

## **An Architecture of Distraction**

### **The MAS by Neutelings Riedijk Architects**

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It is a commonplace of criticism: at a certain moment architecture has to step back, become invisible and devote itself completely to the service of daily use, like a pen that no longer impedes written language in any way. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin describes this issue from the perspective of the masses and of the general public. Historically considered, architecture can certainly possess an obviousness that makes it – in the eyes of everyone – disappear. As a common phenomenon, it permeates everything and everyone; hence no one fails to see the programme and the building as one and the same. From time immemorial, architecture 'has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.'<sup>1</sup> 'In a state of distraction' or *in der Zerstreuung* in German: here this should be understood as day-to-day obliviousness, naturalness, the essence of normality, as if people are so distracted that architecture is not even distinguished from daily events. And 'by a collectivity': the masses, literally, but not necessarily as the masses only, because the individual is also distracted when he goes to the post office and is interested only in posting a letter and does not even notice the building.

It is important to note that Benjamin deliberately uses the past tense and correctly employs sober wording. In real life, things are shockingly different. In the case of architecture and the masses, what emerges is no longer a mind that wanders in a calm and relaxed way but a tense experience fraught with the obligation to be entertained and have fun. So today, when a big building is erected for the general populace, in the public domain, in the centre of a city, and for the booming-as-never-before culture industry, 'distraction' remains a highly relevant word.

The Museum aan de Stroom (museum by the river, or MAS), designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architects and located on the Hanzestedeplaats in Antwerp, is such a building. Together with Kurt Cobain of the rock group Nirvana, the crowds who enter the interior or even the shadow of the MAS can say or shout: 'Here we are now, entertain us.' Like the ringtone of a mobile phone, this has become the catch phrase of 'the people'. A ringtone, indeed, because each and every time it resounds, the call has to come from the outside world. Seen as such, contemporary architecture appears to be only one of the both countless and intrusive sources of distraction from that outside world. Can there be any point at all, therefore, in wondering what is happening in such a building, in such a world, with such desires and such instant satisfaction? Is everything then not the same; is the old-fashioned, authentic and dull distraction then not integrally replaced by a commercial, boisterous and spectacular foolishness? And then what?

The answer can come only in the form of architecture. Neutelings Riedijk Architects' design is completely free of illusions in terms of the task it has been given. It does not enter into a fray with the processes of city marketing, gentrification, mass tourism, historical abstraction or museums outbidding one another. It simply makes this unavoidable situation – to which it owes everything, of course – into a visible reality. In the former harbour area, just beyond the network of streets known as 'de Leien', the building guides visitors with ease along the history of Antwerp. The collection of the MAS is a chaotic amalgam of remnants: from the colonial era, from

the golden age of shipping, from periods filled with old representations of everyday, industrial and historical urban life. Neutelings Riedijk Architects has designed the route that moves as an orthogonal spiral past these artefacts. Each level consists of a glazed exhibition hall that is rotated 90 degrees with respect to the one below. Escalators carry consumers of culture in one direction, upwards, to the highest point, where a cafeteria, a conference room and a look-out platform are located. Thus the whole tower, 60 m high, is one uninterrupted space that can never be experienced as an entity, however, but only as a chain of beads that have been strung, one after another, right to the top. Those spaces which have not yet been eaten away by the worm of the flow of visitors, are clad in natural-stone slabs in various shades of light red. On these slabs, thousands of cast-iron hands have been mounted, which lend the façade a dazzling and detailed relief. It is as if the hand of Antigone that was cut off by Brabo and tossed away – a heroic act to which a statue on Antwerp's main square still testifies – has been miraculously multiplied here and, indeed, scattered over every part of the collectivity; as if history is no longer a matter of giants and knights but of day-trippers who want to be amused – distracted but, at the same time fragmented and distributed across the levels of one building. All together, through the laying on of hands, they silently support the project and the programme of the MAS. It is even possible to become the owner of such a hand. No courage is required, only money.

And so the illusionless design is simultaneously affirmative, no matter how paradoxical or ironic this may seem. You want to be entertained by this city and by its history? It can happen here without restraint, without guidebooks, without a message, with the remnants of centuries of human and urban activity on one side and, on the other, the city itself, in all its equally problematic and physical presence. At the end of the 1835 novel *Le Père Goriot*, Balzac has the main character cast his eyes on Paris from a similar height, after a similar journey along the swarm of humanity, present and past. '*À nous deux maintenant!*' are the famous last words of the young Rastignac, as he realises what a struggle will be unleashed if he is to hold his own in a modern and metropolitan context such as this. The design by Neutelings Riedijk Architects puts visitors in the same position. They are subjected to the laws of the culture industry and the contemporary city, and even if they have not deliberately opted for these mechanisms and temptations, they are placed opposite them here, as in an arena, in a radical confrontation. Architecture is no longer the 'work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity' – architecture is only a 'work of art', in the positive sense of the word, if it breaks up the collectivity into individuals and confronts them with their desire for distraction and with the ease with which the world meets that desire. If distraction occurs nonetheless, then it is something for which architecture can no longer be blamed.

In a lecture at one of the last ANY conferences, around the turn of the century, Fredric Jameson talked about the allegorical interpretation of architecture. And, actually, to look at architecture and to pose the question of what will happen through this architecture is, indeed, to view the building as an allegory. This is not a matter of unveiling the mystery of architecture by cracking the code and solving the problem, however. The MAS should not be read as an allegory of something. A naive or, on the contrary, cynical view of this building could stamp it as an allegory of Antwerp, as if here real contact with the city and its past is offered to the residents of Antwerp. A more down-to-earth but far too critical review might say: it is an allegory of the culture industry, which it reinforces with sadistic pleasure. The MAS is simply an allegory of itself, though: like all 'real' architecture, it displays only its own impossible but

inevitable fate and, in this way, brings to the fore a large and important aspect of life today. In an exemplary manner, it collects the elements that can form events and subsequently places them, as an antidote to distraction, firmly yet fairly in the hands of the visitor. Together with itself, it creates – from history and from the ground – a representation of circumstances, without denying or disputing them. ‘Perhaps,’ writes Jameson, ‘the utopian approach today is not the older modernist one of projecting a possible solution to an impossible contradiction, but rather one of reconstructing the problem and the contradiction itself in the first place.’<sup>2</sup>

1 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 232. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band I.2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1991 [1955]), 504.) 2 Fredric Jameson, ‘From Metaphor to Allegory’, in: Cynthia C. Davidson (ed.), *Anything* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2001), 36.