

MANUAL FOR



HOW DO YOU DESIGN A COMPLETELY NEW CITY? WE ASKED RIENTS DIJKSTRA AND KERSTEN GEERS.

TEXT BERT GELLYNCK

AFTER HALF A CENTURY OF RADIO SILENCE IT'S permitted again: designers are openly discussing the creation of complete cities from scratch. A sequel to the modernist dream looms on the horizon: building the ideal city, one different from all that have come before.

The debate on the design of the complete city, the quintessential idiom of post-war modernism, more or less fell silent in the wake of the demise of Team X. In Western Europe, the definitive coup de grâce followed soon thereafter, when public opinion decreed that the completed modernist urban expansions were a failure. Down to the present day, the designers of these cities are held responsible for a broad range of metropolitan problems, as the riots in the Paris banlieue a year ago taught us. The urban designers of the latter half of the twentieth century shelved their utopian ambitions and reverted to the historic city. This city was no longer to be replaced, but transformed in a gentle way, with respect for the past. 'Social condensers' were to generate the revival of community life, historic neighbourhoods were once more 'interwoven' with one another and 'punctual interventions' emancipated the old areas without drastically altering existing structures. The city was and is no longer seen as a construction, but far more

1981

CITY BUILDING

New cities in Asia:

- Pudong (China)
- Dongtang (China)
- Putraya (Malaysia)
- New Songdo City
- The World (Dubai)
- Anuville (India)

as an organism that cannot be controlled in its totality.

And then there was Asia, the continent where the new city never went out of style. Its production, however, was in most instances a less than intellectual endeavour. Cities were designed there as efficient machines, a juxtaposition of extruded residential and business high-rises, erected on uninspired bases, sliced through by thick layers of infrastructure. Whether this urban form was actually a good or a bad thing was not a topic of discussion. There was a housing shortage, as a result of the rural exodus, and it had to be alleviated. While in Europe the 'long-haired work-dodging scum' were battling the police in the streets following the shutting down of yet another squat, Asians willingly acquiesced to being stacked in minuscule flats in characterless tower blocks.

Growing globalization and rapid economic growth, however, made those in the East realize that they could do more and better: self-awareness grows in proportion to the compulsion to consume (space). Moreover, people are striving like never before towards an individual identity; they want to be cleansed of the stigma of the 'generic city'. The first tool for this was architecture. By now, every self-respecting city has some local version of 'a Gehry'

on display. The same compulsion towards identity is now expanding to the design of the city.

Building sites may be mainly popping up in Asia, but a fair number of European design firms are also working overtime to satisfy their new patrons these days. Maxwan is one agency with such a plan for a complete city on the drawing board, a city that will be built next to Moscow in the next few years. Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen, on its own initiative, developed a visionary plan for Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in Morocco. A dual interview about two divergent approaches.

MOSCOW: TUG-OF-WAR AT THE BOBBIN- LACE-MAKING LEVEL



THE ROTTERDAM-BASED MAXWAN FIRM IS currently working on a new city along the ring motorway encircling Moscow. The city is being built on 4,000 hectares of land made available by the closing down of the former sovkhoz, or collective farm, of Kommunarka. Many sovkhozes retained their agricultural function when they were privatized, but Kommunarka has been authorized for urban development.

The development of the new city is entirely in the hands of a private consortium called Mashtab. To what extent can the Moscow city authorities still influence the design?

Rients Dijkstra: None. The Kommunarka area falls under the jurisdiction of the Moscow regional authority, which is far less autocratic than that of Moscow itself. The consortium can therefore operate there with quasi-autonomy. The plan does have to obtain planning approval, but the clients are optimistic and decisive and have every confidence that this will succeed.

What exactly do they expect from the city?

We posed that question as well when we first met them, because surprisingly enough, the brief did not mention

what they wanted. One of the members of the consortium said, 'I want to maximize my profits' and another added, 'I want to build a "dream city".' We replied that they were in luck, because we are convinced that you maximize profits by building a dream city. We drew their attention to the example of Irvine in Los Angeles, one of the most idealistic and simultaneously most profitable suburban developments of the twentieth century. If you are prepared to constantly put the quality of the development first – and are able to combine this with control over the pace of development – you end up obtaining maximum profit, and not just in a financial sense.

What exactly do you mean by the quality of the development?

The Irvine Corporation decided at a very early stage to make huge investments in green public space. This greenery was elevated to a dogma, which subdevelopers were compelled to obey. So they had to invest more, but the result was that the quality of the public areas was so much higher than in the surrounding counties that people were prepared to pay substantially more for their homes.



Isn't that rather cynical, building a city based on the premise of profit maximization?

It's cynical to the extent that capitalism is cynical. Let's face it, a great deal of urban development is business too.

What attempts do you make, starting from the premise of profit maximization, to produce a genuine city as well?

First we look at whether we can steer the brief towards something we think can deliver greater quality. One of their proposals is something that immediately says 'banlieue' to us: a neat but monotonous high-rise neighbourhood with fairly small apartments. You can get excited about that at first because it has a modernist feel to it, but we've grown up with the idea that this is not the proper solution in the long term. If we do not succeed in persuading them of the danger of this rather simplistic model, step two is to produce, with their brief, the best possible urban quality, public space and architecture.

Does the consortium also think about the long-term effects of their investments? What is their attitude, for instance, towards sustainable land use, water management, ecology?

You have to think of it this way. We have a limited view of what's going on in the world. Here in Western Europe, we presume that we're always nurtured by clients operating within a morally responsible framework. In Russia the relationship between commissioning client and commissioned architect is entirely different. We received incredibly little input, for instance. If we think ecology is crucial, it is up to us to come out and say so and persuade them with arguments that also have a certain meaning in their world.

Back to the idea of quality. I presume that you produced a number of images in order to convince them that you actually are capable of creating a dream city.

No, actually we didn't. This doesn't trouble our clients, by the way – they don't ask for these images. They do want a couple of big ideas. In the plan we presented during the competition phase, 85% of the area is taken up by detached houses and a lot of energy has gone into the design of the public space, the design of the street, you might say. If you wanted to express what we proposed in this phase, it would be 'create a stunning street'. To give you an idea: we obsessively analysed Olmsted's magnificent, late 19th century Riverside in Chicago.

Maximizing profits by building a dream city!

RECIPE:
1. STEER BRIEF
2. PRODUCE BEST POSSIBLE URBAN QUALITY



ABOVE EAST QUADRANT.

As repartee to the demand for a stunning city.

Yes. I'm convinced that in a metropolitan project your initial attention should not go to the things that define the 'wow factor', to the exceptional urban elements, but instead that you should start with what defines 95% of the public space: the street.

And yet this commission is an amazing opportunity to realize a number of things you've always dreamt of. Is there anything you absolutely want to get done?

No, there isn't anything like that; I want to be extremely careful about that. Given the scale of the plan, we could do something with a very powerful signature, but the question remains whether this works. I find it astonishing how many people think that a good way of designing is first to have a vision or a dream and then to try obstinately to make it reality.

Still, you cannot deny that there is a long tradition of grand plans in urban design, cities that were built according to a predetermined model? Are you sceptical about this tradition?

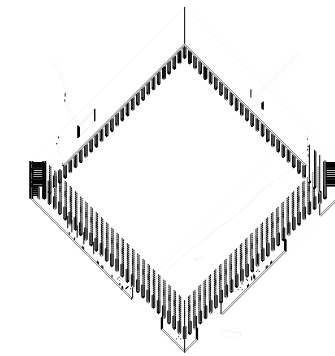
Yes, because I think this tradition has mostly produced

failures. I think that a number of those plans, Brasilia for instance, were mainly valued by a select group of initiates, while this city is far less valued by a significant group of users. Suppose we produced quite an unostentatious plan in Moscow, with rather few exciting moments for confreres or connoisseurs, but that proves to be a huge success over the long term. **Should I be embarrassed that I did not have a visionary idea in the beginning? I don't think so.** Should I be embarrassed if I have a visionary idea that only ends up being torn down in 40 years anyway, like the Bijlmer in Amsterdam? I do think so. Thinking purely in terms of visionary ideas reduces the craft to a mere tug-of-war, pulling as hard as possible in order to get as much as possible out of the struggle. I find it more appealing to play a more complex game with the client and the setting. If you will, tug-of-war as a form of bobbin-lace making, with a hundred ropes at a time. I don't care that much that the results, on the surface, then appear less spectacular.

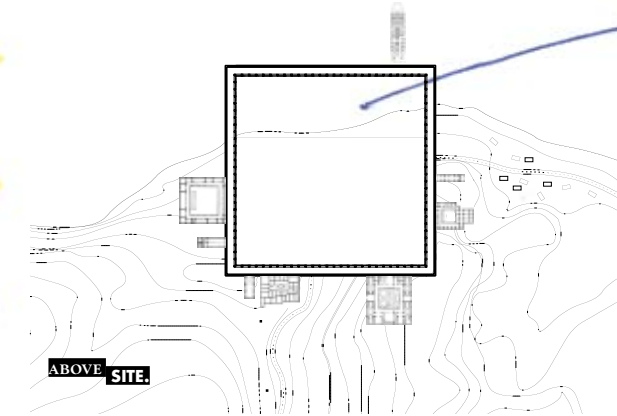
www.maxwan.com

CEUTA: THE CITY AS RESPON- SIBILITY

CEUTA
28 KM²
POPULATION:
75.000



ABOVE AXONOMETRIC VIEW.



ABOVE SITE.

→ A whole city in just one wall, enclosing a 482 x 482m empty square

THE CITÉ DE REFUGE BY THE BRUSSELS-BASED Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen is projected as a mysterious square on the border between Europe and Africa. We're in Ceuta, a tiny Spanish enclave on the northern tip of the African continent. Nowhere else are the boundaries of Fortress Europe so physically present: a double metal fence and watch towers that carry strong echoes of Cold War Berlin are meant to shield Europe against a tidal wave of economic migrants from the south. Ceuta is a door to Europe that is only minimally ajar. In the framework of *Power*, the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam's 2007 edition, Geers and Van Severen saw an opportunity to give this no-man's-land a concrete face. Their design simultaneously provided an alibi to conduct a debate on the form of the city.

Why the name Cité de Refuge?

Kersten Geers: The issue of Ceuta is too often dismissed as a regional problem, a political dispute between Spain and Morocco. With our project we wanted to take the focus away from the regional problem and concentrate on how Europe's border politics are shaped. The question we posed ourselves is: How can we deal with the idea of borders and in what way can we shape them? Refuge simultaneously

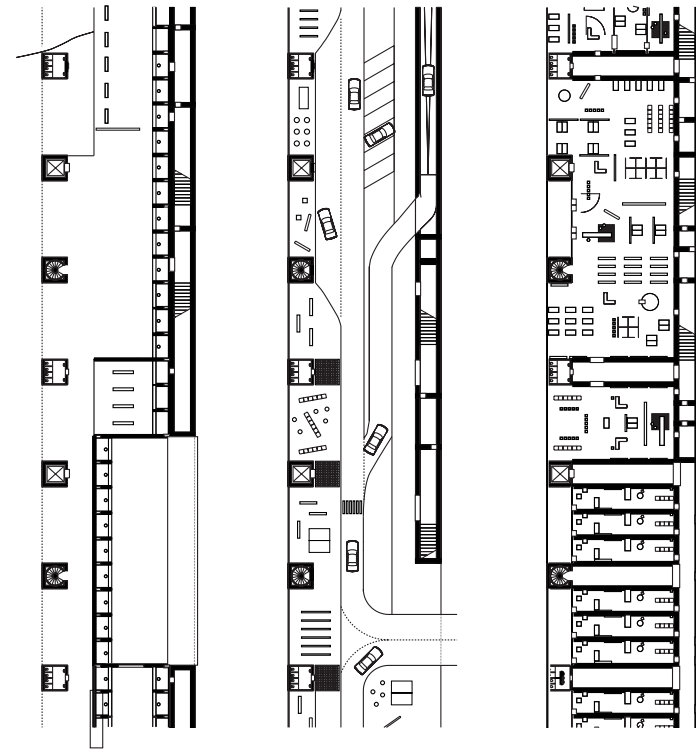
means 'guardhouse' and 'sanctuary'. The Cité de Refuge is our proposal to make the dynamics of the crossing visible.

The Cité de Refuge lies in the neutral zone between Europe and Africa. Do you want to use this new city to create a link between the two continents?

The area around the border crossing is already considerably urbanized on both sides, a process that was already underway long before Europe decided to install the high fences. So we don't want to generate new activities; we want to make a city out of the urbanized area. We're not altering anything about the entire programme of crossing the border; we're only trying to make the whole of these activities visible. **Through architecture, we want to show the things you otherwise would not see.**

How do you make a city out of an urbanized area?

We want to separate the term 'city' from the term 'urbanization'. To make a city is to create a sort of responsibility, to conjure a consciousness into existence. The area surrounding Ceuta is today an infinite sprawl of informal structures, but that is not enough to make it a city. A city as an idea means creating a framework.



ABOVE TYPICAL FLOOR PLANS.



LOCATION OF THE BORDER TOWN OF CEUTA, A SPANISH ENCLAVE IN MOROCCO.

MOROCCO

A framework for what?

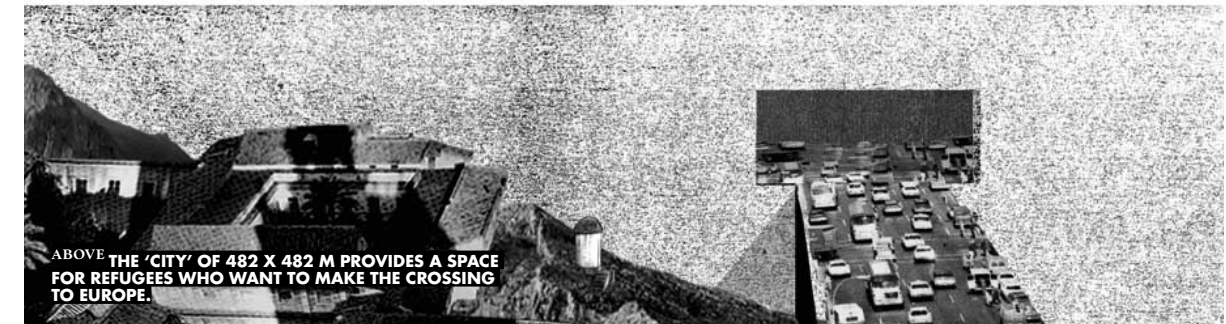
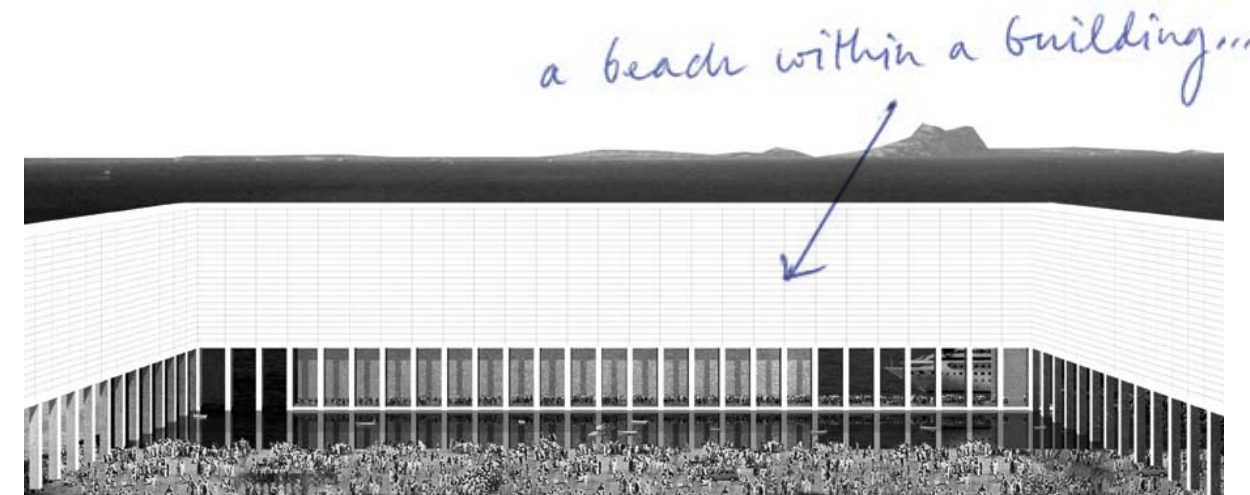
A framework for life as it unfolds in urbanized places, a framework that can be sustained collectively. We equate the city with the concept of responsibility. In a city you are responsible for your environment. In an urbanized environment you can live as an individual – in a city you are part of a collectivity. We want to create a reference point for this collectivity. Essentially this could be a large column, or a wall of fortifications like in the Middle Ages, or the seven great axes Haussmann drew across Paris. In the Cité de Refuge this reference point is the square frame, which defines the contours of the city.

The frame consists of a double wall. The inner wall is the formal face of the city and is articulated as a colonnade. It houses all vertical circulation, the offices for the border police, etcetera. The outer wall is a very blank, informal façade with only a few large openings. Legal migration takes place between these two walls. The plaza in the centre is a sanctuary, a 'mutual territory' – not because it really is neutral but because it is a space that belongs neither to Europe nor to Africa.

In effect you are blowing up the crossing of the border to monumental dimensions. It puts me in mind of the work of Antonio Sant'Elia and his 1914 design for an electricity power plant, in which, in homage to engineering, he pumps up the building to inhuman proportions. May I dub the Cité de Refuge a monument, a monument to urban space?

'Monument' is a compromised word – after all it commemorates something that happened in the past. In this sense the Cité de Refuge is certainly not a monument. But I would like to refer to the interpretation by philosopher Lieven de Cauter, who describes this kind of space as a kind of sanctuary, space in which time and place differ from the norm. He also sees similarities with what Foucault calls the space of 'heterotopia', a place that is simultaneously political and economic. The heterotopia is the opposite of the 'camp', the place where everyone is stripped of his or her political and economic significance. The camp is the closest equivalent to what border crossings signify today: infrastructural spaces, places of 'bare life'.

In this project you see it as your task to give shape to the existing dynamics. Altering the activities is not



your ambition.

That is not because this aspect of programming interests us less, or that it is less important somehow. For my part I do not believe that the form and the programme of a city should necessarily coincide. I think that the programming of the city is not the task of its designers; that is the job of planners, politicians and developers. As designers we should focus on the architectural decisions – that's where we can make a difference.

Do you think that in 2007 a consensus has been reached among designers, politicians and developers about what the city should be? Has the age-old mutual distrust evaporated?

Yes, insofar as today's developers do indeed collaborate with far more diverse kinds of people, people with a broad base of know-how. In fact this is crucial to the economic success of a project. And it is also true that, in our capitalist democracy, an economically successful project equals a successful project, full stop. A remarkable parallel seems to exist between the wishes of the developer and, by and large, the wishes of the residents. As architects we should be concerned with a completely different sort of quality: architec-

ture and urban design as a sort of cultural products with which we interrogate the contemporary city.

Can you have critical or subversive intentions at the level of the city? Or is it about elaborating your own agenda?

Call it the elaboration of our own agenda, which involves a parallel with the idea of collective responsibility for the city. As architects we choose to participate in the debate about architecture, in the debate about the city, and we want to take a specific position. The topic that fascinates us most keenly is the demand for the physical presence of the city, and how we can counter increasing individualization with an urban form that, to a certain extent, attempts to achieve a kind of collectivity. Perhaps this is a project that, by definition, is destined to fail, but is that not the fate of all cultural products?

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Destined to fail!