

Critica de arhitectura

Arhitectura contemporana

Hans Ibelings:

"Unmodern Architecture in Netherlands"

eseu

Structure and aesthetics

At the other end of the spectrum we have the lifestyle variant. Organic vegetables might appeal to us mainly because they taste better than non-organic alternatives, or perhaps because we like the idea that they were grown without using chemicals. In the same way, traditionalism can be preferred for aesthetic reasons, either for its appearance or because we like to think that this type of building could have existed centuries ago, or will still exist for centuries to come.

How should we categorise the devotees of organic products and traditionalist architecture? Does a preference for 'slow food' (as the traditional, natural alternative to 'fast food') reflect conservatism or progressiveness? Do the champions of organic food yearn to return to a time before food became a processed industrial product? Are they the precursors of a new age in which man will take better care of his world? Or are organic products simply meeting a growing demand for gourmet foods?

The same questions can be asked of contemporary traditionalist architecture. Is it fulfilling a need to return to a past in which the streets were not choked with cars and not every square metre was built on? Is it the beginning of a re-evaluation following a century of architectonic innovation? Or is contemporary traditionalism simply serving a niche market, in the same way as 'slow food'?

In a broader context, traditionalist architecture and organic products can be regarded as a response to what the American sociologist George Ritzer calls 'The globalization of nothing'. In the book of the same name (London/New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, 2004) Ritzer describes the massive spread of various forms of nothing. Fast-food restaurants, self-service, branded clothing and call centres. In his view these are all examples of the 'globalization of nothing', and are the opposite of real places, real service, unique objects, and personal attention. Ritzer's underlying argument is that, under the influence of globalisation and market liberalism, more and more is leading to less and less. The overwhelming spread of all this nothingness has provoked a reaction: a new appreciation of the unique, the specific and the authentic. The furor caused by traditionalism in architecture in today's world is one expression of this.

But traditionalism in architecture is more than a by-product of globalisation. Its popularity is also related to our current pluriform and in many respects fragmented culture. Within that culture tradition and innovation, new trends and retro-trends can easily co-exist; they are not mutually exclusive and sometimes even coincide (e.g. cars that are designed to resemble a model from decades ago, but are based on the latest technology). In today's world, it is often difficult to distinguish between modern and old-fashioned, progressive and conservative – and even between old and new.

Contemporary traditionalism in the Netherlands cannot be considered in isolation from changes in the Dutch housebuilding sector. For many decades, housebuilding was synonymous with public housing, and the decision-makers tended towards modern architecture for economic, technocratic and/or ideological reasons. This situation changed when the free market – which, incidentally,