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A new approach to the Dutch Polish Trade Award

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An exposé about Polish football

Huub Droogh
Continuing the tradition of Dutch architects in Poland

Huub Droogh

– building on Polish tradition

When RDH aspired to expand abroad, unlike many of their fellow architects and urban planners, they didn't choose to go to China with its large scale building programs. Instead, they opened an office in Poznan. "I am convinced that you can only succeed abroad if there is a certain click with the country", says Droogh.



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When Huub Droogh joined a trade-mission to Poland in the summer of 2005, he planned this to be a quiet trip that he could use to reflect on the

future of RDH architects urban planners. Around this time, the company had already checked out and decided that it shouldn't set up shop in Asia, but closer to home. Poland seemed to be a good step. "If you want to make a lasting bond between two parties there need to be more than just the money. Authenticity, in which we are specialised, is not the most requested quality to architects in China."

During the trade-mission, Droogh unexpectedly received his first assignment in Poland. He used

this as a pilot-project and a test to find out if Poland would be suitable. "If you want to be active in CEE as an architect, you obviously end up in Poland. Quite soon I noticed that urban planning and architecture in Poland has many similarities with Western Europe."

For a company that is active less than a year on the Polish market you are quite successful.

"We are indeed going through an exciting period. We offer consulting and advice concerning strategic

planning for local governments and there is a huge demand for that. In the area of Warsaw, urban planning is running completely out of control. Local politicians are realising the need to do something about this."

When you look around Poland, you see that there is a lot of work to do for urban planners like you.

"That is not applying for the whole of Poland, but certainly in the urban areas there are many difficulties. Those urban areas' are expanding rapidly and this results in complete chaos. This is caused by the fact that the planning mechanisms of the local governments aren't prepared for the speed of

the developments and the power of the private parties on the market. Therefore, local governments need extra support and additional instruments to support this situation. And this is where we can offer our help."

Are the Poles open for your advice. After all, you are a foreigner and your ideas must sound quite revolutionary to them?

"I feel that the Poles are very concerned about the topics that we bring up. When I had a conference with several mayors from cities in the area of Poznan, within ten minutes, I had a click with the audience and I understood that they had the same concerns as I do. I think that in Poland there is a demand to guide social development. I am absolutely not presenting myself here as someone who knows all about Poland, but what I see is that the Poles want to get the grip back on topics like identity. What I see is that Poland is becoming capitalistic in a very very rapid way. I also see that the first generation is kind of falling victim to this. The people who are now over 50 years of age have no chance anymore in adjusting to this process. The younger generation is too busy with planning and setting up their lives. Therefore we are now searching for new solutions and creating new concepts of modern family buildings. By initiating projects like this, the government can regain grip on the social and urban developments' in Poland."

But you are just a small company in Poland. Can you really make a difference in this big process?

"Don't forget it is not us that will do the regulations, but the market itself. You already hear people mentioning the word 'quality'. When you look around for instance in a city like Piaseczno, people have chosen to live there, because it is cheaper than in Warsaw. You can see that all around you. It is reflected in the urban planning and the architecture. The quality of the houses and apartments is very low and they are built very close to each other. There will come a moment that the

customer is able to make more choices and quality will make the distinction."

So after the cheap and low quality buildings, we will now see developers making quality apartments?

"That is where it will go. Quality and self-regulation of the market are the key elements in which I truly believe. And the government has to develop instruments to bring those two together. This might take another ten years, but in the end, when the client has a choice, he will choose for the best possible option. This is a logical development. Ten or fifteen years ago, we had the developers that built

houses like boxes. But since then, we have seen the economy developing into a different phase. Companies that are establishing themselves in Poland are viewing their own real estate in a different way. They ask themselves, what their buildings will be worth in five years from now. Companies like these are another type of entrepreneurs than the early ones that wanted to make a quick buck and leave Poland for another country like the Ukraine. For those these new companies also the location is important and the companies by which they are surrounded. The best place for them is there where there are several other sustainable companies located. And for this, it comes down to good planning by the local government. So this is where I think urban development will go in Poland in the near future."

When talking about architecture in Poland it is not a big step to a well-known Dutch architecture in Poland, Tilman van Gameren (1632 – 1706). Van Gameren was an architect and an urban planner who went to Poland in the 17th century. He was a student of Jacob van Kampen, the architect of the Palace at de Dam in Amsterdam and Van Gameren designed many palaces, monasteries, and churches regarded as pearls of Polish Baroque architecture. It was only quite recently that Droogh discovered the work of Van Gameren. "I stumbled upon his work when we were preparing a project for the city of Gora Kalwaria. There are rumours that he has drew-up the urban planning for the city. Recently I found an article about him that was titled 'Pole by choice, Dutchman by birth'. That was when I first started to compare myself with him. I think there are many similarities between us and I feel like I am following in his footsteps.

I don't want to call myself a Pole by choice and I still know little about him, but I find it fascinating to find a Dutchman that has done so many things here in Poland."

Van Gameren was using his Dutch identity and this was reflected in his work here in Poland. For instance, he was using the famous Delfts Blauw. Do you like that in his work?

"It is currently very popular to implement many elements of foreign cultures in the designs. That is something of the current time. The whole world is connected and architects pick out bits and peaces of other cultures and in this way try to make a unique design. I try to resist against this mode. I find it important to put the unicity of a place in front. Many architects roll out their concept on a location. I see many architects that are working like that, but that is absolutely not what we want to do. I see in the work of Van Gameren that he uses some Dutch elements but he also puts the unicity of the surrounding areas in front and I like that."

When you look at the Polish cultural heritage. There is so much, it is almost impossible to preserve all of it.

"What you see is that the Poles are very aware of their heritage and they are very connected with it. But sometimes they themselves even have no

idea how much of it is still there. I think that it is very important for the Poles to maintain this. Our bureau is also active in this field. We are trying to find ways to develop monuments for the development of a city. And

you can do this in a very modern way. You can for instance add new elements to an old building and by doing that, this building can become the motor of the redevelopment of a part of a city."

This all sounds very valid and valuable, but under the current difficult times of economical problems, it will be hard to find bystanders for this way of working.

"My opinion is that the market always is right. And what you see is that at a certain moment the consumer doesn't accept it anymore, regarding a lower quality. If you look at the quality of the shopping centres in Poland. We all know the example of Stary Browar in Poznań and I think that the modern demanding customer won't accept anything with a less quality anymore. A similar process will happen in the housing industry. People already can make choices. The companies that have the power to stay in the market under the current downturn, they have to listen to their customers and focus on quality. They cannot only think about the bricks anymore, they have to think about the people that are living in that too."