

There is no lack of even contradictory adjectives for describing young people - fresh, creative, innovative, daring, rebellious or conservative, insecure, shy and conformist - because they are all these things at the same time. But this does not mean nothing is expected of young people, while we wait for them to grow up, this is just a psychological or, if you like, anthropological remark. Being young is a matter of age not a question of belonging to a social group, as marketing would have us believe. If anything young people might form a cultural group with their own way of speaking, seeing things and thinking, although this group is as fragile and unstable as young people's personalities.

These remarks immediately come to mind when faced with projects for young people. The latest, chronologically speaking, is the extremely interesting "Wonderland 2004-2006" project. This is an unusual enterprise designed to move around various European countries, in each of which eleven young architects will be chosen to have their works displayed in loco. Starting in June 2004, the exhibition opened in Bratislava, Prague, Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris, and has since moved on to Venice (at the Salt Warehouses), where it will run from 19th September-2nd October under the name of "Urban Regeneration".

The idea comes from way back, when an exhibition of young architects from Carinthia suggested the possibility of developing a more carefully organised and continuous way of assessing the latest trends in modern-day architecture (architecture in the period of so-called "second modernity" in which we are living). New projects might be observed along more coherent lines, insisting less on the quality and style of the projects and more on the age of their designers, something which, bearing in mind what we pointed out at the beginning, might provide a unifying thread for the entire enterprise.

The project has no official backing and serves no definite cultural purpose of either a critical or historical nature. It works on the assumption that architecture is a "practice" or, in other words, a design operation immersed in a socio-economic system it must bear in mind and work around. Other than this very vague label, "Wonderland" has no real theoretical grounding or stylistic tendency. It just has its own sort of slogan - "Anything that can be imagined can be achieved" - which might call to mind the 1968 period, if it were not for the fact that the organisers are more interested in architectural practice than its ideological underpinnings. Indeed, the organisers have pointed out that the choice of the eleven pre-selected firms "is not based on any definite guidelines", just the intrinsic quality of the projects themselves.

This might make the project seem rather vague and imprecise, aimed at mapping out the state of the art and, at most, acting as a go-between between the latest generation of architects and their prospective clients, notably in industry. This may well be true, and all those interested in taking part (young architects) or discovering new talents (potential clients) ought to bear this in mind. But the critic and historian cannot settle for this, forced as they are to incorporate "Wonderland" - however pragmatic it might be - in an overall vision of things, viz. into a much broader and less definite spatio-temporal setting than immediate reality.

In fact, one of our first reactions when faced with the results of "Wonderland" or other similar enterprises is to put on our "weatherman" kit and climb up the tallest tower ready to ask "What will architecture be like tomorrow?" Of course this is not a very relevant question, and not because it sounds rather presumptuous, but because the historian and critic do not look out of some sort of watchtower or ivory tower. History and criticism are also a "practice", in the sense that they are deeply entrenched in the workings of

reality, and this is in itself enough to bring them in line with contemporary architectural design. The question they do need to ask themselves - and ask in general - is the meaning of architectural practice, where it is heading, and whether or not it fits in with developments in a society in which architecture plays an active part that is not just confined to the sectors of industry and patronage.

In this light, examining the eleven projects selected for the Venice exhibition (but we might extend our views to cover all those emerging from previous editions of "Wonderland") confirm a certain idea of "mannerism" we have already referred to in the past (l'Arca 195, September 2004). But what exactly are we talking about? Continuity is actually the most outstanding feature of the projects designed by young architects. The past - first and foremost modernity, needless to say - is neither rejected nor critically taken up and reinterpreted in light of totally new needs and demands. On the contrary, it is still a design archetype, theoretical model, stylistic referent or, in the best of cases, something to be worked with. Surveying all these projects, we cannot help noting the technical-aesthetic quality of the designs, deep knowledge of what has gone before, and the dogged determination with which they attempt to move beyond the past. But the past is inevitably nailed to innovation, soaked into it, and evoked all along the way. The distance from which the historian and critic must try and get a reasonable grasp of any work turns into a space resounding with familiar voices: utopian dreaming, science fiction, pop culture, organicism, rationalism, high-tech, playfulness and lyricism, expressionism, scorn for the avant-gardes, and naturalism, all echo around in polyphonic fashion, as just one single, stable and coherent image emerges (however fragmentary it might be): the 20th century and modernity.

This explains why "Wonderland's" conceptual scheme deliberately refers to "second modernity", as if taking for granted a certain continuity, which is more practice than theory. Despite the shift in time, there is a very definite ordered sequence of causes and effects in which we can hear a faint echo of an old saying, that "natura non facit saltus", which has always be felt right through history and society, and against which the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century literally waged war. That the "first" period of modernity appeared at the start of last century with the watchword of breaking with the past and that the "second" period - if we are willing to admit that it has two halves like a film - is trying to establish continuity, might be something worth thinking about. A historian would inevitably point to the cyclic nature of events (and hardly surprisingly the end of the 20th century was enlivened by heated debate between neo-classicists and neo-romantics), while a critic would be forced to deal with all the variables and invariants, citations and absences, passionate approvals and contemptuous rejections.

But apart from all this, we have the works themselves, with their own closed identity as subjects in their own right, calling for a careful assessment and precise analysis of their design premises, purposes, aesthetic pretensions and technical ends. It is not easy to find answers to these legitimate questions, since the exhibition expects those taking part to design not a carefully targeted and fully developed project, but a set of well-defined guidelines of a purely exemplary nature. "Wonderland" is quite clear in this respect, in that it claims to be "a dynamic process, whose aim is to create a network". In the end, it can be seen that the real novelty lies in the method or, in other words, in the appeal to computer technology that represents the real turning-point of the age in which we live, thanks to which it is, so to speak, "second" to none, and with which the latest generation (and the generation before that) of masters is getting actively to grips, so that its successors can take advantage of the research and experimentation it has carried out.

**Behind the Screens
Lisse,
Netherlands**

Credits
Project:
 LEGU (Lehner en
 Gunther Architekten,
 www.legu.nl)
Collaborator:
 L. van den Burg



Questo progetto mette in discussione l'immagine tipica delle fattorie per la coltivazione dei tulipani come richiesto da uno specifico concorso ispirato dal timore di perdere questa immagine importante del tradizionale paesaggio olandese. Ormai, le campagne non sono più caratterizzate dalle fattorie tradizionali, ma la coltura dei tulipani ha adottato sistemi moderni e industrializzati. Il progetto "dietro gli schermi" promuove il dibattito circa la dipendenza da alcuni elementi, detestati ma necessari, della coltura industrializzata dei tulipani. Degli schermi paravento con stampate immagini tradizionali attraversano la regione per un anno. Ogni mese, viene messo in evidenza un aspetto della realtà legata alla coltura dei tulipani.



LEGU's design criticizes the image of typical bulb barns as invoked for a competition imbued by a fear of loss of the traditional landscape in the Dutch bulb-growing region. Clearly, the region is not characterized by the traditional bulb barn any longer, but by bulb culture, a modern, profitable form of agribusiness. "Behind the screens" prompts discussion about the dependence on detested but necessary elements of industrial bulb culture. Windscreens with printed-on images travel the region for one year. Every month, one aspect of the bulb-growing reality is moved to focus.

