

# A10



#14  
MAR/APR 2007  
€6.50

## Start

- Concert hall, Riga
- Housing competition, Spain
- Two libraries, Prague/Hradec Králové
- Cricoteka Art Documentation Centre, Cracow
- Information pavilion, Cape Greco
- Rossignol headquarters, Saint-Jean-de-Millermars

## Ready

- Sports and culture centre, Copenhagen
- Youth hostel, Bremen
- Apartment building, Tallinn
- Cathedral choir school, Stuttgart
- Garden pavilion, Malta
- Apartment building, Sofia
- Sports club bathhouse, Lake Como
- Primary school, Joensuu
- Housing, Aveiro
- Theatre, Zürich
- Emergency housing, Dorohoi

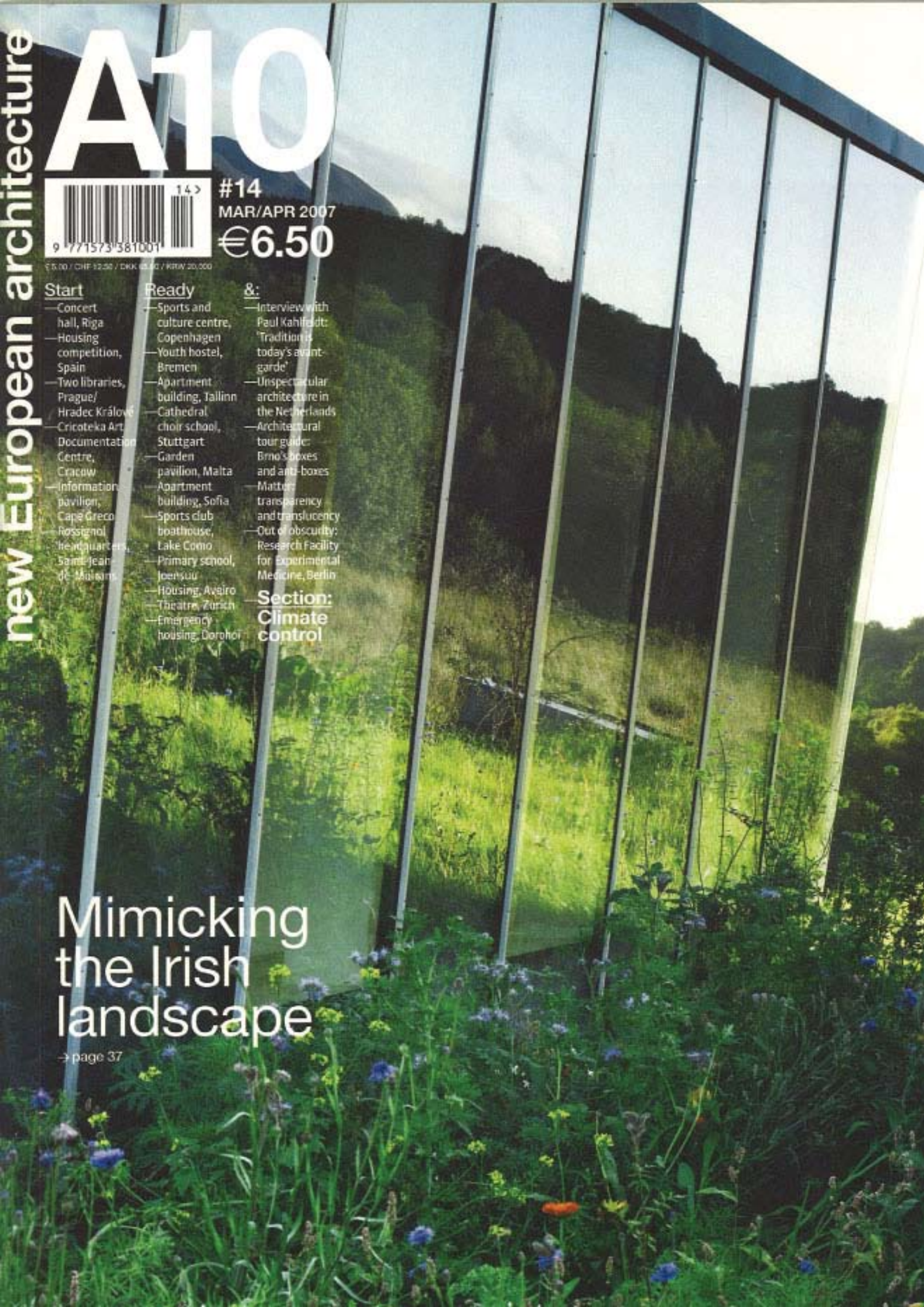
## &

- Interview with Paul Kahlfeldt: 'Tradition is today's avant-garde'
- Unspectacular architecture in the Netherlands
- Architectural tour guide: Brno's boxes and anti-boxes
- Matter: transparency and translucency
- Out of obscurity: Research Facility for Experimental Medicine, Berlin

## Section: Climate control

## Mimicking the Irish landscape

→ page 37



# Unspectacular architecture

Over the last few years a trend has been emerging in Dutch architecture that could perhaps be categorized as 'unspectacular'. After the visual frenzy of supermodernism and neo-traditionalism, this looks like a choice for the middle of the road. The opposite is true: it signifies a deliberate reticence.

NETHERLANDS — TEXT: HANS IJBURG

The first section of the IJburg urban development in Amsterdam exemplifies a shift that took place in Dutch architecture at the start of the twenty-first century. The first housing designs, produced around 2000, were highly experimental in character. The spatial masterplan, by Felix Claus of Claus en Kaan, Frits van Dongen of de Architecten Cie and Ton Schaap of the City of Amsterdam's Spatial Planning Department, was based on a grid of rectangular blocks. The idea behind this urban plan

was to produce quiet and order in this residential district; out-of-the-ordinary projects were to be strictly incidental. Of the dozens of architects invited to design all or part of a block, nearly all initially opted for an incident. Almost no one wanted to produce ordinary residential housing; everyone wanted to make their mark with something special.

One economic recession and many revised plans later, IJburg is now evolving into a city district in which simplicity, quiet and order do indeed predominate. Those

Eurovision

Focusing on European countries, cities and regions



experiments that have survived the cost-cutting and rationalizing are for the most part hidden from view. The majority of the projects are similarly restrained and unassuming: rectangular buildings, made of (dark) brick, with orderly partitioned facades, which effectively conceal any unconventional apartment floor plans and access features that might lurk behind them.

**After the bloom**

IJburg is a *pars pro toto* for a twenty-first century development which is a significant departure from what was de rigueur in the Netherlands up to the turn of the millennium: architecture that flaunted its conceptual radicalness, visible from afar, loud and clear. It was this architecture that gave the Netherlands an international reputation as a paradise for contemporary architecture. Those days are behind us. It's not just that the international media caravan that alighted here in the mid 1990s to report on the wonders of Dutch Design, Superdutch or whatever, has moved on now that the novelty of new Dutch architecture has worn off. Not only is the bloom off the rose, but the Dutch formula is also largely played out, the formula of an architecture based on a striking concept (with staggering one-liners as the result), on a logic taken to the extreme (you want this? you'll get it), and on finding the most unlikely path of most resistance (why make it simple when you can make it complicated?).

After nearly ten years of mediagenic concepts and structures (there was often scant difference between the two, since in many cases the end result was little more than a built version of the initial idea), the last few years have seen a certain weariness appear alongside the light-footed irony and distance that characterized many such projects. Various publications have since observed that the party's over. Here and there one still stumbles across a few party-goers, but in general terms all the bombast of the recent past has given way to a quieter, more serious architecture, which is perhaps best labelled 'unspectacular'. It is an architecture that echoes one of those brilliant, acerbic aphorisms of the Austrian Karl Kraus (1874-1936): 'This is what I expect from the city! live in: front-door keys, street cleaning, asphalt, hot water – I can take care of being gemütlich myself.'

It is architecture that reflects the fact that in many instances there is little if any reason to make something spectacular, because the context, the conditions and the nature of the brief do not require it. This unspectacular architecture was also produced during the halcyon days of experimental architecture, but now that the roar of the architectonic party has died down, →



→  
**JAN BERNARDUSSTRAAT,  
AMSTERDAM**  
Meuskant en Van Velzen  
architecten, 2006



**LEUWENBORG, GRONINGEN**  
FARO Architecten, 2003



↑  
**IJBURG BLOK 34,  
AMSTERDAM**  
Van Sambeek & Van Veen  
Architecten, 2006



←  
**BICKERSEILAND,  
AMSTERDAM**  
FARO Architecten, 2003

**SIMONS, AMSTERDAM**  
Kötter Salman Koedijk  
Architecten, 2006



←  
**MULTIFUNK, IJBURG, AMSTERDAM**  
ANA Architecten, 2006



**HOEFKADE, THE HAGUE**  
Claus en Kaan Architecten, 2004

↑  
**IJBURG BLOK 24,  
AMSTERDAM**  
Claus en Kaan Architecten, 2006





← DE LOODSEN, AMSTERDAM  
Ivahn architecten, 2006

→ LOOTSBUURT, AMSTERDAM  
Ivahn architecten, 2006



← DE LOODSEN, AMSTERDAM  
Wingerder Hovener Architecten, 2006



DE LAATSTE HENDRIK, AMSTERDAM  
Köther Salmen Koedijk Architecten, 2004



← DE LOODSEN, AMSTERDAM  
Köther Salmen Koedijk Architecten, 2006



there is undeniably more interest in this approach, and its representatives are coming to the fore. They are, to a significant extent, architects of the same generation as the party animals of the 1990s. Some of them – like Claus en Kaan, DKV, Rapp+ Rapp or Jacq. de Brouwer – had already achieved a certain international stature in the roaring nineties. The rest are architects and architecture firms who scarcely attracted any international attention until now and were eclipsed by the conceptual spectacle – like Erna van Sambeek, Köther Salmen Koedijk, McCree-anor & Lavington, Maaskant en Van Velzen, Ivahn, Wingerder Hovener, Heren S or Faro, at least part of whose work can be characterized as consciously unspectacular.

What unites and typifies this unspectacularity is that it thrives best in an urban context, where people value a certain amount of anonymity (they'll decide when to be *gemùtlich*). This befits an architecture which is not a personal expression on the part of the designer and does not attempt to express the identity and individuality of the user in its exterior. In the best cases it is an architecture that exudes a civilized indifference, to borrow a sociological concept once used to classify the behaviour of urban residents in public spaces. The street and the city are the natural biotope of this kind of architecture.

#### Ambiguity

The work of the architects who produce this unspectacular architecture, insofar as it can be generalized, shares one other characteristic: a distinguished neutrality, which can be read from the exterior as well as the interior. The exterior of this kind of architecture often alludes to premodern references. In order to blend into the existing urban fabric in a self-evident way, without postmodern pastiche or quasi-traditionalist emulation, the outside of these structures often harks back to or builds on the traditional models and principles of urban facades. These walls often conceal equally neutral, loft-like, spacious apartments.

This may seem like a contradiction at first glance, but on a higher level both the 'premodern' facades and the 'modern' openness of the apartment interiors can be seen as quintessentially neutral solutions. Just as the open floor plans effortlessly accommodate different forms of use, the symmetrically structured facades blend seamlessly into what is in many places still a predominantly premodern cityscape. As a result, this kind of architecture presents itself not as an object, but as a part of the city, without adornment and without trying to please. Its quality can be judged by posing the hypothetical question of whether an entire street or an entire city could be built like this without becoming tiresome. For most of the work of the architects previously mentioned, this question can confidently be answered in the affirmative.

Ultimately, the greatest ambiguity of this architecture lies in the absence of any desire to be architectonic. It is architecture that consciously and deliberately aims to be ordinary, and the result is a never entirely ordinary architecture, which can only be described with oxymoronic phrases: its outspoken circumspection, its remarkable unremarkableness (or vice versa). Such classifications could be viewed as a rhetorical escape route for describing this architecture, but ambiguity is in fact essential to this architecture, which looks ordinary but isn't. Ultimately it isn't possible to make deliberately, intentionally ordinary architecture. The result is therefore never one hundred per cent ordinary: it is at most an approximation, which relates to the ordinary but also irrevocably departs from it, because it is more subtle in its proportions, finer in its detailing, in short better designed, better built, better finished. Yet it is undeniably architecture that recalls the everyday quality that typifies the commonplace rather than the artistic genius of a unique work of art. And it is certainly architecture that develops best in the most ordinary of all briefs, housing construction.

## The strength of current unspectacular architecture is that it tries to escape being held hostage by the interesting, by accepting boredom and redundancy.

#### Cultivating boredom

The everyday and the unspectacular are recurring themes in architecture and in architecture history. A wide variety of designers and theorists, from Peter and Alison Smithson to Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, have dealt with it, with widely divergent notions of what the ordinary encompasses. One of the most recent reflections on this theme made an appearance at the last Venice Biennale, where the exhibition 'The Beauty of the Ordinary', put together by Label Architecture, was on show in the Belgian Pavilion. In the similarly titled companion publication, Coert Bekeert, an architecture writer of high standing in Belgium, observes, 'Whether we like it or not, we are the hostages to the interesting'. The result is that dogged efforts are made to uncover interesting aspects of what is in itself uninteresting ordinariness.

The strength of current unspectacular architecture in the Netherlands is that it tries to escape being held hostage by the interesting, at the very least by pretending not to be all that interesting at all, by accepting boredom and redundancy. Elsewhere in the essay, Bekeert calls boredom an essential aspect of architecture: 'Boredom brings us to architecture. The interesting in architecture lies right there: it is and remains boring'. In the Netherlands, because of all the party architecture of the past decade, there is too little boring architecture in the built environment, and this unspectacular architecture can be seen as a necessary compensation for this.

Simply put, the overwhelming majority of architects in the Netherlands attempt to combat the boredom of the world by sprucing up the ordinary. A small minority follow a different strategy whereby, rather than taking action against boredom, they take the boredom of the everyday as their starting point, in order to produce an architecture that recognizes and reflects it. Whereas the majority of architects usually achieve something one gets tired of looking at once the shock of the new has dissipated, this minority come up with an architecture that consciously cultivates boredom rather than glossing over it. This seldom produces the shock of the new – at most a shock of recognition. On the other hand, boring architecture won't start to annoy you. ←