

MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN

Lecture by Ronny Lobo at the conference “Caribbean Modernist Architecture”

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Introduction

I'm very honored with the invitation of MoMa/Utech to speak at this important conference on Caribbean Modernist Architecture. I truly hope that this conference will contribute to the continuous debate on our profession. Maybe it's just a coincidence but very recently a DoCoMoMo group was formed in the Antilles, to document and protect the beautiful buildings built in a certain period of time. Louis Kahn said: “Architecture does not exist. What does exist is the work of architecture”. Did he mean that architecture does not exist in itself but starts with the appreciation of the build form and environment by the people who inhabit these?

I will start my lecture by giving an short overview of the Dutch presence in the Caribbean and the resulting Dutch influence in culture, industry, trade and more specifically its architecture. You will see some excellent examples of the modernist architecture of the last century in Curaçao including works by Dutch architects working for the government and the Royal Shell oil refinery and the later works by local architects. Due to time constraint I will have to limit myself to the architecture in Curacao and cannot include the buildings on the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles or Suriname.

Most of the older buildings that I will show appear on the list that was put up by the just initiated DoCoMoMo group. I will not save you from some bad examples of superficial consumer design, showing that apart from the good work that is done by some local professionals to design and find recognition for good architecture, there is a tendency towards mediocracy, also experienced on other islands in the Caribbean. I will end my lecture showing examples of my own work, with the influence of *Aldo van Eyck*, one of my professors in Delft and *Gerrit Rietveld* who himself made one of the best buildings in Curaçao.

Modernist Architecture in the Dutch Caribbean.

The Dutch presence in the Caribbean started when they conquered the six islands Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius and Saba from the Spaniards in 1634 in search of salt for their fish industry. For a short period the islands were also governed by the English and even the French made three attempts to conquer Curaçao. This island, the biggest of the six, and since colonial times the most important, has the strongest Dutch influence in culture, industry, trade and more specifically on its architecture. Thanks to its authentic architecture with Dutch characteristics the capital Willemstad has

been nominated by the United Nations as World Heritage City in 1997. Its two halves Punda and Otrabanda on each side of the harbor entrance Anna Bay together form a remarkable city with an outstanding beauty. Punda has always been the business center, while Otrabanda was more for living. During a certain period Punda was enclosed by a city wall that was erected for defense purposes. The limited space within the wall forced the Dutch military engineers to careful planning along a grid system. Otrabanda on the other hand grew in a more spontaneous way according to people's needs. This, combined with the different topography of the area, gave Otrabanda a great liveliness.

The architecture of the last century.

Similar to what happened on most of the other colonized islands, the government was centrally directed from the mother country and most know-how, including the art of building, came from these countries. A typical way of building developed, originating in Holland but adapted to the local climate. This architecture showed a remarkable consistency up to 1930. Only around 1900 a Latin-American Art Nouveau style with certain grandeur started to develop in the newer neighborhoods. One of the first examples of Modernist Architecture in Curaçao was the head office of KNSM, the Dutch shipping company, build in 1939. This building was designed by an unknown architect and was clearly inspired by the modern buildings in the mother country in that time, like the Town Hall in Hilversum by *Willem Dudok* in 1931. The same counts for different other buildings in Curaçao. Later followed a few examples of Art Deco, like the Cinelandia open-air Theater by *Peter Stuyvenberg* in 1941. While architectural activists did not succeed to save another theater in Art Deco style by the same architect from demolition, the Cinelandia Theater still remains, but is in very bad state of repair. *Stuyvenberg* was the Director of the water distribution company and not trained as an architect. He made several utility buildings like water storage tanks on higher hill tops.

The CPIM (*later Royal Shell*) started an oil refinery in 1915, thanks to the magnificent enclosed harbor. The company was once the biggest in the world in number of different oil products. It was not only the most important economic pillar of the island but also had a strong influence on the island's architecture. The Shell house-architect *Abspoel* made the Head Office building and the laboratories around 1950 in a typical tropical architecture.

Cornelis Bakker, a Dutch architect who arrived in 1939, was the first professionally trained architect living in Curaçao. Employed by the Department of Public Works he designed most of the important public buildings and schools between 1939 and 1952, when he emigrated to Canada. *Bakker*, who left the government in 1944 to work for the CPIM, also designed the housing quarters for the employees of the company. In one of

these I have my own architect's office. The Shell buildings and the buildings by the government were strong architectural examples for the local people building their own shelter. They were all adapted to the tropical climate with large roof overhangs and elevations carefully designed for ventilation and daylight access. *Ben Smit*, another Dutch architect who became a partner of *Bakker* in 1950, has an equally impressive record of buildings up to 1971. He was also trained in Holland and build according to the rules of modernism, but tropical and thus climate-efficient. The famous Dutch architect *Gerrit Rietveld*, almost as an incident, made one of the best examples of buildings suitable for our climate, the Mgr. Verriet Institute for disabled people in 1949.

During the period from the forties to the sixties only the two major architects on the island, *Cees Bakker* and *Ben Smit*, joined by a limited group of what I call traveling architects, were able to create a vast number of architectural landmarks with high quality. They made excellent examples of many schools, a hospital, and beautiful houses. All very suitable for their function and well adapted to the site and our climate. The same quality could only be displayed in incidents during the years after. The architects of the next generations like *de Vries*, *Fresco*, *Alexenko*, *Nolte*, *Zingel*, *Julian*, and *Badaracco* were not really able to establish with their designs, although of high quality, an awareness of the general public for good architecture. In the seventies the local architect *Tom Janga* designed several projects for the government and public institutions. His major work was the Public Library, which is a good example of a contemporary building in an historic environment and suitable for the climate. Not all architects follow the philosophy that the architectural expression should be a reflection of the climate. With the development of better glazing and insulation it was possible to make the Social Security Office as a glass box. Personally I don't support the dependence on highly sophisticated materials or equipment to make buildings resist our tropical environment.

The tradition to study architecture in the mother country still continues, due to favorable scholarships by the government and the advantage of the language. Architects of the present generation are struggling for recognition from the majority of the population for their profession and the buildings they make. While they try to find an architectural language that is understood and appreciated by the general public, for the sake of their existence they often copy any style that the clients want. The architect's title and/or profession are not protected by law and the majority of the buildings are not designed by professionally trained architects. Spontaneous architecture by non professional architects, for example for single family houses, has always been part of the architectural landscape, but now seems to have expanded to the bigger and more expensive dwellings and also to commercial buildings. Superficial consumer design has almost become a standard for most buildings on the island, including institutional projects. Bad design is supposedly

compensated by the use of expensive materials and strong colors, while the failures in climate-efficient design are compensated by more powerful air-conditioning units, which have become even cheaper. The government lost its role as trendsetter, by giving the best examples of how to build. Instead, public entities rent expensive office spaces build by project developers, with no architectural quality whatsoever. And the great opportunities to let local architects show their talents are neglected. For the new headquarters of the Central Bank an unknown American interior designer was hired. Just after this mistake the prison, originally well designed by a Dutch architect of the Department for Public Works, was poorly extended by an American architect. The latest doubtful example of letting others design our future monuments is the new terminal building of the airport. While the old airport building was beautifully designed by *Cees Bakker*, the new building is a bad copy of historical shapes, in order to give the building that “typical Curaçao look”.

My own work

Of all Dutch architects, of whom several were my professors at the Delft University, the most influential on my career was *Aldo van Eyck*. I support his humanist approach towards architecture and his theories of the ‘dual phenomena’, the ‘in between realm’, the ‘threshold’ and the ‘con figurative’. I agree with him that the failure of the utilitarian functionalism was the lack of attention for these phenomena. I was also influenced by the work of *Rietveld* who made just one building in Curacao, the Mgr. Verriet Institute for physically and mentally retarded people. Of the older Caribbean architects I’m most inspired by the organic architecture of the Cuban architect *Ricardo Porro*.

I started my career employed by the Government at the Department of Public Works in 1978. As a young architect I had the privilege to design two large schools and a community center, that were even build. After three years I joined *Tom Janga* who was then working on the design of the Public Library. I could not find a house for rent and inspired by my parents I decided to buy a piece of land and design my own home. After some 25 years I still don’t regret that decision. Shortly after moving I started my own practice. One of my first commissionings was the head office for the telephone company in Bonaire.

In 1991 the Governmental institution for public housing *Fundashon Kas Popular* organized a competition for housing and shopping in a very dilapidated area of Otrabanda. I had the honor to win this competition together with my Venezuelan colleague *Domenico Silvestro*. The area for construction was surrounded by important monuments. One bad thing that beautiful historical buildings can do to architects is to make them passive for being creative in their own search for a local contemporary

architecture. Knowing that most people like historical beauty, some architects prefer to copy the traditional. This is something I will continue to refuse. Even though some architects say that architecture is an imitative art I think that copying classical forms from monuments in new buildings is not fair to the monuments themselves because it creates a false history, unbelievable and not trustworthy. What we did do for this project is to explore the existing spatial qualities of the build environment and to start an honest dialogue with the old using contemporary shapes and detailing. It's undeniably more risky, especially not knowing how the new will be accepted by the general public, but leads to a more authentic result of our times. We discovered that Otrabanda was composed of single buildings, all different from one another and arranged in a more or less spontaneous pattern. We adapted to this pattern giving answers to the neighboring buildings in every corner of the plan. Yes, we used traditional materials like concrete masonry, wooden windows and Dutch roof tiles. But applying these well known materials in a different manner, distinguishes contemporary architecture from the old. We did not deny the fact that in the past the inhabitants of Otrabanda lived partially in the streets, but rather enhanced this phenomenon by creating ample communal outdoor spaces. We colored the buildings with almost all colors of the rainbow continuing a tradition of the local population that I've always supported since my earlier works. Thus we created a neighborhood with a local feel, but clearly recognizable as contemporary architecture.

In the past fifteen years I experimented with a style where the placement and organization of the different spaces within the building develops in a more organic way, in relation with the requirements of the program and the site. I made a small office building for a credit union, which can be considered as one big saddle roof that widens, curves and heightens as the spaces requires this. In 2005 I participated in a competition for the office building of an accountants firm. The design came out like a flower of ellipses. The same form of an ellipse I used in the extension of a school complex.

For my sister I made a house on a rather steep hillside. The building shape was born from the shape and inclination of the lot, and as in all my buildings from the climatic conditions. The roundings embrace the outdoor space and widen the views in the directions along the facade. The roof, with large overhangs for shading, follows the round shapes. In the living area the roof is supported by a space frame between two round concrete columns. In this the roof is really curved in contrary to my earlier projects where the curved roofs were build from several flat surfaces.

Ending my lecture I give you an example of a very utilitarian object, a sound retaining wall around a school. Playing with the form of the necessary stability columns every three meters and the horizontal sound reflecting beams and adding my favorite colors of

the rainbow I reached a playful result.

Thank you for listening to my contribution to this conference.

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