

Architecture in the Second Modernity

A series of international architectural conferences have been held in Orléans under the title ArchiLab. The conferences and exhibitions have brought together a wide range of mainly younger architects to showcase work and provide a forum for debate. This essay appeared in a catalogue of one of the conferences. Bart Lootsma (born 1957, Amsterdam) is an architectural historian, critic and curator and has been a prolific chronicler of the Dutch architectural scene, notably in SuperDutch. He collaborated with Winy Maas, Sanford Kwinter and others on MVRDV: Reads and recently published Body & Globe: Dwelling in an Age of Media and Mobility. Lootsma is also a guest professor at the ETH Zürich/Studio, Basel.

Datascales

MVRDV, too, is unconvinced by the notion of a situation that is converging on homogeneity, believing instead that it is possible to identify 'gravity fields' in the apparent chaos of developments, hidden logicalities that eventually ensure that whole areas acquire their own special characteristics. 'These gravities reveal themselves when sublimated beneath certain maximized circumstances or within certain maximized constraints'.¹ And they give a whole series of examples: 'Because of tax differences the borders between Belgium and the Netherlands are occupied with vast numbers of villas generating a linear town along the frontier.' 'Market demands have precipitated a "slick" of houses-with-a-small-garden in Holland.' 'Political constraints in Hong Kong cause "heaps" of dwellings around its boundaries.' 'In their wish for a nineteenth-century lookalike town, Berlin puts its new buildings into tight envelopes. This pushes the majority of the vast programmes underground, turning the streets into elements in the middle of vast programmes.' 'Monumental regulations in Amsterdam limit the demand of modern programmes, causing "mountains" of programme invisible from the street behind medieval façades.' 'Accessibility demands cause almost enclosed types of infrastructure and thus a series of linear towns through the Ruhrgebiet.' 'In order to avoid the high-rise rules, in Paris-La Défense massive programs appear as Ziggurats with 18 metre-high accessible [sic] 'steps' so that all the offices can be entered by the maximum length

of the fire-ladders.'² In fact the entire built environment is governed by such force fields. Apart from the fact that they create differences in the landscape, they hold the key to understanding how society manifests itself in contemporary architecture. Because there are usually several of these force fields operating at the same time and none is truly dominant, it is difficult to detect the impact of individual forces. Which is why MVRDV came up with the concept of datascares. Datascares are visual representations of all the quantifiable forces that may influence the work of the architect or even steer or regulate it. These influences could be planning and building regulations, technical constraints, natural conditions such as sun and wind, but they could just as well be legislation, for example on minimum working conditions, or political pressure from interest groups both inside and outside the commissioning organization. Each datascape deals with only one or two of these influences and reveals their impact on the design process by showing their most extreme effects. Hence, a site normally contains more than one datascape. Over the last two years, MVRDV have developed a whole catalogue of datascares in collaboration with students from the AA in London and the Berlage Institute in Amsterdam.³ Together they demonstrate a new image of what collectivity could be in the Second Modernity. Datascares are in fact visualizations of what the sociologist Anthony Giddens calls 'expert systems' and 'abstract systems': bureaucratic systems in which faith in the system is based on the presumed expertise in a specific field.⁴ The status of a person in one system says nothing about his or her status in another system. But that is not all: the information produced by the different expert systems is also open to dispute. Contemporary society is governed by a multiplicity of such 'abstract systems [sic] and they have replaced the traditional systems that were based on authority. What makes the datascares so fascinating is that in many cases they actually generate schemes that apparently approach something that may be called an architectural project. As such, they certainly have an aesthetic appeal of their own. Also, the method and the results are sometimes very similar to actual designs, for example, some of those by Greg Lynn, who is also interested in formal reactions to forces from outside his projects. But datascares are not architectural projects, even though they are, just like architectural projects, at the same time both abstract and real ... [p 26]

1 MVRDV, 'Datascape, The Final Extravaganza', *Daidalos*, no 69/70, December 1998 – January 1999.

2 Ibid.

3 MVRDV, *Datascares* (Rotterdam, 1999).