

Red: Bicycle Storage, Amsterdam



Red...Blue Gold Green: VMX Makes Its Mark

By Raymund Ryan

The Dutch preoccupation with landscape, with planning, rationalisation and programme has resulted in the world's most potent architectural culture. One can easily track the career of Rem Koolhaas – the impact of his buildings and texts, and the dissemination of his tactics through design schools and international competitions – to register the influence of this the most famous contemporary Dutch architect. Alternatively one can visit almost any point in the Netherlands – the designation 'place' seems too static and settled for such fluid cities and infrastructure – to discover remarkable projects by architects much younger than Koolhaas.

One of these is Don Murphy of Amsterdam-based VMX Architects. Murphy is also the most provocative architect to emerge from Cork since Kevin Roche commenced practice in Connecticut four decades ago.

Born in Cork City in 1966, Murphy left Ireland in the mid-1980s first to study architecture at London's South Bank Polytechnic, then pursue a graduate degree at Amsterdam's nascent Berlage Institute. In Amsterdam, he worked with Pi de Bruijn at de Architecten Cie on the Berlin Reichstag competition; finalists alongside Foster and Calatrava, they envisaged a sleek new pavilion, reminiscent of Brasilia, in front of the drab Wilhelmine parliament.

Whereas two Berlage classmates, both Croatian, are now partners at de Architecten Cie, Murphy chose an independent route and launched the firm VMX. 'V', an older partner dealing mostly with interiors, soon retired; 'X' left and joined Koolhaas's AMD team. This resulted in Murphy in control, the 'M' at the centre of VMX.

Murphy's headquarters is the penthouse of a Citroën garage in Amsterdam South, one of two white, International Style structures gracing an entrance to Jan Wils' 1928 Olympic Stadium. It's an ideal lair between the low-rise, red brick of Berlage's urban vision for Amsterdam South and the plate glass of global office parks nesting to the south towards Schiphol Airport.

VMX's best-known project is the bicycle storage near Amsterdam's Central Station. The temporary structure rests on piles in the canal, looking like a multi-tiered barge, with a contiguous red steel plate as combined floor and ceiling surface. Selected, in 2002, by the Netherlands Architecture Institute as one of five outstanding projects by architects-under-40, it is an excellent example of an architect identifying opportunity in an everyday programme.

It's rather Dutch, this manipulation of the repetitive, elemental structure and the packed black bicycles – with their high, old-fashioned handlebars – along both sides. But it also reveals an eye for iconography. For the single gesture that resonates.

Bracketed by designs from Claus en Kaan and de Architecten Cie, VMX's intervention on Sarphatistraat stacks loft-like residential units over commercial uses screened by glass from the street. It's the solid black panel for each unit



Black: Sarphatistraat apartments, Amsterdam

above that attracts notice, panels focussed about a single, almost Cyclopean opening.

With interior space extending from front to rear façades (access is from rear external walkways), and with only essential services such as bathrooms fixed-in-place, residents have options in their arrangement of internal partitions and room layout. They each face the outside world through a single orifice with its curved perimeter, an expansive monitor, without intrusive mullions, reminiscent of 1960s utopia.

The VMX complex at IJburg also exhibits utopian qualities. Of course, what appears utopian to a visitor may merely be pragmatic to the Dutch. Southeast of Amsterdam, IJburg is an artificial island in the former Zuider Zee, another feat of engineering in the Netherlands' current bid to construct one million new dwellings.

The VMX contribution aligns three-storey houses in parallel bars of a base, or tail, while stacking apartments in a cubic nine-storey tower. House dwellers have thus the modest luxury of individual street access and rear gardens, whereas tower residents – in a VMX conflation of problem-solving and communal theatrics – drive cars onto an internal lift and ascend to a parking berth close to each apartment's front door. Amid all the shining newness, and contrary perhaps to an instinct for the latest materials, Murphy selected a sooty



Blue: Directie Noordzee, Rijswijk, The Hague

or dirty brown brick for the IJburg façades.

A new building for the Directie Noordzee near The Hague is a further fusion of the rational and the glamorous. The compact primary block consists of open-plan office trays directly above a low, transparent foyer. As with Wright's Larkin Building in Buffalo (1906) and Rogers' Lloyd's of London headquarters (1986), services are sited in satellite towers.

External surfaces are clad in brilliant blue, circular ceramic tiles and punched by porthole windows – these stagger in elevation to offer workers glimpses out whether standing or sitting. The foyer walls below, and the sides of bridges linking to two of the four service towers, have floor-to-ceiling glass so that, at dusk, the freestanding architectural object becomes a multipart lantern or chandelier.

The secondary school at Den Bosch has also a block-like massing, cantilevering out at first floor level. It's gold, clad externally in a gold membrane often used on domes of new Dutch mosques. Interior floors and ceilings are vibrant yellow. Even the floor-to-ceiling windows have a burned gold tint.

It's one of a new breed of schools in the Netherlands, utilising computerisation and loosening the old formal arrangement of individual classrooms with teacher and students sequestered behind closed doors. Thus, in part, the openness of the interior, the studio-like "mediathèque" with furniture and information services gathered in informal clusters. Upstairs within this taut, boxed volume is a double-storey gymnasium plus rooftop staff rooms.

Older Dutch architects – Aldo van Eyck, for instance, or Herman Hertzberger – often made social diagrams literally concrete in their schools and clinics and housing complexes. With the Internet supplementing, if not replacing, the library and the classroom, and with an increasingly multicultural society challenging previous mores and systems of belief, such direct translations from diagram to built form may today lack a desired flexibility and legibility. Murphy says his aim is to create "publicness" which may "not necessarily be public."

In historic Utrecht, his ongoing project for a psychiatric hospital balances simultaneous needs for openness to the urban neighbourhood and privacy for individuals. Murphy currently envisages a cross-shaped plan that maintains a public through route and results in four courtyards – the façades of each yard treated as a distinct material composition.

Already built for the Utrecht client, VMX's Centre for Psychosomatic Convalescence is set in the forest at Zeist, in the southern province of Noord Brabant. It's green, circular in plan, and with a contiguous exterior that curves up and inwards to create a private, interior courtyard. Covered in green rubber, the doughnut-shaped building reads as a temporary pavilion for both surveillance and at least the possibility of pleasure. It minimises internal corridors while maximising the individual view each patient has to the forest.

Dealing with the constraints of Dutch bureaucracy, Murphy is clearly able to harness a vivid architecture not afraid to make its presence felt. Is Cork, or Ireland, ready for such synthesis of the efficient and the iconic?



Gold: Secondary school, Den Bosch



Green: Approach to Psychiatric Pavilion, Zeist