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Reposition in a changed world

Simone Rots, Crimson Architectural Historians, September 2013

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The different crises that take place all around our globe result in a changed world. Next to economical and political crises also the institutional crisis increases the awareness that we are no longer dealing with a (temporary) crisis, but with an entirely new situation. In Dutch architecture this means that the traditional arrangements between governments, semi-public and cultural institutions—which together ensured the centrality of architecture—have been broken or at the very least, minimized. Everything from research and publication subsidies to the strength and autonomy of housing associations has been repealed or removed. The real significance of this is that architecture is no longer seen as a natural presence in policy, but as one of the private or sectoral interests in what is now called ‘the creative economy’. Spatial design is no longer a medium through which to achieve public goals, but rather one of the private players that must search in the marketplace for support and assignments. This will substantially alter her position and agenda for decades to come.

This asks for a flexible attitude of the different stakeholders, one of them being the architect/urban designer. Different reactions can be found. Next to sticking to the idea that “everything will be as usual after the crisis” or seeking for clients abroad, there is a group that takes the current situation as a starting point. Without the traditional clients and financial resources, these architects and entrepreneurs create their own assignments often in existing buildings and disused areas and with a direct relationship with the user. The market has already recognized this trend and starts to ‘use’ it in their policy to survive the crises. This sometimes leads to an ambiguous situation, where the more idealistic and activist search of the architects is used as a place-making marketing tool by the market.

But hopefully in this way the possibilities of the existing city and architecture becomes part of the common attitude towards city-planning. Important is that the institutes and persons who are responsible for the city at this moment allow these developments. The results show that the city already benefits from it. But this also requests a flexible attitude and flexible legislation of municipalities, developers, owners and other institutions that make the rules.

One condition is flexibility and creativity in financing the transformation of the existing city. For example the possibilities of investing in listed buildings and areas. In the past an object with monumental status was not the most wanted property, because changing cultural heritage was associated with rules and obstacles. Nowadays the advisors in real estate discover more and more the possibilities of cultural heritage, because in the Netherlands investing in cultural heritage can bring tax-benefits to private investors. When these financial constructions will be researched and developed more, the existing city might bring solutions in the changed world of today.