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The Choice

Prof. ir. C.H.C.F. Kaan. Delft, Friday March 14, 2008.

'DE KEUZE'
Intreerede prof. ir. C.H.C.F. Kaan
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'THE CHOICE'
Inaugural speech prof. ir. C.H.C.F. Kaan
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Delft University of Technology

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The current architectural debate is characterised by the threat of a split between proponents of change and renewal as the motive and motor of progress and the advocates of the tried and tested, and therefore timeless, skills and qualities in architecture.

But is it not the case that progress is found precisely in the equal recognition of change and constancy? In the equivalence of research and knowledge?

"Rector Magnificus, members of the Board of Governors, fellow professors, and other members of the academic community. Esteemed audience.
Ladies and Gentlemen,
The current architectural debate is characterised by the threat of a split between proponents of change and renewal as the

motive and motor of progress and the advocates of the tried and tested, and therefore timeless, skills and qualities in architecture.

But is it not the case that progress is found precisely in the equal recognition of change and constancy? In the equivalence of research and knowledge?

The Delft University of Technology has appointed me practice professor of Architectural Design at the faculty of Architecture. This part-time chair carries the title: 'Relation to practice'. Since there is a vacancy for the core chair of Materialisation I intend to use my practice chair to fill this void in order to arrive at 'Materialisation and relation to practice'.

Ever since I graduated, here, at the Delft University of Technology in 1987 I have been mainly involved in designing for building. After seven years of imaginary projects I wanted one thing and one thing only: to design in order to build, designs that were thicker than paper . This implied establishing and running an architectural firm. This was accomplished from 1987 to 1997 in intensive daily cooperation with Felix Claus. The foundations of the firm have been laid in this period. Over the past ten years we developed the oeuvre of Claus and Kaan Architects from our offices in Amsterdam and Rotterdam through cooperation and with new partners.

In the course of time it became clear to me that architects in our country operate in an exceptionally professional context. This professionalism determines the development of architecture and the role of the architect. The Netherlands has a strong tradition in spatial planning, infrastructure, urban development, and architecture.

Each and every square metre in the Netherlands is planned, designed, and drawn up. 'Rijkswaterstaat' – an agency of the Ministry of Transportation and Water Management – celebrated its 200-year anniversary in 1998 and in 2001 the Housing Act was 100 years old. The 20th Century has produced a series of memoranda by the government on the issue of spatial planning. Until recently, the design of the Netherlands was part of the government's agenda, something we considered to be entirely normal.

From this a huge planning industry emanated, a sector comprised of institutes and companies that are engaged in the designing and planning of the Netherlands. Architecture has become a mass-produced article that attracts broad societal attention.

This broad societal attention translates itself into the number of 520 new students at the Faculty of Architecture that we were happy to welcome at the start of this academic year, 2007-2008.

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Never in the history of this institute has the influx of new students been this big. Apparently, the popularity of the professional practice of designing our country - the building and designing of our cities - has a powerful pull on the current generation of pupils and students as well.

This may be called curious, to say the least. Especially at a time when the role of the architect and the urban planner changes continuously in the building process due to external factors,
when the role of the architect and urban planner can no longer be unequivocally defined – precisely at such a time the interest in architecture and the attractiveness of the architectural profession is at an unprecedented height.

I am asked frequently what an architect is and does. So what do you design? The interior or real buildings and houses? In what style? The impression is still prevalent that an architect is an industriously sketching creative artisan who produces ideas for buildings that are then built from some sort of water colour by a building contractor. The architect is chiefly thought to be responsible for the way buildings look, the rest is done by the contractor. The important role played by the client is almost entirely ignored, let alone the roles played in the building process by other professionals.
Architects are divided amongst themselves as to the role and tasks of the architect. The interpretations of the profession vary from those who see themselves as the innovators of concepts concentrating on taking the initiative and on the preliminary design – consciously choosing not to play a role in the building process other than guarding the concept -, to those who take on the part of the master builder, play the confidant of the client, and manage the entire project from start to finish but without paying particular attention to the opportunities provided by the initiative phase.
Not being familiar with the role and tasks of the architect is perhaps due to the differences in interpretation of the profession among architects themselves, but maybe even more due to the image of the creative genius who has appropriated the profession where copyright plays an important role.
Ever since the Renaissance authorship has been recovered in Western culture. After the period of anonymity of the master builders of the Middle Ages the person and individual vision of the architect has gained in importance. Over time, the image of the architect developed from being the master carpenter, to being an intellectual, artist, and engineer. The architect is the designer of the totality of the building. This status reached its apex during the modernist period when the architect appropriated complete control over the building process.
The entire intellectual process from the initial fleeting ideas to the drawings and the theoretical justification of a building is thus recognised to be the intellectual property of the architect. This recognition was serious enough to be laid down in the Intellectual Property Law of 1912 (the right to royalties, to which

personality rights were added in 1931) and is part of every contract between client and architect, but – at the same time – is disputed in practice, just as the role of the architect as the almighty master builder is.

The side effect of copyright in architecture is that the client is owner of the physical product - of the design whether realised or not - but is not entitled to apply any changes without the architect's permission who owns the intellectual property rights. This is usually not a problem as long as the client is also the owner and the end-user of a building, but this is not usually the case in the Netherlands. The client as property developer is often only briefly the owner and hardly ever the user of a building. Therefore, the building is developed generically or at arm's length, even if the future tenant is known. The limitations imposed by copyright law render the building not entirely freely marketable which explains to a large extent why clients feel an aversion to the paragraphs on intellectual property as included in architects' contracts. Apart from the economic value of the building another factor comes into play as well. The acceptance of the absolute authority of the architect by accepting his copyright is a sensitive issue in a design process that includes many professionals to a greater or lesser extent, as well as the client who plays his part not only as the initiator and financier but also as an active participant.
Thus, we observe that there is confusion about what does and does not belong to the architect, but we must recognise as well that the time of absolute clarity is behind us, as is the architect as creative genius.

Education

The academic environment is determined by theory which enables students to develop conceptually. The relationship to the building practice is virtually non-existing which shouldn't be a problem as long as one is aware of this reality and the student isn't prevented from choosing to get acquainted with the practice. However, it is a little awkward if graduates do not understand the design process. That is where my mission in this faculty is situated.

The academic design is a laboratory model in which the context and the simplified project environment is many times simpler and can be set more unequivocally in preconditions.
The interaction between participants – the supervisors at the university – is predictable and the inclination is to follow the personal thought processes of the students. I can assure you – clients don't do that. The low level of time pressure and the lack of concrete input do not lead to sharp choices but to a multitude of personal options.

Project learning tends to aim for personal self-development instead of the acquisition of design skills. Cooperation, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, which is essential in practice, is practised far too little. Students are still being educated to become creative solo performers.

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The reality is much rougher, more unpredictable, dynamic, and impossible to control or to freeze. It is impossible to enforce a controlled, linear design process in logical steps. One has to deal with political unpredictability, the client who appears in various guises, the unattainability of certain technologies, and the invisible end-user.

I have noticed that the academic world has a dramatically different image of the practice from the reality of that practice.

"In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is."
I quote here the legendary American baseball player from the 1950s, Yogi Berra.

It is the observation of a fact of life that in itself should not be a problem, but requires recognition. For that reason I take the opportunity of this public lecture to share with you a few reflections taken from the reality of that practice.

The practice

When Aaron Betsky, the former director of the NAi, was asked in autumn 2002 in an interview for SMAAK – the magazine of the Ministry of Transportation and Water Management – to comment on the then recent 'Third Architecture Memorandum' which was limited to 10 large projects, being American he answered:

"'Branding' is just as important for governments as it is for large corporations. In order to run a company you need 'shared values', values that are recognisable and supported by shareholders, employees, customers, in brief: by everyone. Apart from that, a good company has a 'core competence' – something it is really good at – and the product has to be of good quality, but more importantly, recognisable. The government is for an American particularly visible in the US Army – the core competence is war.
In the Netherlands this is somewhat nicer: Spatial Planning. The opening up, planning, securing, and substantiating of space. Building roads, tunnels, and bridges, inventing management systems, creating a situation that leaves room for everyone. But also ensuring that something remains that is communal.'
The Netherlands has a dominant middle-class culture. For centuries power has been in the hands of farmers and traders. Our cities and polders have been designed by engineers in order to serve agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade. The architectural artist who served an educated elite is alien to this country. The Beaux Arts are hardly known here. The massive industrial development of the 19th Century that brought with it large-scale urbanisation in Europe, more or less passed us by. Due to the Housing Act and the laws on Spatial Planning the last century saw a complete and planned reorganisation of the country. For many years, the authorities played an intensive role in realising the production of public housing,

the provision of homes for the population became the core competence of Dutch architecture and thus of the building industry.
Not only are building techniques and materials completely tailored to this form of standardised house building – which is dictated by minimum requirements as imposed by the authorities - but so are knowledge and skills. The result is that the architecture of public buildings struggles to surpass the quality of public housing: the floor has almost become the ceiling.

The change

All this changes at the end of the 20th Century . Suddenly, the government changes its tack. Various responsibilities are left to the market in the name of deregulation and liberalisation. The previously operative morality of reconstruction - a morality of equality and rationality – turned out to be an ethical and cultural model that no longer met the increasing dynamics brought about by European market forces. Finally, the third Balkenende government puts a stop to its guiding and governing role through the Memorandum on Space, decentralising almost all government policies. The image of the state dominating the building industry changed rapidly in favour of private enterprise. This retrenchment goes hand in hand with the demise of shared points of reference, based on rationality and equality, and of identity providing values. The Netherlands loses this protection mechanism and thus its unique position in the field of spatial planning. Spatial planning is no longer at war strength.

The elections/selections

Around the same time an obligatory procedure for European tenders for all government projects was introduced. This procedure, which is meant to stimulate market mechanisms and prevent unfair competition, has also been made obligatory for the selection of service providers, i.e. architects, absurdly enough. As a result they have to take part time and again in competitions and selection processes.

The considerate and careful architect, who made comparative assessments based on humanistic principles, is being replaced by the market-oriented designer. The latter attempts – be it alone or in cooperation with clients, mostly project developers – to realise the dreams and ambitions of local politicians and the public. This 'competition for dreams' leads to excesses where the emphasis in architecture and town planning is shifting to originality and iconographic effect, the commercialisation of architecture as a product. Intrinsic architecture is replaced by the image. This iconic trend brings about a strong urge to break all ties to tradition and context. Since the super-position of the architectonic image aims to seduce and to distinguish itself it has no choice but to distance itself from its environment. Thus, the architectonic object becomes isolated, alienated from its physical environment.

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The exclusive concentration of designers on the architectural object leads to the excessive regard for just one sensory quality aimed at getting attention. Whereas previous generations of Dutch architects attempted to approach and rationalise their design from the existing reality, culture, and context, new experiments are just as solitary as they are isolated.

The architect generates the concepts that local and sub-local politicians, the market, and public opinion will have to embrace. Until now, the government had set the tasks, had defined the target audience, the starting points, and the qualities, and the architect could concentrate on the design. In the current system market parties and designers determine the choices.

Whatever design has been chosen, it will have to keep being shown, explained, and communicated for it to remain chosen, for permanent support is needed to be allowed to build. Although very professional, the client as developer is often only briefly owner of the building and hardly ever the end-user. The client has less of a personal connection to the design and is only rarely represented by one individual who is present during the entire process. Given the lack of an opinion on the task at hand the government is by definition anonymous and its representatives change all the time. The design is an orphan and the only thing preventing it from being exchanged for another is the delay - and concomitant excessive costs - that such a change entails. Because the architect is the only constant factor in the projects, he runs the risk of being continuously busy showing the ropes to, and informing, new participants in the project.

The competition system, that only wants to select a design, definitively undermines the relationship to the client. The competition encourages the architect to act all by himself. Without a dialogue with the client or user the project lacks in depth. It is precisely the client who should have the ambition and the will to invest in the quality of the project and who will continue to back the project even in difficult moments. In contrast to an academic model, an architectural project cannot be carried by the author in practice.

For instance, in the design-phases in which the master builder is not yet present the designs will have to be self-evident and understandable to such an extent that the lack of a master builder is less of a problem. The design has to be of a clarity that seems to indicate that it has been created to explain itself, not just to the panel of judges but also to the user, to the client, and to the public.

What never changes

The field covered by architecture seems to be without boundaries. Architecture is present everywhere and in spades, and as a result the subject of public debate. The profession has a long tradition. Depending on the stance taken by the observer either this tradition or the latest fashion in building is dominant.

It remains a fact, however, that commissions emerge from the societal desire to build. In practice, an architect uses his personal interpretation of his profession but within the framework of the commissions and the societal context that is a direct reflection of the political culture. In the Netherlands the latter for a long time had been based on the search for consensus.

It is very tempting – especially given the developments in the practice – to label oneself as an architect with a specific trademark or speciality. The use of an extreme style makes you more easily recognisable as an expert or an extravagant designer. Deriving such a trademark from a discipline in the periphery seems innocent and obvious enough but it leads us further away from the core business of our profession and our own building culture.

Architects like to perceive themselves as boosters of innovation. This is the most inappropriate self-image of our profession. Since our profession is among the slowest developing possible, trendsetting or being ahead of social changes is a contradictio in terminis. The time required by a building project – from the initial contact between client and architect until final occupation – is long. By its very nature architecture is a slow profession. Much slower than many fundamental societal changes and much slower than technological changes.

Time is a constant - always present. Time puts everything in its place.

Jerzy Kozinski describes this beautifully in 'Being there'.
The story is about Chauncy Gardner, the main character, who spends his entire life in a walled garden, completely isolated from the surrounding world. Behind this barrier, i.e. in his garden, time passes without any points of reference but the seasons.

"What was particularly nice about the garden, was that at any moment, standing in the narrow paths or amidst the bushes and trees, Chance could start to wander, never knowing whether he was ahead of or behind his previous steps. All that mattered was moving in his own time, like the growing plants."

There is an unbreakable bond between the material from which the building was made and the time that is enclosed within it. But in time the object can liberate itself from the idea from which it emanated. After all, the idea was just the cause, a means to the end of having a building, the circumstances in which the building emerged change, the spaces and bricks remain and – in their turn – may harbour new activities or give cause to new events. I consider its ability to be generous in this respect and to be able to cut itself free from its lead position, to be the essential aspect of architecture. In the end of the day a building is nothing but a tool facilitating human activity. The quality of a building is measured by its conveniences, durability, ergonomics, and functionality.

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Contrary to what happens to society, the physical reality and thus the fundamental requirements of human life hardly change.

Form is not the aim of Chance's garden, but the result of a series of actions performed with care and attention. Quality and universal wisdom are the implicit consequences in this metaphor. This goes for the creation of buildings too. We produce good buildings through dedication and concentration.

I once asked myself how one creates architecture. Now I know it cannot be created. One can only build keeping this image in mind. Perhaps the building will be considered as an example of architecture later.

Physiognomy

When the physiognomy of a building is in balance, its appearance will correspond to the character, function, and essence of the building.

The beauty of this concept is that it allows us to look differently at buildings and thus assess them differently. Physiognomy is not about trying to attain a certain style or aesthetics but a strong presence of that which is of lasting value. Beauty in the conventional sense is irrelevant. A building that is correct in its physiognomy might very well be unattractive as long as its appearance and character correspond. In order to achieve this we have to follow consistently the conceptual and programmatic path. The architectural design is rid of all elements that do not contribute to the conceptual essence of the project. What remains is the most direct representation in a more intense form of the fundamental idea behind the project.

Therefore, this necessarily means the absolute mastery over the construction, materialisation, and detailing, over understanding 'the building process' itself.

Building

The knowledge of – and mastery over – the use of materials is invaluable. After all, the design comes into being in the material, it becomes irreversible and definitive. Architectural design is not a graphic activity but thinking in terms of material and space. In terms of what is, what may emerge, and what should be made.
Materialisation is not an afterthought but part on the concept.

Not only is the choice of materials essential if a design finds its final form in materials, but its mutual connections and encounters or conversions play an important role as well. These details say/reveal a lot about the building. They may be utterly unpretentious or expressively sophisticated. There are cosmetic details that embellish and enliven a building, making it more pleasant, touchable, and comfortable, and there are strategic details that are essential for the expression of the idea – if these fail, there will be no physiognomy and thus no architecture.

Form (ever) follows function

This is perhaps the must used one-liner in architecture. Yet I would like to give it some thought in relation to the aforementioned.

The American architect Louis Sullivan, who lived from 1865 to 1924, is considered to be one of the most influential architects despite his relatively limited oeuvre. He built a lot as a young man but after his split from his associate, the engineer Dankmar Adler, in 1895 and the revival of European architectural styles after the world exhibition in Chicago, his building activities declined sharply. However, he kept writing extensively. Frank Lloyd Wright, who is far better known, regarded him as his 'Lieber Meister'.

Sullivan is regarded as the 'Father of the modern skyscraper'. It was he who provided this type of building with its own architectural identity and explained it in his essay 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered'.

"It is the universal law of everything organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and superhuman, of all true expressions of head, heart, and soul, that life is to be recognised in its modes of expression, that form always follows function. That is the law".

The expression 'Form Ever Follows Function' is used here for the first time and later becomes estranged from its original meaning, the slogan of Functionalism. For Sullivan, 'function' does not refer to the function or use of the building but to its entire being, character, and physiognomy. He never mentions showing or revealing the function and the structure of the building but of the expression thereof. Sullivan's functionalism means that a building is an organic whole, just as a living creature is an organic whole. In his view a building has to express intellectual, emotional, and spiritual reality.

It is wonderful to see how he can put things into perspective as well. In 1901/1902 he writes the 'Kindergarten Chats', a series of briefly described encounters with a young student:

"THE MASTER: I am endeavouring to impress upon you the simple truth-immeasurable inpower of expansion- of the subjective possibilities of objective things. In short, to clarify for you the origin and power of BEAUTY: to let you see that it is resident in function and form.

THE STUDENT: So is ugliness, isn't it?

THE MASTER: To be sure."

'To produce vigorous results in art, the emotions must follow close upon the mind and give it sure support".

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What to me is very noticeable and irresistible is that he perceives emotion as supporting the ratio and not the other way around. Perhaps this is the key to understanding Sullivan.

In his explanation Sullivan stressed the freedom of choice for architects to derive the form of his design from his own interpretation of the essence of the building to be designed. Thus, he was searching for an authentic American architectural style. His zenith as an active architect came in a time of such fundamental social changes that architecture had to change dramatically as well. The rapid rebuilding of Chicago could not longer be captured in existing orders but required new types of building.

This challenge culminates in 1922 in the Tribune Tower in Chicago competition. It was the first global architectural competition and ambitions were sky-high:
"It had for its prime motive the enhancement of civic beauty; its avowed purpose was to secure for Chicago the most beautiful office building in the World".

The competition was won by Raymond Hood and John Mead Howells with a design in Neo-Gothic style of which Sullivan – who had been sidelined in the debate – disapproved whole-heartedly. He praised the runner-up, the design by the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. In its turn, this design served as an inspiring example for the beautiful Rockefeller Centre in New York, also designed by Raymond Hood.

When we consider the results of major international competitions of today, for example the Gazprom competition in Saint Petersburg, I get the sense that we haven't progressed much over the past hundred years.

The fundamental points of departure in our work should not be found in the aim for a certain style or to follow the latest fashion, but in the wish and ability to act freely and to make the most of opportunities and make choices without prejudice, based on concrete facts that form the foundation of a project. As far as I am concerned all styles are freely usable, the signature/handwriting will remain personal. Freedom of style, but in correspondence with the law of Sullivan: "Form ever follows function".

Attempts to express change in architecture are therefore unnecessary. Architects are part of the times they live in and thus buildings automatically will reflect the spirit of the age. To know this saves a lot of time that can be used to practise our business properly.

The will of time
Fundamentally changing circumstances will in the end be expressed in a changing architecture.
Mies van der Rohe wrote in his 1924 essay 'Baukunst und

Zeitwille' (Architecture and the will of time):
"Architecture is always the spatial realisation of the will of time, nothing else.
As long as this truth is not whole-heartedly recognised the struggle for the points of departure of a new architecture cannot be fought effectively and vigorously; until that time it will have to remain chaotic with forces working in contradictory directions".
"One will have to understand that each architectural style is connected to the age it works in and that it can only manifest itself in actual tasks and using the means available in its own time. That has never been otherwise".

There are alarming indications to assume that those fundamental changes are not long off. There are plenty of tasks for us to work on in the designs we create today, but not as an instrument of marketing, but to give them true meaning.

The choice
Making choices is one of the most common and essential things we do in our profession, but this should not be confused with making choices from options which is – in essence – precisely the consequence of having postponed making the fundamental choice. The essence in making a choice is not found in the range of possibilities from which a choice can be made – which are sometimes limited, then limitless – but in the source from which the choice is made. Making choices as an architect means developing a vision and making decisions based on that vision. The choice is a decision out of which actions follow.
We may observe how the architectural world can be traced historically, we may observe that the circumstances within which the architect works have changed fundamentally recently, and we may observe that we will have to make strategic choices based on these changing circumstances. We may take a position in the debate that will then evoke the same again, and we may then conclude that nothing has changed during all those years that the discussion on form has been held.

The main thing we owe to our profession is to take ourselves and our work seriously. The buildings we architects design are not meant to glorify ourselves, nor the intellectual wellbeing of the academic world. We have the responsibility to be aware of the consequences of our buildings, it really matters, it is not theoretical.

I am convinced of the point of view that architecture emerges from building, from approaching the obstinacy of materials, people, and time correctly. Building the Dutch embassy in Africa – in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique – was the ultimate test of this approach. What a joy the building process turned out to be! It was not the process that proved obstinate in Maputo, but the materials and the execution.

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Yet these latter two also gave me the most pleasure during the building process.

Developing an integral architectural vision, understanding and taking responsibility for the entire design with all its implications both as far as detail is concerned and in the societal arena:

"The joy of traveling to the essence of building!"   That, for me, is **the choice**.

Thanks
Finally, I would like to thank you all for being here today during my journey to the essence of the profession, but above all I would like to thank you for the trust you placed in me to build.

Thank you.

Prof. ir. C.H.C.F. Kaan
Delft, Friday March 14, 2008.

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1. *'Thicker than paper' is the title of Capita Selecta and the opening lecture (November 2nd, 1995) at the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam in cooperation with Felix Claus.*

2. *This is not a direct quote, but my personal summary of what was said.*

3. *Michele Costanzo, Claus and Kaan The architecture of attentiveness, 2005.*

4. *Roemer van Toorn, Lost in paradise, Architectuur Jaarboek (Architectural Yearbook) 2001-2002.*

5. *Riken Yamamoto, The realism of Claus and Kaan, introduction to the 'Beauftragt' catalogue, galary Aedes, Berlin, 2002. "Giving a simple explanation is not easy. But as I listened to Claus and Kaan, I gradually began to understand that an attempt to do this lies at the heart of their architecture. And the audience understood this too. It was not the simplicity with which they explained their work,, but the way that their architecture, from the structure as a whole down to the smallest detail, seems to have been designed to be explicable, not just to the audience but to clients, users, and the public."*

6. *See the lecture byn Willem Jan Neutelings, 9 November 2007, in 'de Doelen' in Rotterdam, during the 'Congres Architectuur 2.0' (Architecture Congress 2.0).*

7. *Professor Oudejans, 'Verstandhoudingsmiddelen', lecture notes TU Delft 1981.*

8. *Being there, Jerzy Kozinski, 1971. Being there, Claus en Kaan Gebouwen, 2001.*

9. *Louis Sullivan, The public papers, Robert Twombly, 1988.*

10. *The international competition for a new administration building for the Chicago Tribune MCMXXII. Containing all designs submitted in response to the Chicago Tribune's $ 100,000 offer commemorating its seventy fifth anniversary, June 10, 1922.*

11. *Vertaling overgenomen uit 'Dat is architectuur', Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, Lieven De Cauter en Karina Van Herck. uitgeverij 010 2001. Voetnoot irrelevant]*

12. *Claus and Kaan Architects, The Royal Netherlands Ambassy in Mozambique, essay The joy of traveling to the essence of building! Dikkie Scipio, 2004*