

## How to Live?

The central assignment in the competition inviting designs for a 'VIP home for Leidsche Rijn' left nothing to the imagination: design a *landmark* for Leidsche Rijn, 'a house that gives the site a certain weight, a house with some special significance, or a house for an unusual person. An example that comes to mind is the Rietveld-Schröder House in Utrecht, which has been designated a UNESCO monument because its inhabitant gave Rietveld the opportunity to make this house into a radical statement about housing and living together.'

Although the Rietveld-Schröder House is an excellent example of the combination of ideals, architecture and personal circumstances, the analogy with a future architectural place of pilgrimage on the outskirts of Utrecht is flawed in several respects. But that did not stop me from revisiting the Rietveld-Schröder House for the first time in many years and listening to what the guide had to say. The guide, who was not entirely coincidentally my own father, turned out to have just decided to stop showing visitors round the house.

In Rietveld's design, rooms appear and disappear with the use of movable partitions. This makes the house into an environment that can change in response to the everyday fluctuations in residents' living and working conditions. That the house adjusts to those who live in it instead of the other way around is a principle that will appeal to everyone's imagination and is frequently presented as a theoretical possibility in architecture; in fact, however, few examples exist.

Moving forward to the twenty-first century, in which individuals are confronted with changes on the personal and professional level on a bigger scale than in 1924, my entry constituted a kind of sequel: a house that can undergo transformations of scale. And although it could never provide the solution for all living situations, it is a statement that,

in contrast to the static architecture of *vinex* estates [new housing estates built in accordance with government policy on urban expansion—transl.], could serve as a model for something that, in the right place and at the right time, could lead to different views about living and working.

My first-round proposal consisted of reflections based on my own housing history, which seems rather typical of the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. I wrote an essay linking living space to a chaotic family life, with a lack of direction, reinforced by the spirit of the age, that did not eventually lead to anything very interesting, let alone to the happiness of those concerned. A striking element was the literal reversal of the idea of the 'parental home': parents stumbling into the future with their new partners while their children stayed behind among the brown and orange household furniture.

The text also included a letter from me to Gerrit Rietveld, explaining that my father had given up his job as guide in the Rietveld-Schröder House because he had become thoroughly tired of telling the same story again and again in a historical peepshow that had so clearly been designed for people to live and work to the full. Now converted into a museum, the house has become a setting in which ostensibly formal aspects have to be reanimated with anecdotes.

When the tangible results of living ideals are accorded the status of UNESCO monuments, something must surely have gone wrong somewhere. My first premise was that I wanted to develop an idea that would never achieve a definitive state, because the house's shape would always be related to a moment in the user's life. The House had to be based on a principle of mutability.

*Vinex* houses project an air of temporary final destinations. They focus on practical matters: the car parked right outside the house and enough bedrooms for 1.9 children. There is a total separation between living and working. Is that why so many people working in the cultural sector have such disdain

for these dormitory towns? The cultural elite assume that 'people like that' come home, have dinner, watch TV and go to bed, and above all lead Very Empty Lives. It is true that the range of cultural opportunities on offer, the social network, and the possibility of dropping into a department store at the merest whim is eliminated, but it is highly debatable how much is to be gained from having these things within reach 24 hours a day. When my best friend and I moved into the same apartment building, we stopped inviting each other to dinner; it no longer seemed necessary, now that we were so close. It is mainly the *idea* of the city centre that is so inspiring.

In the autumn of 2005, the art historian Lisette Lagnado arrived from São Paulo, Brazil in the bleak and windy Leidsche Rijn, where *Beyond* had just opened the event 'Pursuit of Happiness'. She was welcomed by a friendly student attendant, blue with cold and encased in a thick sweater, who was stationed with his booklet in the specially modified barn on the site.

Many art 'consumers' see the psychological distance between the city centre and provincial small towns as unbridgeable, but Lagnado views the distance from Amsterdam to Leidsche Rijn much like a trip to a different part of São Paulo. The true cosmopolitan makes the switch effortlessly: from a metropolis where attempts to count the population produce results that differ by several millions to a *vinex* location where the families have been counted down to the last half child.

With her own major project at the back of her mind, entitled 'How to Live Together', Lagnado was drawn to the exhibition's title, which in all its topicality nonetheless evoked the naive world of the previous generation: for there is no difference between pre 9/11 and post 9/11 in art: only the visitor's gaze has changed.

Lagnado leaves the picturesque city in which the artists live, and crosses a muddy field to reach Stanley Brouwn's

pavilion, which has just been completed. The story goes that the artist Brouwn explained what he had in mind by placing two matchsticks on the table at right angles, one on the top of the other, after which it was up to Bertus Mulder, the former right-hand man of – there's that name again – Gerrit Rietveld, to show that this vision could be converted into a viable building. Which he did!

The work being shown in the pavilion, *Two Projections*, is one that I created especially for this occasion. It consists of a sound recording and a series of slides projected in the form of a video. In the slide projection, I try to portray my grandmother through her eternally modern furniture. She designed a great deal of it herself, and over the years these structures gradually encased her like a suit of armour. Two underlying questions: can good taste protect someone from the dangers lurking in the outside world? And how conservative, really, is the 'modern' gaze?

Like many portraits, it became a double portrait in which maker and sitter merge: *Two Projections*. And although the family relationship is not mentioned, certain matters are raised that an 89-year-old woman would be unlikely to discuss with a stranger: her mother, who vanished to Cuba with the Cuban ambassador when her daughter was just one year old, her Jewish father who was deported to a death camp in the Second World War, and the observation that as a young girl, she took more interest in art than in sex.

When Lisette Lagnado asked if she could show both *Two Projections* and the animated film *Transformation House II* as part of her biennale on the theme of 'How to Live Together', it prompted me to ask myself whether these personal tales could have any significance for an audience in Latin America. And does my work not rather revolve around the question of 'how to live'?

How to live. In any case, not in a *vinex* estate. Far

preferable is the priceless historic centre of a city. Is it the daily unconscious brushes with history, the distances that are so easy to cycle, or the tourists whose presence constantly emphasizes all the attractions on your doorstep? São Paulo, in every respect the complete opposite of a *vinex* estate, does not have any of the qualities we attribute to our little canals. Perhaps it is really about something else. In Brazil, planners opted for a twentieth-century vision that admittedly got out of hand. Vertical growth on this scale, alongside the inevitable expansion in a horizontal direction, is inconceivable in the Netherlands. The plans in Leidsche Rijn for a 262-metre-high phallus named after the eighteenth-century novelist Belle van Zuylen is the exception that proves the rule; it is the vertical dream translated into a symbol, and certainly not intended as an idea for a way of life. The suburban formula, complete with its standard gardens and garages, is spelled out horizontally. And at ground level.

So my entry for the architecture competition 'House for Sale' did not make propaganda based on a metropolitan point of view, but instead admitted a kind of naiveté that only an artist can get away with. In the words of one friend: 'What you did with your Transformation House is really to make a proposal in which people's choices would be less harmful to their surroundings, with references to the social environment and the family, whether intact or shattered'.

An aspect that has scarcely been explored to date, which would link up extremely well both to the Transformation House and the *vinex* location, is a more ecological approach to living. That too has always been dismissed as marginal, but it no longer attracts immediate derision, now that it turns out to have become an asset. Even that status symbol, the Belle van Zuylen tower, is proudly displayed on the website, complete with green energy solutions.

When we launched a joint venture, as artists whose studios were located in the same building, to generate our own energy

using solar panels on the roof, we discovered that the roof had already been promised to an energy supplier for precisely that purpose. The individual member of society thinking up his own ideas is seen as a bit of a *schlemiel*. It's the model based on practicalities that wins again: top-down solutions, assuring economic gain with large quantities, uniformity trumping diversity: the *vinex* model. But when the *vinex* sites turn into large green energy-efficient neighbourhoods, it'll suddenly be totally cool to live there. The poverty of the mono-culture, the lack of social and cultural diversity, will all be easily outweighed by the aura of clean energy and future-oriented thinking. And mark my words, the tourists will soon be flocking there too to look at the windmills.