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THE ORDER IN BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTY IN ORDER

DOM. HANS VAN DER LAAN AND THE BOSSCHE SCHOOL

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DLA—dissertation/abstract

My paper discusses proportions, shapes, the relationship between natural and built spaces, the fundamental relationships identified during the observation of nature, the measuring of our physical environment and the structuring of the types of sizes and relationships so obtained and the trinity of experience, perception and knowledge.

The relevance of the theory of Hans van der Laan lies in the way of building on these fundamental ways of human perception, measurement and experiencing—which are based on fundamental human traits that exist still today, as our need for measuring, proportioning things is related to our seeing and our perception of the environment.

The aim of this paper is to unravel and understand the spaces created by Hans van der Laan and his followers and the practical application of the theory underlying the creation of those spaces. I used the examples given in this paper to provide a comprehensive picture of how the theory is implemented in practice—from the “basilica” style of the early years to the classical style of the Bossche School. I analysed the buildings to compare the similarities and the differences in the architectural styles of the master and the student and to describe their innovations in terms of space and form.

The complexity of the system of proportions based on plastic figures does not leave a lot of room for its widespread architectural application. Every size is interrelated in the system of proportions defined by Van der Laan. The individual units are the multiples of the basic module; still, each is part of the whole or the larger dimension. Similarly to musical proportions, his system has its lower limit and upper limit; it, however, has a series of proportions that spans from wall thickness to the entire building. All this creates a spatial unity that is in a mutual relationship with its parts.

Scale is an interesting part of this theory: How can a system of proportions be extended from the scale of the wall of the house to the scale of the town, where the same proportion applies from the smallest to the largest spatial systems of different scales. Unfortunately, the theory has not been put into practice; its more detailed elaboration would, however, be an interesting architectural and urban planning project.

My attempt in this paper is to show a distinctly specific way of space-shaping by describing the complex system of proportions based on observation, perception, experimentation and experience.

SUMMARY OF THESES

Van der Laan's strict theoretical development work manifested in an architectural style that shows the bare essence of form. Consequently, his works are, at first glance, excessively conceptual, rigid, strict and use a great deal of rationalism. Taking a closer look at it, however, we can understand the process of shape perfection, his expressed architectural objective. He really wanted to bring back the original hierarchy underlying the "life of forms", which hid under the layers of decorative art for centuries.

To accomplish his objectives, he developed a technique from the fundamental relationships between nature and architecture. He searched for rhythmic patterns in nature and in natural phenomena to later incorporate them into structures. He interpreted design and construction basically as the process of identifying and transforming forms derived from nature.

Thesis 1

"The architectural process is not making something from nothing, but remodeling things that already exist."¹ The relationship between the built environment and nature, the inner and outer space, played a key role in the architecture of Van der Laan and also meant a connection to the teachings of Benedictine architecture.

His interest in fundamental relationships made him view the creation of space as a fundamental human action. To him, architecture is the intermediary medium, the middle space that connects the sky and the ground. Vertical walls complement the horizontal ground and establish the first connection between humans and nature. It is, however, the space between two walls that clearly delineate the homogeneity of nature and creates architecture. Walls and the spaces between them are the essence of architectural form and mass; the accurate determination of their relationship is, therefore, necessary.

According to Van der Laan, human existence has three levels: experience, perception and knowledge. The basic methods humans use to measure and understand their environment connect to this. His theory is that humans instinctively measure their physical environment and use the types of size and connection so obtained to structure their understanding.

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¹ Ferlanga, Alberto - Verde, Paola: Dom. Hans van der Laan, Architectura & Natura, Amsterdam, 2001

Thesis 2

For van der Laan, the proportions which he called plastic figures did not have any mystic or sacred content, but were the objective results of fundamental human perception, the essence of space creation and structure. The result of the system of proportions he created is not ideal Platonic form but the application of sizes in practice, connecting human perception with the spaces and materials of architecture.

Between 1946 and 1953, the first period of the Bossche School, the main task was to restore what was destroyed during the Second World War, to erect new buildings in place of the destroyed sacral buildings. Almost all the buildings they built in this period are sacral in function, chapels and churches the shapes and spatial structures of which show a strong influence of early Christianity and antiquity. Outsiders regarded the “basilica” style buildings of the School merely as a pointless bringing back of the design language of antiquity and early Christianity.

The period after 1953 meant a real change; the school abandoned the way too traditional design language of the preceding period and created a much more unique architectural language. They distanced themselves from the “basilica” concept and designed inornate and clear buildings of simple design that did not leave any room even for the tiniest ornamentation or detail. The forms and spaces of these buildings were clearly determined by the system of proportions of plastic figures. The buildings erected during the second period were not only churches and monasteries, many profane buildings were also built. The rebuilding of the churches destroyed in WWII had been completed by 1960. Most of the designs prepared by the School at the time were residential buildings, small public buildings (schools, city halls) and for urban planning.

The Bossche School (founded in 1946 to restore what was destroyed in the Second World War) was an excellent opportunity for Hans van der Laan and his followers to perfect the system of proportions of this monk and architect and to test the theory in practice through the buildings.

Thesis 3

The existence of the Bossche School, the use, perfection, application in practice of the system of dimensions defined by Dom. Hans van der Laan and the buildings actually built clearly demonstrate that the theories of van der Laan manifest not only in the handful of buildings designed by him but also in many buildings created by the Bossche School.

In his designs, Jan de Jong strongly reduced the dominant image elements (arcades and galleries) of the “basilica” style of the Bossche School. The same applied for historical references, ornaments and arches (which were typical of the traditional basilica); these disappeared from his architecture for the sake of fundamentally expressing the theory developed in order to give as much strength to plastic figures as possible.

Among his sacral buildings, three really stand out: the H. Gerardus Majellakerk in Gemert (1959), the Kerk van de Heilige Kruisvinding in Odiliapeel (1959) and the St. Benedictuskerk in Rijswijk (1958). These buildings meant that pro-simplicity became the mainstream trend at the Bossche School. The key feature of the Rijswijk church is the practical demonstration of the statement that a church interior can be authentic even without columns. It minimised the architectonic space. The church interior looks like a public square. Its washed gravel pews meant something really new in the Netherlands. The underlying concept is the urban space. The individual elements, the ciborium and the small chapels, like small buildings, set the dimensions of space.

Thesis 4

Among the second generation of Bossche School students, Jan de Jong developed a much more distinct design language based on plastic figures.

His clear shapes and novel spaces gave a new kind of appearance to the Bossche School architecture.

Before the Second Vatican Council (convoked in 1962), these churches were the first hall churches in the Netherlands, and they played a key role in the renewal of the catholic liturgy.