

RHYTHM IS AN ARCHITECT

C2C ARCHITECT THOMAS RAU ON ENVIRONMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

BY DAVID OTTOSSON

At Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, you can watch capitalism unfold through breathtakingly beautiful art. The paintings at Holland's national museum depict, amongst other things, the rise of the Dutch East India Company; the first multinational corporation and inducement for the world's first modern stock exchange. Through the Dutch Masters' artfulness, grim Puritan patrons of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* seem hauntingly alive. It is hard to grasp how these alien beings could be, however accidentally, the architects and first subjects of globalization.

In his 1905 book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber pointed to Puritanism as a factor in the development of capitalism, concluding that:

“/.../when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism/.../with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.” (Page 181, 1953 Scribner’s edition.)

Today’s Amsterdam is still a fermenting ground for new ideas, particularly in the field of sustainability. For a country struggling not to be swallowed by the sea, there is nothing abstract about environmental threats. Somewhere around 500 architects active in the Amsterdam area specialize in sustainability. Thomas Rau, born in Germany, is one, notable for his involvement in the Cradle-to-Cradle (C2C) movement, and an increasing number of groundbreaking buildings. I visited his office on the KNSM Island in Amsterdam.

David Ottosson: How has Amsterdam influenced you?

Thomas Rau: (Laughing) I think we try to influence Amsterdam.

We started out with a very clear plan. We strove to be energy-autonomous, energy positive. We are happy that the government is starting to notice. Amsterdam is a city that doesn’t just demand things, but does a lot itself too. Now, for instance, with a climate-neutral street. We just try to show the officials that we are already farther along than they could dream.

DO: Your One-planet-architecture initiative is unusual, how was your perspective broadened to include the world?

TR: I was inspired by the Apollo 8 ‘earthrise’ photograph, the first image of the earth from orbit, and the starting point for the environmental movement. With it, we realized how vulnerable we are. We saw that the earth was a vulnerable being. And looking into space we see that there is nothing more out there. Nothing else coming along. We are here. And we are guests. It is important to realize that we are only guests.

I act out of an attitude. And this is not just to keep down my consumption. It is more natural to act out of an attitude. Because I’m not here to save energy. I’m here to use energy. There is no energy problem, only demand for energy, and we try to answer it in strange ways.

The important issue is what kind of value we get out of our footprints. We don’t know, because we don’t feel the consequences of our energy use. We have to get back in touch with energy. Make energy where we live.

The Romans knew better. We haven’t found any ugly ventilation-boxes on the roofs of roman buildings. They used water to cool buildings. We don’t have to invent a different approach. All we have to do is create a second nature based on a transformation of laws of the first nature. Which is an important responsibility.

The sun rises in the east and settles in the west, and will do so for the next 300 million years. But if you look at the planning of a city like New



York or Rotterdam, there is no awareness of this fact. We lose track of what makes our life possible.

DO: Do you think ideas like this can be popularly disseminated?

TR: We are born with this wisdom. Somehow it is covered up. Everyone can go back to the roots. But we just get there if we feel it. We have to think with our heart, and we need to communicate. Everything starts with love. With money and technology we try to compensate our deficit in communication and love.

A real one-planet building is not more expensive, because we include communication and love; everything we solve with communication and love are things you don’t have to pay for. We don’t sell buildings, we offer



Photo © Stijn Uipott

arc
hitecture
59

a process that leads to a very individual building. During this process you and us work together on a building that fits your *gestalt*. For us, solving a problem is about fixing the future. The future must work within the same reality of our nature.

DO: How do you impart this conviction in your office?

TR: I let my colleagues feel for themselves what their own relation to the world is. We start the day with a gong. And the last person who leaves strikes the gong as well.

We work four days a week, 4 x 9 hours. It is important to maintain the qualities that we want to give the world. We need time to recharge, to share love with our partners, our children. Get in touch with nature



Natuurcafé La Porte, Driebergen.
This revolving door generates energy every time it is used.

Photo © Boon Edam

De Woonplaats Head Office, Enschede

Photo © Christian Richters



or work socially. And everyday we eat an 'organic' lunch together at the office. Input is output.

We have lost the rhythm. We want to do everything. Somewhere we lost track of the fact that time is a quality. The apple tree still knows it. The apple tree knows when it has to preserve energy, when it has to produce seeds and fruit. The apple is the result of following a process in time.

Every step is different. When you are seven, your teeth grow. When you are fourteen it is sex. Twenty-eight is different from thirty-five. I try to coach people according to their own time. So I might say: *it's good that you have this problem now. It is natural. Or: you should have dealt with this before. You have to hurry up.* When people join us, they give their own life form, make their own biography. And new projects always invite us to learn something. So you connect the assignment to the person who is at the right point in their lives for it.

Every Monday we have a meeting for the whole organization. Everybody listens, to get a feeling of the whole thing. It is a community. Some years ago we went for two weeks to the Himalayas, to the roof of the earth. To experience that there is nothing else above us. That this is all there is.

Our next step for the office is a fully C2C interior. To not be surrounded by less-bad things, but by good things. Sustainability, and making something less bad is not interesting. If you hit your child five times a day and limit it to three times that is an improvement, but it is not good. It is three times too many.

We have to be modern farmers. I know what decisions I have to make before Easter. I could wait with some things until later, but I have to take care of the time. As a child, I wondered why bakers did all their work early in the morning. The bread could still be fresh if they baked it the evening before. Once I spoke to an old baker, and he said "the best time for the yeast to rise is between 4 and 6. Everybody knows this." So the bakers are following the rhythm of the yeast. We have to follow the rhythm of people.

DO: You speak about being in touch with your body. How did you come to this awareness?

TR: I'm a dancer. I started out taking care of homeless children. Then I went to an academy for dance. Then I learned sculpture. Dancing has two elements. It is about moving into space, and getting in contact with your body. Your body is an instrument. But we forget that.

DO: You build a lot of public structures. Is this part of a plan?

TR: When I was 10, I had an accident. Two legs burned in an explosion. I lay in a dark room for two weeks, and it took me one year to fully recover. I thought I was dying and I decided I wanted to help the world change. I try to be aware of what is coming to me. And I choose projects that interest me, but I don't look for them. The schools just come my way.

DO: Do you have a dream project?

TR: (without hesitating) A prison: to show that you can socialize through building environments. I have visited a lot of prisons, and they are terrible places. You won't be a better person when you leave than when you came.

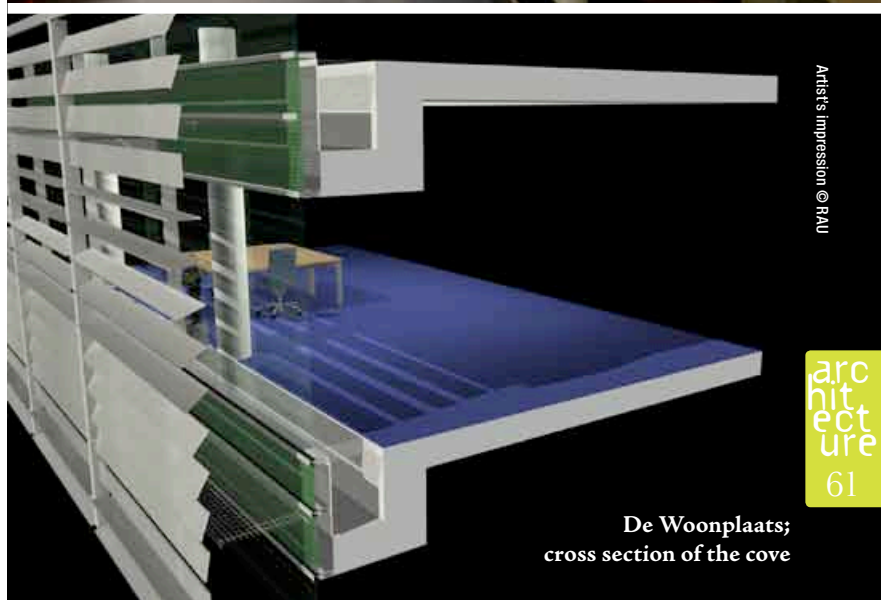
DO: Speaking of socializing people, what was the inspiration for the Piter Jelles YnSicht Secondary School?

TR: This school is a classroom. Everything is open, so that you can study how the building works. And if you look at the red carpet on the main stairs. I want everyone to feel like a special guest. Every pupil is a special guest.



YnSicht School

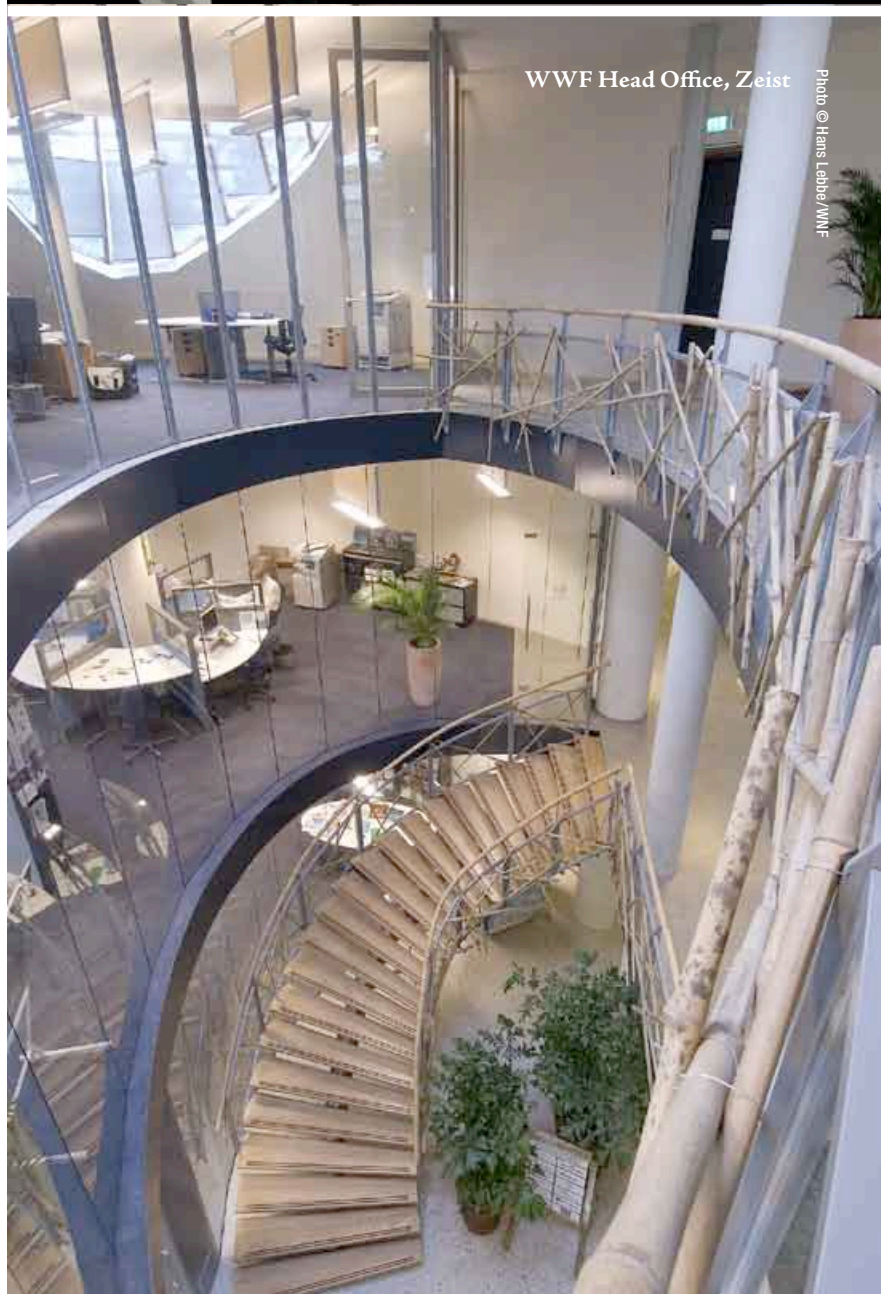
Photo © Ben Wilkens



De Woonplaats;
cross section of the cove

Artist's impression © RAU

arc
hitecture
61



WWF Head Office, Zeist

Photo © Hans Lebbe/WWF



Christiaan Huygens College



The ISW Hoogeland School

DO: You give a lot of talks. To children as well?
TR: Yes. With children I mostly tell fairy-tales. Fairy-tales have very sustainable buildings.

DO: Can this view of sustainability really be adopted by the public?
TR: C2C is a commitment. We try to translate it. Bring it to the people. We experiment.

We try to make contracts. For instance, I don't care about light bulbs. They are not interesting to me. I just want there to be light. If you could contract light, the producer would get back the lamp when it was spent. This would stimulate the producer to make a better product.

You don't always have to be the owner. I don't want to own a car that I don't know how to fix. I want to get from point A to point B. You can take responsibility for the things that you do yourself.

I'm not perfect. If you are the owner of an architecture office you always act in a context. Sometimes you have to act in a way that is not healthy, but then I make sure I get back in synch immediately. We don't work nights or weekends. We have to take responsibility for what we do.

DO: A final word?
TR: We have to stop making the same old mistakes. It is time to make new mistakes.



The ISW Hoogeland School



Christiaan Huygens College

Annons