Dirk van den Heuvel: I've always been interested in and working with issues of modernity with a focus on the post-war period - even as a student. What really interests me are the questions behind the period, of course the work too, which is particular to that time. Even though the work may change, the questions behind the work remain pertinent today - questions of habitat, and the relationship between architecture and society, and how you might define or re-define the role of the architect in relation to society. It's interesting to look at that period as a lens or a mirror to understand our present condition. In Holland, in preparation for the exhibition, we were asked - 'why is it relevant, why do we do it now, what will we gain from looking back that will benefit us today?' - and I think it's a hopelessly obnoxious question, because you make the 'here and now' the absolute standard for everything - your work, your culture or research - everything! In Holland this is a very strong and dominant attitude in the rhetoric and in the way you have to formulate your projects. You always have to relate to the 'here and now', which in itself is fine, but since it's the dominant ideology it's like a Pavlovian response that managers or bureaucrats always ask you this really horrible question - 'but how does it relate to what we're doing today?' without being aware, specific or articulate about what we mean by the 'here and now'. It's nit a slogan but a kind of 'automatism' - a reflex. The new institute - the Study Centre - came about after Max Risalda, my colleague and professor, and I did the Team 10 project. we felt that we should establish a more permanent and structural relationship between us - the research group at the department of architecture in Delft - and the archive at the NAI. And then there was an opportunity. In Holland cultural policies changed due to budget cuts and the former Architecture Institute (NAI) had to merge with the Design Institute in Culture, there was a new director who had a real interest in the archive, and who wanted to legitimise it through opening it up for research - so he approached me and I proposed to set up the 'Study Centre'. It was born of a culture of politics that we hate - about budget cuts and the oppression of culture and research - but somehow we managed to use this as an opportunity to collaborate. Things have changed due to the crisis. Before we used to call it post-war modern architecture because classically or conventionally the big moment is of course before the second world war with the avant-garde, the establishing of CIAM, the De-Stijl movement in Holland, the Bauhaus and all the other movements of the 20's, and the post-war moment was considered a sort of withering away of that legacy. But for me it was interesting because it was also a continuation, a re-phrasing of questions, and also the moment when the modern movement became mainstream which is interesting in itself. Then with the crisis we started to call it 'welfare state architecture' which might be a bit more to the point, because that's the bigger framework in which it was all made possible, or at least happens. So around the 2008 crisis we started to look at the period through the lens of welfare state politics and how architects relate to this context of the welfare state - to politically contextualise this production. In our research we are exploring this idea amongst others because it's a useful framework. The welfare state is not a homogeneous monolith as it's often considered to be. At the time many architects didn't like the welfare state, there were all kinds of criticisms. So the welfare system is interesting because it's a system that tries to organise its own criticism - because criticism is very important in terms of innovation, assuring that money goes to the right places, experiments are done in the right places with the right purpose. So the notion at the institutional level, professionally, with the universities, the government institutions are crucial in this moment. The big criticisms of the welfare state in the 70's and 80's was that it was too bureaucratic etc.. Now we see that with the new 'market' conditions the bureaucracy hasn't gone away. On the contrary it's gotten even worse for all sorts of reasons. But in many ways they were probably right that these monopoly positions - nationalised industries - stood in the way of real innovation. However, with 40 years of hindsight, looking back - especially in Holland - there were all sorts of programmes to organise innovation, experiments and criticism. And it's really interesting to learn from that, to understand that that there might be systems other than the 'market' that might be useful, helpful and possible for us to use. So the welfare issue is key to us. It also positioned architecture within this large organisational framework, with housing for instance. Another area we are interested in is Dutch Structuralism - that's the architecture of Herman Hertzberger, Aldo van Eyck, Piet Blom - that's very specific to the Dutch situation and then the bigger global trend around Team10. And the main thing that I'm discovering is about Structuralism through the archive is that there was a new awareness that the work of the architect as a form or object maker, or as an autonomous discipline needed be part of a larger social

structure. That's an important moment. And the idea came from anthropology through people like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and afterward it became part of the debate around 'habitat' which formed the backbone of Dutch Structuralism in Holland and Amsterdam. It involved architecture at a more social level and introduced ideas centred around the user, appropriation, flexibility, change, and then finding an architectural language for it.

SP: You mention the introduction of anthropology. Why think it became popular during that period, or why did certain architects become preoccupied with it?

DvdH: That's a good question. I think it's related to this notion of democracy that very gradually moved its way from a political and social discourse into architecture. Of course also the issue of legitimacy for architects in the discipline, and then also the fact that architects were more involved in housing and planning, which made architects have to look into this field. It also had to do with class structures and the shifting of power structures. So you might say that the first phase of modern architecture relates to redesigning the city for the industrial society, to emancipate the workers, this is also why there's a lot of criticism of Corbusier who doesn't really address the issues of workers housing in the city, placing them outside the city rather than inside. And post-war you have the construction of a middle class democracy. So if you make the user the centre of your discourse on inhabitation, architecture and the city - to look for a democratic, social legitimacy in your work, then anthropology naturally becomes one of the subjects of interest. This way of thinking still goes on today.

SP: Do you think it was also a superimposition to some extent?

DvdH: Yes, I suppose so, because the government also wanted this from the architects. That's something the second world war triggered of course - this promise of an egalitarian society was the new thing - and Bakema was certainly the one who embraced it, and Team 10 embraced it, but also struggled with it. You can see this in the work of the Smithsons - you can see how difficult it is to resolve because power structures are very real and the production of architecture works within those power structures - so to bring about an egalitarian society through architecture is pretty tough.

SP: But they tried.

DvdH: Yes, much to their own frustration.

SP: Could we explore the relationship between Bakema and the Smithsons - where it begins and develops and what the differences might have been between the British and the Dutch viewpoints?

DvdH: Yes, it begins through CIAM. CIAM was not just an ideology but also a history of exchange. It was an international global exchange of ideas. They probably met in 1951 in Hoddesdon. Bakema as a young architect was already at the first post-war CIAM conferences at Bridgewater and Bergamo together with Aldo van Eyck, but the Smithsons weren't there as yet. He was slightly older than the Smithsons, which is important, he was also slightly older than van Eyck. He had already built a few buildings by the late '40s before he joined van de Broek - he did them for Rotterdam Council - and they were very nice buildings with naked structures - where you can see the plumbing - with very economic materials - this was Rotterdam and everything had to be very cheap because there were very few resources. It was beautiful work which already included his idea of the 'doorstep philosophy' related to DeStijl. I think these early works made an impact on van Eyck and the Smithsons. So Bakema was considered the leader of Team 10, as much as it had a hierarchy - he organised the meetings from his office - he had a bigger office - at one point one of the biggest offices in Europe with about 200 employees and also offices all around Holland and Germany. He had a natural authority I suppose because he was more established. But he wasn't an intellectual - the Smithsons weren't really either. Aldo van Eyck was the real intellectual. His father was a professor and he was very erudite. But the Smithsons were basically self-made people. There's a naivety there because they had an ordinary education - they self educated, read and appropriated what others brought to them. Alison's father was trained at the Royal College and became head of an art academy in Newcastle I think - so he was a little bit more culturally educated, but it's not a metropolitan or bourgeois upbringing - or a sophisticated intellectual background like Aldo van Eyck's. Bakema was also from a common background - so he was like a sponge. He and the Smithsons absorbed everything. I think Bakema also got a lot from the Smithsons - there was a real exchange which is evident in his writing and you can see it in the notion of the 'open society' - I think he got that through the Smithsons who got it from Karl Popper which became current in Britain just before it spread to

continental Europe. It was a notion that the Smithsons start to use in their competition in Berlin - which was not yet divided by the wall - and the Smithsons start to talk about the 'open city'.

SP: Was their work a protest?

DvdH: You could see it like that, but Bakema was also always mainstream. That's why I find him interesting actually. That it is possible to work from the centre, to be innovative, to be progressive - to have a progressive mentality from the centre, and not just from the periphery, and not just from protests.

SP: But he influenced the periphery.

DvdH: Yes he liked to do that. He stood for the all-inclusive society.

SP: Which involved user participation, which has become popular again but in an entirely different context. We now hear a lot about the 'bottom-up' approach which I'm critical of personally. The motives that brought it about then and the motives that drive it now are entirely different. So, in what way was 'participation' important to Bakema, and in what way was the 'open society' important to the Smithsons?

DvdH: The Smithsons were British, so their background was rooted in class differences, much more so than the Dutch. It could be argued that one of the biggest differences to the British approach to the welfare state and the Dutch was housing. The housing estates in Britain and also in places like Paris, were used to contain the working classes rather than to emancipate them - in territorial terms but also in social terms - creating problems of ghettoization. This didn't happen in Holland. I mean, Holland also had problems but they were completely incomparable to the problems created in France, in the UK or the States. In Holland it's not just about emancipation and elevation, but it's also about mixing society and the classes. So all the housing provision post-war is about how to achieve this. One of the popular phrases in Holland was 'the makeable society' - that we can make or create a society. It was a very strong idea then, related to a welfare and egalitarian society, which is now related to a market centred society.

SP: It's been appropriated now.

DvdH: Yes, with incentives, to stimulate or control how people behave or live in cities - through education, tax incentives - all sorts of instruments for the government and its institutions to influence its citizens.

SP: A by-product of earlier good intentions.

DvdH: Yes, Colin Rowe wrote this book 'The Architecture of Good Intentions'. Colin Rowe was very much against all this.

SP: It also comes out of a change in the way we think about the individual's role in society. The way they, Bakema and friends talked about it was very different because it was still understood that the individual had a certain agency - that change could be affected politically.

DvdH: If we go back to the idea of 'bottom up' and 'participation' - then, as now, they both start with a systemic crisis - then the welfare state, now the market and what's been called the neo-liberal economy - and its inability to deliver as much as people expect. There's no money, there's no credit. So if you want things done, then one strategy is to employ a 'bottom up' approach or policy as a way to stimulate the market and society. It has to do with the breakdown of a system which has reached a certain limit. But back then it was highly politicised and participation wasn't just participation but activism. I don't see this activism today. There are little bits here and there. I mean the 'occupy movement' is not the same. In those days they would have moved into the banks and in to the stock exchanges for weeks and weeks to stop them from working. Now they just sit in the street. Well who cares. No one is really bothered by that at all. Back then they were much more political and much more effective in a way. It had many positive effect, many negative too I suppose, you could say that Bakema is deconstructed by this participation thing, he has a heart attack and loses a lot of energy - it's also a personal story. So today, I think, it's really to patch up some of the miseries caused by the crisis, but it's not a real solution. I don't know. In Holland there are a few interesting programmes where the government still has some control, but it's more about setting the right conditions to allow

for private individual enterprise, and then private individual meaning its citizens or groups of citizens, which are very different compared to private initiatives led by the market. It means that housing developers were not allowed to build housing complexes beyond a certain size. Now, even in Amsterdam with its strong socialist tradition has decided that private initiatives should be encouraged and that they should allow these projects to be built - complete neighbourhoods - while maintaining or even raising living standards. Because the government is really the only instrument to control building standards - the moment that regulations are relaxed you will get trash - builders and developers will always go to the bottom of what is necessary. If the regulations say that you now no longer need windows as a stipulation, builders will build houses without windows. That's what happens. Especially in city areas. When pressure on urbanised spaces is so high, demand is so high, then the only instrument to control standards is the government - the market can't and won't do it - developer associations can't do it - business associations can't do it - the only method is through government control and regulation. It's a pity. It would be nice if it weren't the case. We had these experiments in the past when the regulations were relaxed - for instance a house or an apartment wasn't required to have an outdoor space anymore, or storage space, because the idea was that the market would take care of it. And of course it didn't happen. In those years it can be seen that none of the houses had any balconies anymore or storage space. The minimum set by the government is the maximum met by the developers. So you need the government. And on the other hand, this 'bottom up' idea is seen as something that will open up the market led by private citizen initiatives. I think it's interesting, although of course it has problems - the people that can do something tend to be middle or upper class, not working class. If we are seeking an all inclusive society then this problem will have to be looked in to.

SP: If Bakema was alive and saw 'participation' today do you think he would recognise it as being the same idea?

DvdH: He was a pragmatist. He was very aware of the power structures. Nowadays we call these structures 'ecologies' which is really a term of hopelessness because it's a depoliticised term. It proposes that there is a natural system somehow at work beyond the political and that things can't be changed or organised in a different way. The 'metabolism' of a city, or the city as an 'ecological' system is of course there to analyse and study - you can work with it - but in reality it's always a political question of how you organise the flow of money and the notion of redistribution is forgotten largely - everywhere there are all sorts of systems of redistribution - for instance in the banking system it was clear in the way private debt was transformed into public debt as a redistribution of money flows, and it's a political problem. It's not really related to architecture on the surface, but they are interdependent to a large extent.

SP: But in the 50's and 60's a number of individual architects did provide a physical vision for the redistribution of wealth. It was manifested in their urban and architectural vision for society.

DvdH: Yes, that's partly why we chose to exhibit Bakema. It's kind of a soft criticism of Koolhaas' theme this year, which is very interesting and a good exhibition, but Koolhaas doesn't offer the same vision or direction. In the interview he did in 'Volume' he complains that people always see him as a surfer, but it was a metaphor he introduced himself in the late '80s early '90s - that architects should be like surfers rather than fighting political battles - just to go with the flow and that you cannot control the waves of the Zeitgeist or political fashion - it's about surfing those tides and to try to make the best of it - to go with the mainstream or the maelstrom even. And now he complains, it's a soft complaint, that he was never into that. He's a very good journalist in that he makes fantastic observations and knows how to make them into provocative statements. He knows which buttons to push, but he never offered a comprehensive vision. He did a few projects, like Parc de la Villette, that verged on a vision, but those were a long time ago. He has such a big office now so he has to produce and produce to make it operative. So if Bakema would be here today I suppose that he would try to develop a 'vision'. It's good to think of 'conditions', yes of course it's still necessary to think about the conditions on which architecture depends, but at a certain point a gesture has to be made, or several scenarios, which was for a long time the favourite way to do things in Holland - to produce scenarios on a national scale. In the '90s there were scenarios for liberal development, ecological development and so on. So you could choose, rather like a menu, which was a bit naïve, but it helped people to make choices. But that was the last thing that happened at that level in Holland. And of course in the 90's everything changed - the market was going to take care of everything. And it didn't.

SP: Yes, but there was this surge of development with the opening or deregulation of the markets - the free market economy. It was the period identified in Holland as 'Super Dutch'.

DvdH: Yes, it was a horrible moment! I hated it. That's why I went to work in a University. It made all sorts of debate and discussion impossible. It narrowed everything to a kind of operativity - and you couldn't criticise it. Any money that was available for research and innovation that had previously gone to a number of subjects was now being funnelled into this notion of 'Super Dutch' rather than trying to develop alternative perspectives that wouldn't necessarily be helpful immediately. It's very important that you organise other perspectives, otherwise you're bound to reach the limit of a strategy very soon.

SP: It's rarely thought about this way, but the CIAM and then Team 10 meetings were to some extent an instrument to test a number of different perspectives within a defined political framework. In what way do you think Bakema saw himself as representing a particular perspective - I guess the Dutch perspective - did he see himself as particularly Dutch in this respect?

DvdH: Oh yes, totally. But the Dutch have never really seen themselves as nationalists. It's not the same as it is in Britain or France. That kind of nationalism is unknown in Holland.

SP: What I'm trying to get at was that CIAM and later Team 10 was an international instrument, not just ideologically but also practically. They came together with an understanding rather like the framework of the United Nations to discuss national concerns at an international level. Do you think Bakema as a delegate, so to speak, brought something particularly Dutch to the meetings - or did the Smithsons bring something to the debates that then became part of a more universal understanding?

DvdH: That's a tough question. There's this assumption that architecture is somehow national. Here in Venice I guess it's amplified by the fact that the nations are given their own pavilions. Architecture is always international. Architecture travels easily from one region to another, one country to another. But I think the Dutch may have brought - not so much Bakema but van Eyck - a preoccupation with how architecture and anthropology could be understood together. The Smithsons I think are always misunderstood. I still don't quite know how it happened. Banham pitches them in a certain way. He mystifies a lot of the things they were doing. He relates the Smithsons work at Bethnal Green with the working class and it was much more complicated than that. In the late '50s it's much more about the middle class than the working class. Of course there's an interest in working class neighbourhoods and communities, but really it's all about car ownership and the new consumer society. It wasn't just about embracing it of course, but it was the main topic of debate. The big clash between the Dutch and the Smithsons came in '62 at the Royaumont meeting when they proposed that they wanted to think of the city as different systems working together. There was always huge rivalry, and the Dutch were still trying to develop one system - one completely coherent system. The Smithsons used this term 'ecological urbanism' related to habitat but it wasn't particularly novel - Corbusier also used the term 'ecology'. The Smithsons realised that the system of cars and motorways had different rules, different developments in relation to time and space than a housing unit in a city. And Piet Blom and Aldo van Eyck especially, were still looking for this one coherent system. The Smithsons were much more realistic in that sense. But I've never thought about how all these different ideas became an international thing because then you'd have to follow each development and study its impact. But even outside of these meetings, Bakema, through his practice is already bringing these ideas to other places like Germany and Yugoslavia and other eastern European countries. The Smithsons were also part of this whole debate about 'climatic architecture' which is related to the British experience in the colonies - or the former colonies and protectorates. This stuff is being talked about at the AA in London at the time and of course is also influencing their work like the Doha scheme in Qatar for example. It's very tough to say that one idea comes from one source to become a common thing. For the Dutch the 'doorstep' idea was very important - the space of transition - the space between - that's very much part of the Dutch Team 10 contribution. But it was also that idea of where the private citizen meets the public, this 'doorstep' that was agreed to be important by all parties - van Eyck, Bakema and the Smithsons. I guess this originates specifically out of the Team 10 discourse.

SP: It's interesting looking at these images you have in your publication. There's a palpable transition in Bakema's way of thinking about urbanism. If you look at the Plan for Pampus in 1964, then the Hamburg Mümmelnsberg in 1969, and then the Verneuil scheme in 1979 you see this incredible viral dissolution of the idea of a common urban experience or city toward a fractured individualistic one. It's an visual commentary of the actual attitudes of the society at the time. But it's not just a reaction to these changes, but one that is being addressed from within the architectural discipline itself. It's clear when looking at the material that architects have also been agents in the development of a kind of anti-architecture and possibly anti-city sentiment. The response was that other architects,

after the efforts of Team 10, recast the discipline as an autonomous historic and formal exercise, highlighted in the '70s with the work of Peter Eisenman and friends.

DvdH: Yes, you also see this in Holland. The response to Bakema and van Eyck by the emerging younger generation was to introduce a discourse based around typo-morphology which was similar to Eisenman's, but in fact he never really had that much of an impact in Holland. But typo-morphology research does become important at that time. However, you can already trace that back to groups around van Eyck in Delft and typo-morphology is also related to structuralism - how underlying structures are tenacious in how cities develop and are organised. The Mümmelmansberg project, it's a pity it was never built, is very much about organising a process. Architects, and I include myself, like the projects around 1959-1964 because they're fantastic in their visual rhetoric and how they sit in the landscape. They look ambitious and provides a vision for society, but at the same time it is anti-urban because it's done in one complete gesture, which is then criticised by the likes of Jane Jacobs and Colin Rowe - who say the city is made by many actors working together and the accumulation of historic experience and so on. In the Pampus plan you can see the Dutch landscape as a major source of inspiration, then the Mümmelmansberg project tries to integrate or absorb the idea of the city as a process of many actors working together, and we have to question whether the result is enjoyable. I mean it doesn't look nice.

SP: In these three project you see the ambition changing from that of large scale structures, even if they are autonomous from the city, to that of the individual household on a plot. It's kind of a breakdown in the public sphere.

DvdH: Yes, but you already see this in the modern avant-garde and is a response to affluence as much as anything. So you have these two factors in the '70s - one of affluence and on the other the economic system breaking down. There's also a credit crisis. But compared to the '40s and '50s the '70s is still a comparably affluent period.

SP: True. Purely visually this last one at Verneuil also looks much more cellular - I mean biological in its structure. It occurs to me that it might be influenced by others like van Eyck. It fits more with the ideas that van Eyck was pursuing. Was Bakema influenced at that level by his peers?

DvdH: Bakema was used to working in groups in his office and I guess Team 10 suited him because of that. He was always working with others and it's because of this that people always question his authorship. He is always contested as an author. That's partly why he's been forgotten. I've had some interesting responses from the other pavilions - for instance in Brazil he was totally unknown which is incredible because he was the major figure in Team 10, the last secretary of CIAM, so he was very important. But because he always worked together with other people his authorship is always questioned - and Bakema and Aldo van Eyck were the tandem who ran the architecture magazine 'Forum' in the early years from '59 to '63, and they had a lifelong friendship, friendship and rivalry, helping each other out with jobs and public debate and juries - so there was a strong relationship between the two even though they were very different. Even so, Bakema would have thought of van Eyck as an elitist. And he was, even in the '70s the Neo-Marxists criticised van Eyck for being an architect-artist rather than being an architect-sociologist. And Bakema was the one who kept talking to everyone - the Neo-Marxists and the students and so on. He was the one who always succeeded in maintaining a discussion. Even the Neo-Marxists had a special place for him which is quite astonishing. Bakema wanted architecture to be at the heart of social issues and society.

SP: To go back to his authorial presence. Let's say we look at Bakema and Michelangelo in terms of the strength of authorship, then one could reasonably say that they are comparable. Their strength of vision is comparable even if their output is completely different. So even though Bakema is regarded as a 'social' architect - and perhaps even hidden behind the title - his voice could be regarded as an equal to Michelangelo.

DvdH: Wow. That's quite a comparison! Well, as you say, he's quite a different author. It reminds me of this TV series he did in the '60s in which he talks to the nation and while he's talking to them he's drawing these sketches. Then you see his character and his strength as a communicator. In each of the works you always perceive his hand, even though he works in groups, he is highly skilled in moving and directing teams to achieve his vision. When he died it was obvious what a strong force he was in the office. The work lost something special. So it's interesting to think of the role of a figure like Bakema within these large groups and social structures, as a very strong directive force. When he died Team 10 also ended. Peter Smithson called him the Tito of Team 10 - keeping everybody

together with his forceful attitude. He was democratic but also like a father figure - telling people when enough was enough I suppose. In Holland we certainly need a little more distance to say something like that. If I was to say this in Holland they would do a double take! But yes, I agree, there is a strong authorial presence. The nice thing about Bakema was that he was at the centre of things and made things happen. It's a relief to finally be free of the idea that the solution lies in the periphery or in the counter position. We need to be at the centre. That's the lesson I take from Bakema.