

UN US

UN Studio / MATRIX 146

February 16 - April 28, 2002

**Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art
Hartford, Connecticut**

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By the turn of the millennium, architecture had taken on a remarkably prominent role in the expression of contemporary Western culture. It is in architecture that the revolutionary promise of new technologies found its most spectacular and tangible expression, with the realization of designs that only a decade earlier would have seemed impossibly futuristic. Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim has come to stand for this new horizon of creative possibility and economic value - ambitious architecture having become an engine for growth, rather than simply its result.

Yet this architectural ascendancy has not taken place in a vacuum, with architecture an ever more autonomous and formally purified practice. Rather, it is in the ability of architecture to absorb the forms of contemporary culture at every level that has fuelled its impressive rise. The forms of recent art are no exception, as Benjamin Buchloh has observed: "Architecture has reclaimed and recruited almost every new object type and spatial relation that sculpture has opened up."¹ Popular culture, advertising and marketing strategies are equally integral to much new architecture, with Rem Koolhaas's flagship Prada store in Manhattan perhaps the quintessential expression of the seamless experience of design as consumption.

Between the virtuoso expressionism of Gehry at one extreme and the socio-cultural mediation of Koolhaas at the other, UN Studio has developed an architecture that is neither ego-based, nor confined to a dominant thematic approach. Their innovative designs emerge from a profound engagement with both the historical practice of architecture and its redefinition in an era of rapid social, political and technological change.

Architect Ben van Berkel and art historian Caroline Bos established Van Berkel and Bos Architectuurstudio in Amsterdam in 1988. A decade later, they expanded and reorganized their collaborative practice under the name UN Studio. "UN" stands for united network, an articulation of the collaborative process of contemporary architecture. The idea of network practice acknowledges the complex relationships that exist between professionals involved in design, technology, organization and execution, and



Erasmus Bridge, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 1990-1996

1. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cargo and Cult: The Displays of Thomas Hirschhorn," *Artforum* (November 2001), 109.

between architects, clients, investors and users. It reflects the varied needs of different projects, drawing on a flexible network of professional participants. This is, quite simply, an efficient business model, yet it also reflects a philosophical position. UN Studio resists the architectural star system, where the development of a signature style becomes the bankable commodity of high-end design. UN Studio seeks to invent an appropriate design vocabulary for each project, informed by an approach referred to as “deep planning.”

Deep planning is essentially a methodology of information gathering and organization, investigating the specific conditions of a project in relation to infrastructure, urbanism, economics and program. Through the use of digital techniques, this information can be represented, comparatively analyzed and structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of a given project. This approach reveals an

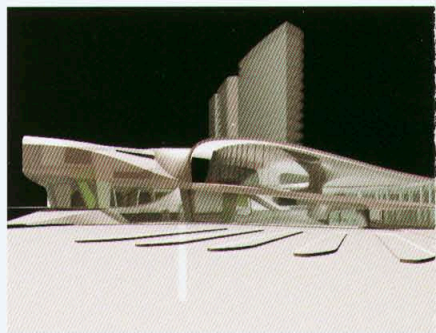
interest in architecture no longer being defined by the discrete, autonomous building, but rather an architecture of interconnection and inclusiveness.

In this sense, UN Studio heralds both the disappearance of “the architect” as traditionally conceived and

the emergence of “mobile forces” that render seamless the integration of architectural form with daily life.

These general principles have been articulated in large-scale urban infrastructure projects such as the Erasmus Bridge, Rotterdam (1990-96) and the public transportation center in Arnhem (1996-2007). With its brilliant deployment of architecture, engineering and urban systems, the Erasmus Bridge dissolves the prevalent dichotomy between purely instrumental urban structures and sophisticated design, reclaiming the potential of the bridge as both a powerful symbolic and functionally advanced form. A similar integration of complex systems of circulation, transportation and urban space is the basis of UN Studio’s “single surface” design for the Transfer Hall in Arnhem, linking trains, taxis, buses, bikes, parking, offices and the town center.

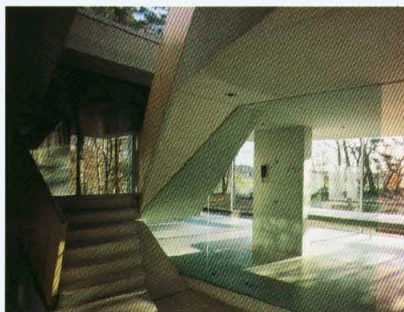
If network practice and deep planning for large-scale public projects suggest a proliferation of information and multiple points of view, it is equally important to consider the value of coherence in UN Studio’s designs. In counterpoint to the systematic effort of research and



2. See Terence Riley, *The Un-Private House* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999).

3. Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos, *Move: Techniques* (Amsterdam: UN Studio and Goose Press, 1999), 43.

analysis is the spontaneous, synthesizing work of the diagram. For UN Studio the diagram is a way of conceiving disparate elements within a conceptually unified whole. The Möbius House, The Netherlands (1993-98), is a case study in the logic of the diagram. The Möbius strip, the paradoxically continuous one-sided loop, became the conceptual basis for the elaboration of the design for this unconventional private house.² The Möbius strip crystallized the idea of continuity between inside and outside, of the possibilities of reversal and exchange within a coherent system, and of the metaphor of two intertwining paths representing the way two people can live together, yet maintain their independence.

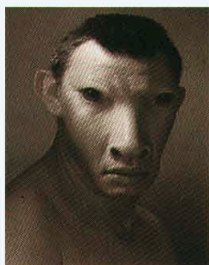


The Möbius House, private house, The Netherlands, 1993-1998



Möbius band, diagram indicating trajectories of time, movement, and construction

Transfer Hall Arnhem, The Netherlands, 1996-2007



The Manimal, original art work by Daniel Lee

The Möbius diagram is not literally applied to the building. As van Berkel and Bos have written, "The two interlocking lines are suggestive of the formal organization of the building, but that is only the beginning; diagrammatic architecture is a process of unfolding and ultimately of liberation."³ To experience the Möbius House is to witness the elaboration of a remarkably complex, innovative and surprising architecture that is at the same time typologically coherent and formally consistent. By any measure, the Möbius House is one of the last great private houses of the twentieth century and an introduction to the promise of architecture in the twenty-first.

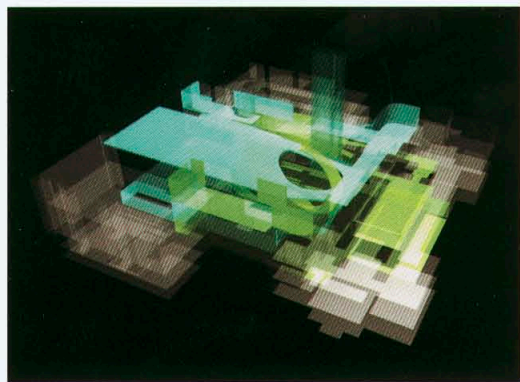
In concert with the synthetic technique of the diagram, the pursuit of coherence is further developed in UN Studio's technological notion of "hybridization." What they refer to as an icon of hybridization is the "Manimal." The Manimal is a computer-generated hybrid image of a lion, a snake and a human. Van Berkel and Bos have drawn a distinction between the modernist practice of collage - where evidently disparate fragments are juxtaposed - and the digital practice of morphing, where unrelated elements are seamlessly joined. "The fact that the unity of the hybrid is not disrupted by the

diversity of its ingredients is what distinguishes this hybridizing technique most from collage."⁴ The consequence for architectural practice is the "convergence of sameness and difference into one coherent structure."⁵ By working through the conceptual implications of digital technologies the architects avoid a simplistic application of particular computer-based effects as merely stylistic gestures. Their approach is rather to investigate the potential of computer programs to expand the spatial imagination, to facilitate a non-hierarchical design model, and to introduce different disciplines into the design process.

The interest of UN Studio in creating a dialogue between architecture, art and their cultural context is a guiding principle for their Matrix installation. The architects were not interested in a conventional presentation of plan drawings, elevations and scale models of different projects. Instead they have adapted the prevailing object of

classical art museum display - the painted canvas. Using photographic sources from a variety of UN Studio projects, the architects have created large-scale digitally rendered images that hang on the gallery walls. Videos of UN Studio works may be viewed on a monitor that has been literally embedded into a piece of furniture placed in the gallery.

This introduction to the work and ideas of UN Studio takes place as the firm prepares their design for the renovation and expansion of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. An initial conceptual diagram shows the unique challenge of this commission: to link coherently a group of historic but disparate existing buildings and to add a significant new element, all within the land-locked Atheneum footprint. In the tradition of the Matrix program, which has given many important artists their first museum exhibition, the Wadsworth Atheneum has given UN Studio their first major American commission. The stage is now set for UN in the U.S.



Conceptual diagram, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art expansion and renovation, 2001

Nicholas Baume

Emily Hall Tremain Curator
of Contemporary Art

4. Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos, *Move: Techniques*, 83.

5. *Ibid.*

BIOGRAPHY OF BEN VAN BERKEL

Studied architecture at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam and the Architectural Association in London.
1988 - established Van Berkel & Bos Architectuurbureau in Amsterdam, with art historian Caroline Bos.
1998 - established UN Studio, a network of specialists in architecture, urban development and infrastructure.
2001 - appointed dean of architecture at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany.

SELECTED PROJECTS

1989-1993

REMU 50/10 kV switching substation, Amersfoort

1990-1992

Karbouw: offices and builder's workshop, Amersfoort

1990-1996

Erasmus Bridge, in collaboration with Gemeentewerken Rotterdam, Rotterdam

1990-1997

Service buildings and entrances Piet Hein Tunnel, Amsterdam

1992-1994

Villa Wilbrink, Amersfoort

1992-1996

Rijksmuseum Twente, conversion and extension, Enschede

1993-1998

Möbius House, Het Gooi

1994

Yokohama terminal competition

1994-1996

Extension and renovation of shopping centre De Weiert Emmen

1995-1998

Bascule bridge and bridge master's house, Purmerend

1995-1999

Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen

1996-2007

Masterplan of station area of the city Arnhem

1996-2000

City hall and theatre, IJsselstein

1996-2001

Laboratory for NMR facilities, Utrecht

1998-2001

Switching station, Innsbruck, Austria

1998-2002

Music faculty, Graz, Austria

1999

IFCCA competition, Manhattan, New York

2001

Alessi Tea & Coffee Piazza

2001-

Extension and renovation of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

2001-

Ponte Parodi, Genoa (winning competition entry)

2001-

New Museum for Mercedes Benz Stuttgart (winning competition entry)

2001-2003

Restructuring of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- Ben van Berkel*, monograph
by 010 Publishers, Rotterdam (1992)
- Delinquent Visionaries*, 010 Publishers
Rotterdam (1993, reprint 1994)
- Mobile Forces*, monograph
by Ernst & Sohn, Berlin (1994)
- Ben van Berkel*, monograph issue
by El Croquis 72.I, Madrid, May 1995
- Move*, UN Studio and Goose Press,
Amsterdam 1999
- Museum Het Valkhof*, UN Studio,
Amsterdam 1999

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

- When the Cathedrals are Blue*,
1990-2002
high resolution photographic print
on polyester cloth
95 x 145 inches
- The Bridge Masters View*, 1995-2002
high resolution photographic print
on polyester cloth
95 x 134 inches
- Work*, 1997-2002
high resolution photographic print
on polyester cloth
95 x 134 inches
- Double Portrait*, 1993-2002
high resolution photographic print
on polyester cloth
95 x 134 inches
- Exhibitions*, 1995-2002
high resolution photographic print
on polyester cloth
95 x 169
- UN US*, 2001
video installation
27-inch color video monitor and
seating unit

MATRIX LECTURE

- 11 a.m., Saturday, February 16, 2002
- Ben van Berkel discusses the evolution
and recent projects of UN Studio and
their new MATRIX installation in
The Museum Theater.
- Tickets: \$10; \$5 for members and students
with i.d. *Ticket price includes general
admission into the museum and
the MATRIX 146 exhibition.*
Seating is limited.
For tickets and information,
call: (860) 278-2670, ext. 3049

GALLERY TALK

- 12 noon, Tuesday, March 5, 2002
- "UN Studio: Digital Architecture"
Nicholas Baume, Emily Hall Tremain
Curator of Contemporary Art
- 12 noon, Tuesday, April 2, 2002
- "UN Studio: The Architecture of
Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos"
Andrew Benner, Architect, School
of Architecture, Yale University

**MATRIX 146 has been made possible
by the Edward C. and Ann T. Roberts
Foundation, Inc.**