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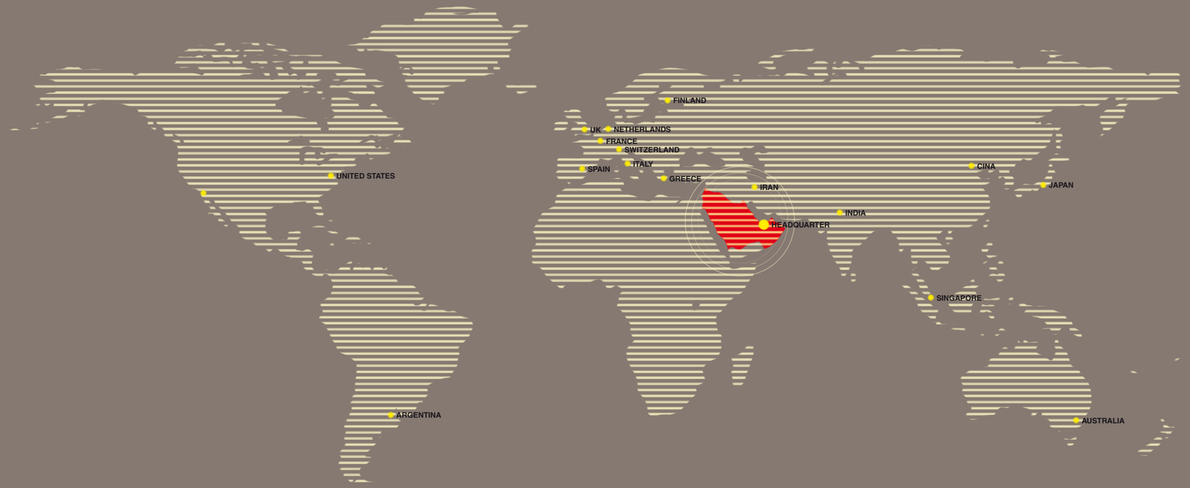

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nio-plasticism

NIO architecten

Work
The Amazing Whale Jaw
Bus Station in Hoofddorp

Date
2003

Location
Voorplein Spaarne Ziekenhuis
Hoofddorp, Netherlands

Client
Schiphol Project Consult

Project Architect
Maurice Nio

Project Team
Henk Bultstra, Mirjam Galjé, Hans Larsen, Maurice Nio, Jaakko van 't Spijker

Total area
338 m² in 1 storey

Image credits
Courtesy of Radek Brunecky

What do the main character in the film "Matrix" and a futuristic piece of architecture that looks like an "amazing whale jaw" have in common? The character referred to as "The One" in the Wachowski brothers' movie is named Neo; similarly, the name of the Dutch architect who created the largest single-block structure in the world made entirely out of synthetic material is NIO.
Born in 1959, Maurice Nio obtained his degree by creating a villa for Michael Jackson and has the strange habit of giving his projects nicknames. He was the founder of the Nox office in the 90's, famous for its brave experimentations with computer graphics. Today, as owner of the NIO architecten office, he fully embodies the contemporary ideal of the heteronymous architect, is interested in writing books, producing videos, writing articles about architecture, cinema, television, photography and dance. His favourite stomping grounds for his works are residual spaces. His dream is to "infect the soft with the hard, the extreme with the crystalline, the virtual with the real, intelligence with stupidity".
"The Amazing Whale Jaw" – the nickname Nio gave to the bus station in Hoofddorp – was finished in 2004, and remains unequalled to this day in terms of size (50 x 10 x 5 metres) and cost (one million Euro). The structure coincides with its form. The interior is made of polystyrene blocks modelled by a computer-controlled device. The exterior is formed of a layer of polyester that unifies the form and protects it against the elements.
The "whale jaw" puts into practice the definitive separation between production techniques and local reality. It is the greatest sign of globalisation in architecture: the same materials, the same techniques in different and distant locations, similar to the International Style. "Like the white face of a geisha," writes Nio, "every opinion and image can be projected onto the building and it has no answers of its own".
Gianbattista Vico spoke of cyclical repetition in historical events. The plastic revolution, characteristic of the new millennium, seems to be following that of the concrete revolution that characterised the beginning of the previous century. The Modern Movement discovered and examined in depth almost all of the potential of reinforced concrete, creating buildings that were extraordinary architectural ideas. At the same time, these works were often functionally inadequate and technically imprecise. This was followed by a more mature, reflective phase. History now seems to be repeating itself. There are still very few plastic buildings but they remain extraordinary for their "showpiece" value and enormous potential. Another common characteristic is variation in scale. In the Modern Movement, experimentation began on a small scale, at a design level, only later evolving into the realm of architecture. Gerrit Rietveld's neoplastic chair was transformed into the architecture of the Schröder House.
Hoofddorp's whale is a watershed in architecture, a pragmatic work whose primary conquest is that of overcoming the dimensional taboos of plastic architecture. While imagining the whole as a sum of the prefabricated blocks assembled on a building site, Nio created an object with indefinable form. His explicit reference is to Oscar Niemeyer's sinuous forms. The implicit reference is to the construction techniques used by Le Corbusier in the Philips Pavilion and, from a formal point of view, to the other plastic works by the same author (Firminy and Ronchamp).
Nio-plastic architecture has no definitive prospect and is ambiguous. "Ambiguity" is one of the more meaningful definitions in this Dutch architect's work. Its form is fluid and, as such, it adapts to society's

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needs. Plastic is the unifying material in the Amazing Whale Jaw, plastic is its form. While experimenting with “blob” forms in the Nox group, Maurice Nio never imagined that technical progress would have allowed him to transform those images into reality: “I never had the idea then that I could make a building as The Amazing Whale Jaw at that time”. As so often is the case, the success of a project begins with its level of difficulty. The project’s budget impeded the use of traditional techniques and for this reason plastic was seen as an ideal and economical alternative. As the Italian designer Bruno Munari wrote, “one aspect of fantasy is a change in the materials”. Nio’s plastic creations lead us to think of the architectural evolution of Anish Kapoor’s sculptures. The boundary between sculpture and architecture disappears in a society defined by the philosopher Zigmunt Bauman as “liquid modernity”. In such a context, the utility of the objects surrounding us is relative: form responds to an induced function. All of the contemporary creations that refer to the paradigmatic works in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao fall into this category.

The evolution of techniques for working with polymers over the past decade has opened up previously unimaginable scenarios. Computer controlled devices allow for the material transposition of any form into three-dimensional Cartesian form. Plastic is the chosen material for “mass customisation”, one of the most interesting results achieved by contemporary manufacturing. It draws together the efficiency and economy of industrial production with the needs of a client. IKEA furniture, blogs that can be personalized online and custom-fit NIKE shoes are all examples of how the opportunity to personalise something crosses all elements of society. The last Venice Biennale saw Greg Lynn’s work being prized as he recycled used plastic toys and transformed them into very interesting pieces of furniture. Lynn is also responsible for “Blobwall”, a project that represents the first archetype for plastic architecture.

So what does the future hold? “There is hardly any knowledge of its structural capacities in the field of architecture. We know how to use it for boats and airplanes, but for architecture...” says Nio. One of the most promising techniques, referred to as “Overbraiding”, allows for the creation of particularly complex forms and producing objects that are simultaneously form and structure”. The traditional image of children building houses out of plastic LEGO blocks could very soon become a reality in which real houses are built using plastic bricks.

Matteo Belfiore

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