

marc koehler architects

Building Community The Power of Smallness

Ever since the end of the Golden Age of Dutch Architecture - the so-called Super Dutch period of the 1990's - the real-estate sector and the profession of the architect have found themselves in a state of permanent instability. It is a period characterised by an accumulation of crises, which has forced a new generation to question and challenge both the context and profession of the architect.

Due to a process of hyper differentiation of goods and services, intrinsic to the Neo-liberal economic model that was characteristic of this period, the architect became an insignificant element in a chain of highly specialised consultants and managers around powerful real estate developers and public housing corporations.

In the meantime, the user has also been set aside. Only brought into the picture once the project has been completed, and then at most may choose the colour of the front door or, in the best case, have their say in the layout of the kitchen. This 'top down' manner of working leads to frustration, when it should lead to satisfaction. A situation in stark contrast to other fields, like fashion, design and social media, where users have reclaimed a central position in recent years.

The economic crisis has subsequently brought these flaws in the neo-liberal model to light. This gives rise to new opportunities for a direct, user-generated design approach in which the architect reinvents himself as an instigator of creative processes that lead to new design concepts and user communities.

By liberating themselves from a dependence on the institutional, economic and political forces that dominated the last decade, and by building creative partnerships with end-users, the architect can create new opportunities for design experimentation and excellence. It is within this changing context that I champion the 'Power of Smallness'.

The new architect

Within the new economic and social reality, and through the major changes in the construction industry, a new type of architect has come into existence that seizes new opportunities. Not through opposing the change, or drifting away in nostalgia, theoretical abstractions and utopian projects, but rather by approaching the market with innovative ideas and a sound business plan. As the organiser of new networks, they are at the forefront of new developments. The contemporary architect is a proactive entrepreneur, who initiates and develops his own products and concepts. Today's architect has to deliver brand, marketing and sales processes as an intrinsic part of his design enterprise and pursues long term connections between partners in the real-estate sector of tomorrow: builders and producers, financiers and technical consultants, the legislative bodies[ES1] and, above all, the users.

The user at the centre

Previously, buildings were made for the average consumer. For the anonymous with as average a profile as possible in order to have buildings that could be sold as easily as possible. Today, we are creating buildings for diverse tastes, not an average preference which everyone has to accept. We closely examine the eventual end user. We employ the use of a 'micro-mapping' exercise in the case of residents or co-creation workshops in which we

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identify the needs of larger groups in the case of more complex projects. As such, we make a (public) building personal, tailored to the lifestyle and rituals of the user. One that is perfectly suited to the user, while simultaneously prepared for changes in the future. We avoid the middleman, ask management to take a step back and talk directly with the users. Users have become creators of their own identity. Using the words of Charles Eames: "Beyond the age of information is the age of choices." In a process of co-creation, end users are closely involved in the design in order to arrive at a (re-) definition of the program. One that is better, more flexible and more durable. Working from a holistic approach is characteristic of building community, from the sales brochure through to the interior. By working with a modular system, consumers and clients can themselves apply a great deal of variation without undermining the quality of the whole. We combine the qualities of a flexible building with those of a personal approach, having an eye for detail, a sense for atmosphere and a feeling for what is 'home'.

After the crash of the markets, people are reassessing the meaning of 'value'. Identity, freedom and time are the new 'money'. We now consider 'value' instead of 'price'. The architect can play a powerful role in the process of building community and, in collaboration with users and stakeholders, create real, lasting value. As with a design of a chair or a car, it's not just about the idea and the initial impression of the design, but mainly about the continued use and emotional value in the long term. The design is utilised to organise a social and cultural processes.

Users are given the opportunity to shape our designs to their own purpose, to make it their own. Through this process, the building will acquire meaning and beauty; it is allowed the freedom to form its own character over time. Through intensive collaboration with a community, the building obtains its specific character.

As architects, my 12-headed team and I create buildings together with a community. For each of our superlofts housing projects we setup a co-operation for every property, the members of which meet with each other via community meetings and an online platform to participate in the decision process and exchange their knowledge. In total, some 900 members are associated with our projects which form a formidable group that is involved in the city's development and is a political and economic force to reckon with.

The Power of Smallness

The power of smallness is the power that lies in personal design service, based on curiosity, attention, empathy and mutual trust to build community. The power of smallness is not about 'thinking small', but about connection, linking scales and creating communities. This does not lead to small buildings or to unobtrusive architecture. Instead, it advocates concise and open gestures across all layers of the practice to facilitate engagement in the creative process on a personal level. The power of smallness is about the power of network-based collaboration as a strategy to form connections between professionals and users. Together they make a difference.