

Winy Maas

of Dutch architects MVRDV met up with

Joep van Lieshout

to talk about the artist's SlaveCity project, a perverse parallel society. Here they discuss imaginary architecture, human recycling and the imminent revolution

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PORTRAIT THIJS WOLZAK

WM What to do with this recent credit crisis, Joep? You're in a way a real estate operator – a specialist!

JVL The question is: how can the Western world be so stupid? A few years ago when I saw all those advertisements for loans I was thinking: who is going to pay for this? Who is taking the risk and why? It's one of the big blind spots of our society – we just stumble into the net utopia. [Laughs.] It's called SlaveCity.

WM Is that what SlaveCity is about? Is it a real utopia?

JVL Yes, it's a kind of utopia. It's also a vision of the future. You could call it a parallel world into which you can project ideas. It's a place where you can design every building, every system. SlaveCity is the 21st-century concentration camp only designed to make profit. I mean, if you were to really build my ideas for this city, they would be very profitable.

WM Does the impossibility of it mean that when everything's designed you're going to stop?

JVL I don't think that many of the structures that I have designed for SlaveCity could ever be built, or if they could you would need a budget of billions.

WM I like the idea of finding the impossible and constructing it in one's head. It's utopian in the purest sense. How is your architecture career by the way? I sense you would like to build.

JVL I would. I'm a bit hesitant because architecture is a very slow process; I like action. For me the creative process is the first five minutes, followed by five years of concessions.

WM You play with it. It sharpens the profession. So please don't stop. You'll see what happens. As long as you're not dependent on the building process it's easier to behave like this.

JVL I would say the world deserves some SlaveCity buildings. [Laughs]

WM Yes, definitely! Shall I make some of them? Joep, you're well known for your anarchism. But what does anarchy look like? In the Sixties there were a lot of designs that were anarchistic, but you can't directly copy them.

JVL At that time there were no possibilities for large constructions and systems because the building world was still very manual. Nowadays it is the other way round: we can only build with prefabricated systems and it's impossible to find good craftspeople.

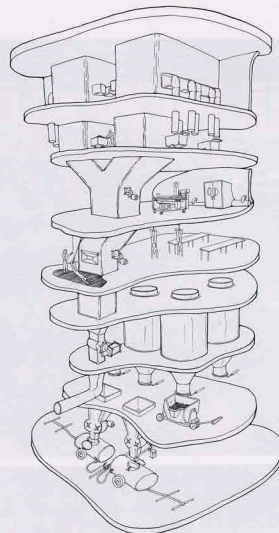
WM Hey, you didn't answer my question! Anarchy? OK, your works are about some kind of craftsmanship or they have a kind of limited technological desire; they are not about the latest tension cables. You sift out the materials in which you are a master, and that's it. It's not high-tech, what you do.

JVL No, it's not high-tech, but it's very much based on trying to find clever ways to build something. High-tech, to me, is ornamentation. It gives an impression of technology but at the end it's a decoration because you don't need a very complicated structure to build something. So high-tech is kitsch, I think.

WM But how do you start? A kilometre-high tower needs some high-tech because of wind.

JVL Maybe we should take a look at the book.

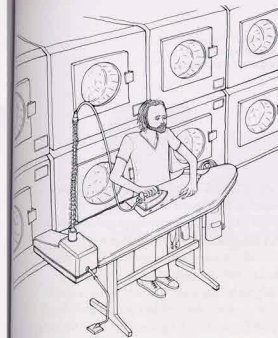
Right: The Selector, for processing the slaves.
Bottom: The urban plan of SlaveCity, which is a 50sq km franchiseable unit.



You're not aware of all the high-tech solutions that I propose? [Laughs]

WM [Laughs] Where are they?

JVL Well, the first chapter of the book is about brothels. Slaves in the city are not paid for their work, but instead are "paid" with privileges such as a visit to a brothel. The design for the lower slaves looks like kind of rustic Plattenbau, the socialist concrete flats built in East Germany. The luxury brothel for males, in the shape of a womb, is for good slaves – they can choose from different types of girls and pleasures. For the women slaves there is also a luxury brothel. It's very much about survival. The men enter at the tail; they have to struggle and fight their way to the front. The cleverest, meanest or strongest guys arrive in the arena where the women



are cheering. The final battle takes place and then the women take the survivor into the cubicles to have sex.

WM This is not the first time that you have used body parts and turned them into a building, like Bar Rectum, and now you see this kind of thing really happening. We have a new museum here in the Netherlands in Leiden where you can travel into the human body. Are you happy that your ideas have been taken over?

JVL I don't feel threatened, because it is totally different from what I do. For me, there is always an analogy in my work. For example there is an analogy with nature where only the strongest and quickest sperm is able to fertilise. It's all about survival. That is why I choose the sperm shape for the brothel for women.

WM That's very formal! Shouldn't we aim for "real" survival architecture?

JVL This building is a really important part of SlaveCity: the Powerplant. All energy in SlaveCity is green. The energy needs of the city are covered by using biogas, solar power, wind energy and bio-diesel. Everything is being recycled, from faeces to slaves. All "waste" is grinded and pumped to the biogasdigester, where biogas is produced by bacteria. The biogas is burned to generate electricity. No waste products are produced, and SlaveCity does not squander the world's limited resources. The Powerplant has some references to industrial architecture from the early 1920s. So like a painter would choose the colour, I use the architecture of a certain time, or a certain idea.

WM But why do you need a cliché of the industrial revolution or of modernist buildings?

JVL Because I think the architectural design of this era is very beautiful. It reflects hope for modernity. Even the totalitarian systems for the 1930s and 1940s liked modernist design for their industrial facilities.

Left: A slave doing laundry.
Below: The museum, or Museogestor, which takes the form of a digestive system.

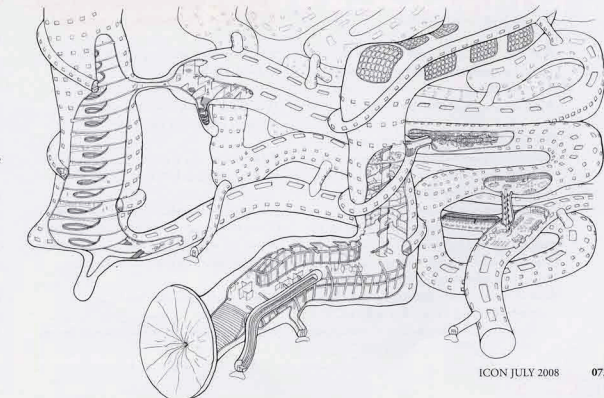
WM I am critical of that: new engineering needs and deserves its own research and expression. Comic book writers who tackle the future, for example the Belgian guys Peeters and Schuyten, always use architecture from the 1900s or 1920s, like art nouveau. I don't understand why that is. Future societies can have their own engineering and a contemporary way of thinking that allows for solving problems, so in a way we should try to grasp what solving problems in the future will be. I hope that you can also put your efforts into saying what a new factory will be, with another kind of aesthetics that has nothing to do with the 1920s anymore.

JVL Yes, I agree. I chose this retro design style for the Powerplant. But if you look at the layout you will see a mixture of typologies. How the object looks depends on my mood. For example, I thought the hospital should be like a tree with fruits for the different departments.

WM And what about the CallCenter? What does that do?

JVL The main source of income in SlaveCity is telemarketing, computer programming, the kind of work people are willing to pay for. The CallCenter is the place where the slaves live and work. I decided to make it vertical but without elevators. There are spiral ramps on each side to allow the slaves to go out to work the land and the food carts to go in.

WM Why would you need to make a vertical CallCenter, not a flat one?



JVL For reasons of efficiency. The building is like a tool to maximise the production of the slaves. It's a pity to use all the surface for buildings instead of for agriculture. I created a density of two persons per square metre, and the building is nine floors high. They work seven hours in the CallCenter, seven hours on the land or in services to keep SlaveCity running, they sleep for seven hours and have three hours for relaxation. If the slave is not profitable enough any more, he gets recycled. In the centre of the building are showers and toilets, which are connected to the biogas digester. The whole building is made of scaffolding.

WM Why?

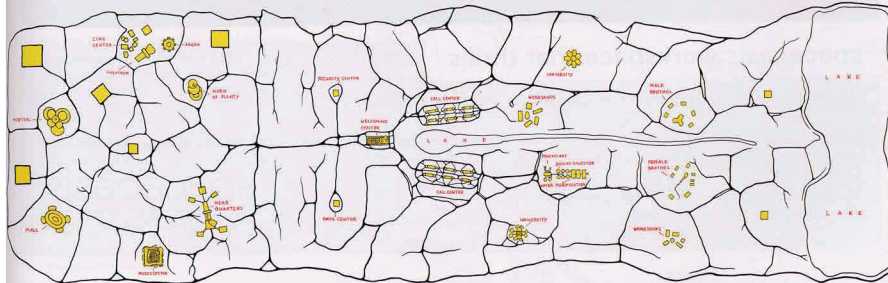
JVL Because I like modularity, the flexibility and the simplicity of it. I like the fact that you could do it tomorrow. A small unit for one hundred slaves can be built in one week for a hundred thousand euros.

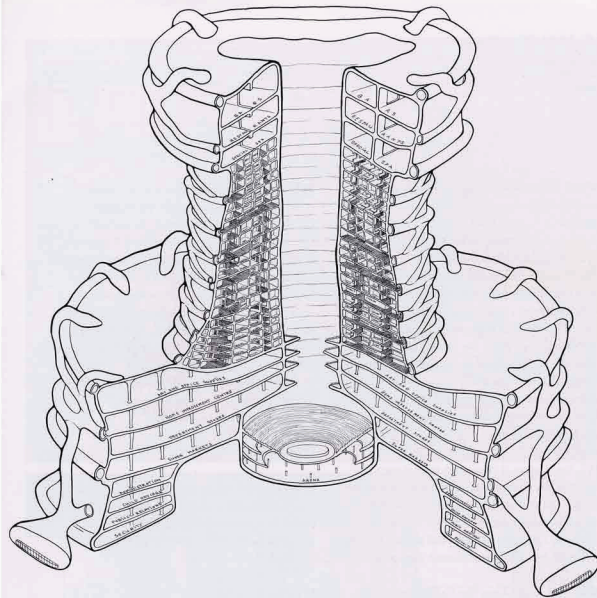
WM It's like a light city.

JVL It's a very light city. The problem is to get the licences to do it. You're not allowed to kill people yet in the Netherlands if they're not functioning very well. [Laughs]

WM Is there a museum in SlaveCity?

JVL There is an art museum, the Museogestor. Art is very much like consumption, so it looks like a human digestive system. The museum has become a labyrinth. It's very difficult to get out again once you're in. ✂





Left: The Mall. The veins around the organ-shaped building are the escalators

WM The Louvre used to be like that. There are stories about people spending the night there.

JVL Well, I'm interested in the building as the perfect machine, like the welcoming centre, where people are automatically selected and processed for their suitability as slaves. I see parallels in how companies are organised.

WM I see these drawings, I like them, I want to copy them: I want to make them into buildings. Would you get angry?

JVL You want to copy them?

WM That will happen with this kind of book if you don't make the buildings yourself. It happened with the mobile homes you did. What do you think about people copying you?

JVL In The Manual, a catalogue made in 1997, I gave a complete description of how to make my work and I thought it was good because a lot of people couldn't afford my work but they could do it themselves. I really liked that. If it were companies copying me then of course I wouldn't like it. In this case I'm much more interested to be ahead of the avant-garde. Once I have done something it's history to me and I want to continue with discovering new things.

Another building I really like in SlaveCity is the shopping mall, the palace of consumption.

It's the biggest shopping mall in the world. It has an organic-baroque form.

WM Sorry to put this question again but you said you like 1920s factories, and now we see here an organic-shaped shopping mall. I just want to know why you selected this shape in this case? You're very much into organic designs.

JVL Well, I wanted to have it the shape of something alive, maybe because when you go in a shopping mall you are being eaten – it's about consumption and being consumed. The veins, the lifeline of the organ, are the escalators.

WM The urban plan – so this is what the city looks like. Is it endless?

JVL No, there is a limit. There is a street around it that is also the border.

WM Because you want to see it as an enclave. How important is it that it's an island?

JVL The business plan of SlaveCity is based on 60 square kilometres of land. It should be a unit so you can reproduce it, franchise it. SlaveCity is not unique, it's a franchisable concept.

WM So what is the next step?

JVL Revolution. I think the next step for our

society is some kind of apocalypse, most likely revolution. Our world cannot support the amount of people and consumption nowadays. Every piece of land will be farmed with genetically manipulated crops and all the raw materials will be used, and when something small goes wrong – say, a plant disease – you'll get the domino effect. When people get hungry they will fight; they'll fight to feed their families.

WM What will be the nature of that revolution? Will everything be plundered?

JVL Yes. I think human society will reorganise in a much more local economy. So if you want to have a piece of furniture you go to the local furniture maker or cut the tree in your garden and make a table out of it.

WM Is your new work encourage revolution?

JVL I'd say it aims to prevent a revolution. I mean I'm an artist, happily, not a politician. But I would like to make works about revolution.

WM A lot of our current design world is partly about that. The green dream, for instance, there's a lot of energy coming from that and it feeds new economies and new designs and the whole architectural world has to work with it. One can call that a revolution.

JVL So what do you think about the future? Let's say during your lifetime, the next 50 years. What will be the big thing to happen?

WM In general, the way things are now is what we translate into the future. That's one observation. But I did a project recently where I was allowed to visualise the urban effects of sky cars [Skycar City: A Pre-emptive History, with the University of Wisconsin and Milwaukee, 2007]. Skycar City says something about the frustration we have about mobility in urban planning. It is a liberation from those problems: the jams, the un-safety, the noise. So it acts as a mirror for our society as it formulates an escape.

JVL I like the idea of an escape, but to me it also has a sense of realism. Our world is on the verge of very big changes, bigger than ever before, and these changes will go faster than society can cope with. ↑

Boom Boom! an exhibition of work by Atelier Van Lieshout will be at London's Albion gallery from 11 July to 31 August