Kees Kaan

# The Choice



*'I once asked myself how one creates architecture. Now I know it cannot be created'*

*In March 2008 Kees Kaan, of Claus and Kaan Architects, gave his inaugural lecture as Practice Professor of Architectural Design at Delft Technical University – the school from which he graduated in 1987. He explained to his audience that after his student years spent designing imaginary projects he most wanted to design in order to build, to make 'designs that were thicker than paper'. This was accomplished in 1987–97 in intensive daily co-operation with Felix Claus and then developed over the last decade in their offices in Amsterdam and Rotterdam with new partners. The following is an edited extract from his lecture where, after discussing practice, education, societal interest and the changed architectural market of the Netherlands, he turned to architectural vision, understanding and responsibility.*

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 on the one hand and advocates of the tried and tested, and therefore timeless, skills and qualities in architecture on the other. 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?

Architects often like to perceive themselves as boosters of innovation. This is a most inappropriate self-image. Since our profession is among the slowest developing possible, trendsetting or being ahead of social changes is a contradiction in terms. 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 slow, much slower than many fundamental societal changes and much slower than technological changes.

Time puts everything in its place. Jerzy Kosinski describes this beautifully in his novel *Being There* (1971), a story about Chauncey 'Chance' Gardiner, who spends his entire life in a walled garden, completely isolated from the surrounding world. There 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.*

In architecture there is an unbreakable bond between the material from which the building is 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. And so, as 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, the essential aspect of architecture. At 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. Contrary to what happens to society, the physical reality and



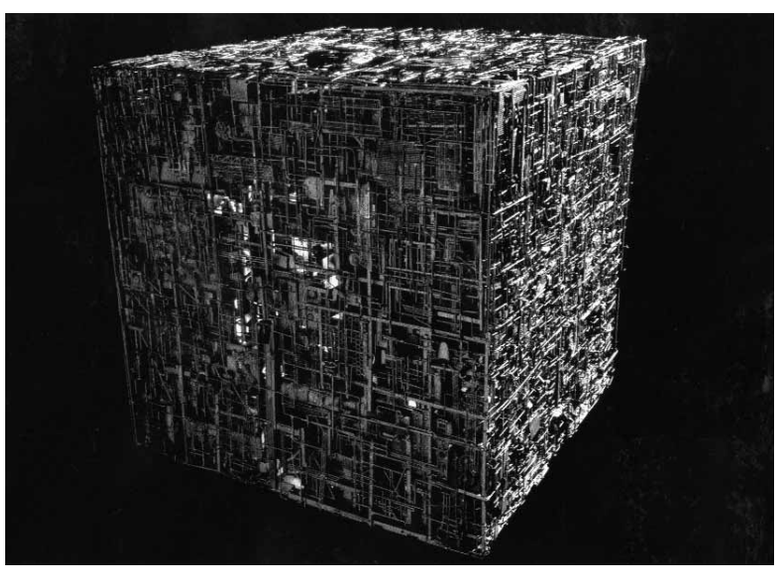
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508001073 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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.

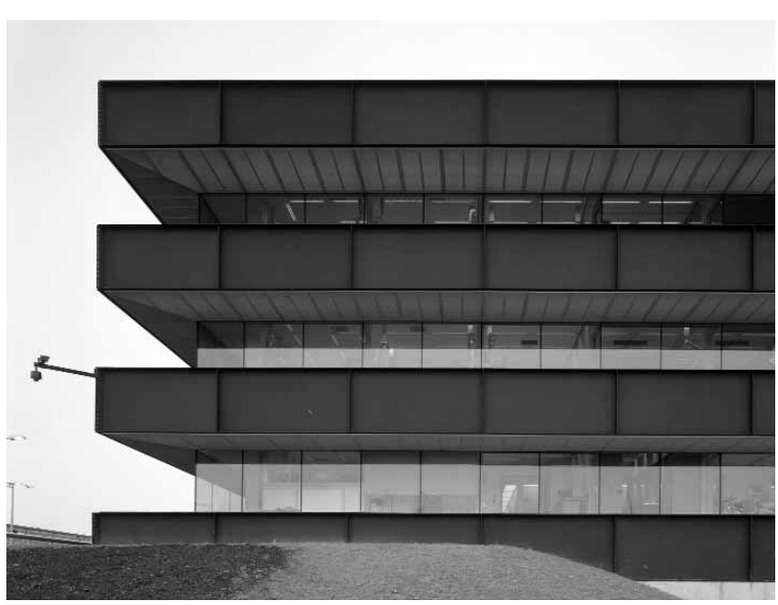
Useful here is the concept of physiognomy. When the physiognomy of a building is in balance, its appearance will correspond to the character, function and essence of the building. The beauty of this concept is that it allows us to look differently at buildings and thus assess them differently. Physiognomy is not about a certain style or aesthetic but about 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 be consistent in following the conceptual and programmatic path. The architectural design is rid of all elements that do not contribute to the conceptual essence of the project, the fundamental idea behind it. What remains is the most direct representation of that idea in a more intense form.

This necessarily requires absolute mastery over construction, materialisation and detailing, over understanding 'the building process' itself. This knowledge is invaluable. Architectural design is not a graphic activity but is 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 of 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 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



**A correspondence between appearance and character: the Borg Cube spaceship from *Star Trek: First Contact* dir. Jonathan Frakes (Paramount Pictures, 1996)**

*'A strong presence of lasting value…beauty in the conventional sense is irrelevant'*



**Architectural design is not a graphic activity: Claus and Kaan Architects, Netherlands Forensic Institute, Ypenburg, 2005**



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508001073 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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.

In relation to this I should like to give some thought to perhaps the most used one-liner in architecture: 'form follows function'. Its author, Louis 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 1896 essay 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered' (Robert Twombly ed., *Sullivan: the Public Papers*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1988):

> *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 phrase is later estranged from its original meaning and becomes the slogan of Functionalism. But 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 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, for instance here in the 'Kindergarten Chats' of 1901–02, a series of briefly described encounters with an imaginary young student (later collected under the same title by Dover Publications, New York, NY 1980):

> *THE MASTER: I am endeavouring to impress upon you the simple truth – immeasurable power 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.*

What to me is very noticeable and irresistible is that he perceives emotion as supporting the ratio



**Claus and Kaan Architects, The Royal Netherlands Embassy, Maputo, Mozambique, 2004. Architecture emerges from building, from approaching the obstinacy of materials, people, and time correctly ...**

## *'to make the most of opportunities and to make choices without prejudice'*

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 a design from their own interpretation of the essence of the building to be designed. He himself was searching for an authentic American architectural style. His zenith as an active architect came at a time of such fundamental social changes that architecture had to change dramatically as well: the rapid rebuilding of Chicago could no longer be captured in existing orders but required new types of building.

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, to make the most of opportunities and to make choices without prejudice, based on concrete facts that form the foundation of a project. Attempts to express change in architecture are therefore unnecessary. Architects are part of the times they live in and thus buildings automatically reflect the spirit of the age.

Mies wrote in his 1924 essay 'Baukunst und Zeitwille!' (Architecture and the Will of Time; in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1991):

> *Architecture is always the spatial realisation of the will of time, nothing else. As long as this truth is not wholeheartedly 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.*

To know this saves a lot of time that can be used to practise our business properly.




**... a process celebrated in a book by the architects, its title taken from an essay on the building by Dikkie Scipio**



https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508001073 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

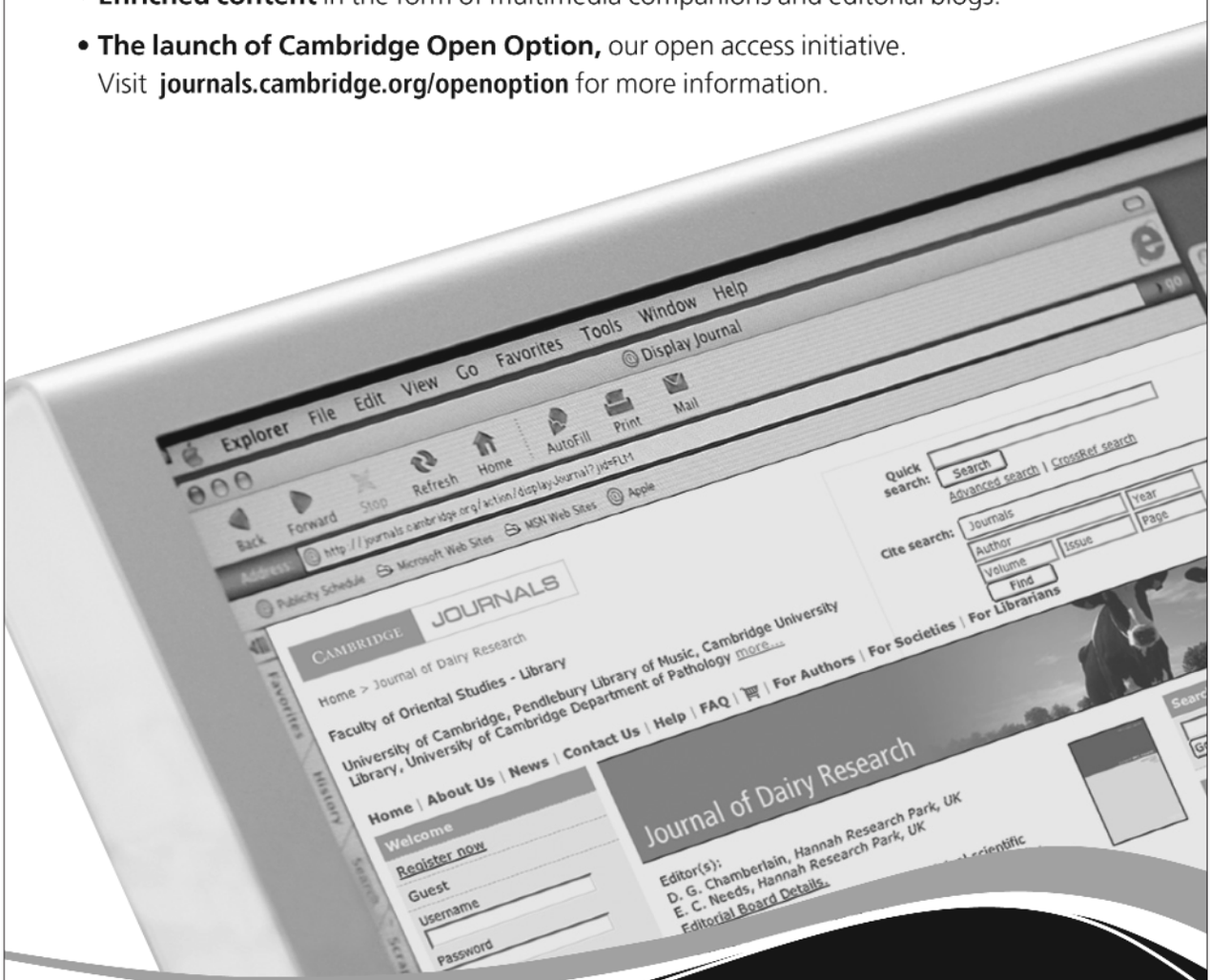
# journals.cambridge.org

## Advancing research. Increasing access.

Informed by detailed consultation with the library and research communities, we are constantly developing our industry-leading online journals platform.

Some recent advances include:

- **Refreshed site design,** facilitating rapid access to the most relevant content.
- **New advanced search interface** and a more detailed, fielded quick search function.
- **Enriched content** in the form of multimedia companions and editorial blogs.
- **The launch of Cambridge Open Option,** our open access initiative. Visit **journals.cambridge.org/openoption** for more information.




journals.cambridge.org CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508001073 Published online by Cambridge University Press