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S333'S LARGEST PROJECT TO DATE IS A RECENTLY COMPLETED MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTHERN CITY OF GRONINGEN. IT IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THE FIRM'S SKILFUL INTEGRATION OF ARCHITECTURE, URBANISM AND LANDSCAPE.

NG TION

BASED IN AMSTERDAM, ARCHITECTURAL FIRM S333 IS BUILDING A REPUTATION ON LARGE-SCALE PROJECTS WHOSE DIVERSITY OF RANGE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES.

BY JAMES CULHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN BITTER

Arriving at the studio of emerging architecture firm S333 Architecture + Urbanism, on the outer edges of central Amsterdam, I'm met on the sidewalk by Burton Hamfelt, one of the firm's four partners. Now housed in the former premises of a car dealership, S333 spent its first six years without a fixed address and toiled 10 years trying to realize its first built work. However, having won several prestigious competitions over the years, and with the recent

completion of two large-scale residential developments and planning in the Netherlands, plus more underway abroad, this low-profile firm is beginning to be noticed. As a result of the heightened awareness of its work, S333's self-styled "radical" practice – the firm has been determined never to repeat itself and never to develop a signature style – is likely soon to receive the attention it deserves.

We hold the first of several meetings at a coffee shop across the street. Coffee shops in Amsterdam have a long tradition of selling drugs, as well as coffee. S333's neighbour represents another variation on the theme of coffee shop hybridization, however – it is a coffee shop/antique store/driving school. For an instant this seems like an elaborate set-up to illustrate one of the more interesting elements of S333's body of architectural and urban-planning work, the remarkable diversity of their focus and output.

The multimodal coffee house is a coincidence, but Hamfelt sees it as a natural and valid model. "In a way it is a perfect example of the hybridization of things that we find in our practice and in our projects. We may not see the connection between these businesses, but to the woman who runs this place it makes perfect sense. Why should she have to choose between these things and compartmentalize them to fit others' preconceptions? This is her life."

From its unconventional beginnings, S333 has had little interest in following conventional models of architectural practice. S333 began in London, in the late 1980s, as a loose collection

TWO VIEWS OF S333'S WORK IN GRONINGEN (THIS PAGE) ON FORMERLY UNINHABITED INDUSTRIAL LAND. SCHOTS 1 IS A MULTISTOREY GLASS-CLAD URBAN BLOCK; SCHOTS 2, CLAD IN WOOD, FEATURES SLOPED LANDSCAPING, INTERMINGLED WITH RESIDENTS' GARDENS, THAT PROVIDES ACCESS TO VARIOUS LEVELS.

IN VIJFHUIZEN, NEAR AMSTERDAM'S SCHIPHOL AIRPORT, S333'S CLUSTERED HOUSING (ABOVE) ADDRESSES THE PERENNIAL DUTCH DEMAND FOR HIGH-DENSITY SINGLE-FAMILY DWELLINGS WITHOUT RESORTING TO A COOKIE-CUTTER SOLUTION.

of mobile young architects without offices of their own. While continuing to work independently, they shared a common studio space – at 333 Kennington Road – and engaged in a dialogue about new ways to practice architecture. The four collaborators who remained in the end, Dominic Papa and Jonathan Woodroffe (both British), Burton Hamfelt (a Canadian) and Christopher Moller (from New Zealand), saw competitions as a way to develop and test their ideas – as Christopher Moller puts it, "a way of getting fit." For a number of years they held onto their day jobs elsewhere, in practices such as Neutelings Riedijk and Wiel Arets in the Netherlands and with Terry Farrell & Partners in London.

In 1991 the strategy paid off, with the announcement that the four partners – still in their twenties – had won an international competition for the revitalization of Samarkand, CIS, from among a field of more than 600 firms. From this, S333 gained a significant boost in terms of both confidence and working capital. However, it was not until 1997 that the partners decided to formally register as a company and quit their day jobs, by which time they had set up shop together in Amsterdam.

Then, as now, S333 considers the central question of architectural practice to be that of practice itself: If architecture is to remain vital in changing times, then it needs to challenge and reinvent itself constantly – perhaps with each new project. Rejecting the traditional hierarchical office structure, the partners set out to consider new ways to enhance the relevance of their work. "We were

FOR VIJFHUIZEN (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE), S333 COMBINED FIVE DISTINCT HOUSING SIZES WITHIN GENERIC HOUSE-SHAPED FRAMEWORKS OF VARIOUS DIMENSIONS. TO SATISFY THE DESIRE FOR PRIVACY, SKYLIGHTS AND CUT-OUT PATIOS HAVE BEEN MANIPULATED TO ELIMINATE PROSPECTS OF NEIGHBOURS' WINDOWS AND MAXIMIZE DIAGONAL VIEWS OF BLUE SKIES.

interested in interactivity between several minds... The electricity of the debate, which could work as an efficient idea engine," Moller explains. "We used the studio wall as the neutral medium in our discussions. Once on the wall, an idea was under rigorous scrutiny before we decided if it was good enough to survive."

The main reason S333 was drawn to the Netherlands was the firm's choice of Groningen as the project site of its – ultimately winning – entry in the 1994 Europan 3 competition. "There was a very good chance that Groningen would realize our experimental ideas," says Moller. "Groningen developed a lively exchange between international and local architects, as well as a city-wide interest in culture, architecture and urbanism. This is still unique, even in the Netherlands."

The four partners actively maintain a loose office structure, while keeping a high level of contact between themselves. Papa teaches at the Architectural Association in London, where Woodroffe also taught until 2001, and works frequently on planning and proposed projects in the U.K. and elsewhere. Moller lives in Groningen, 200 kilometres north of Amsterdam, where he worked part-time as senior urbanist on the Groningen city council until this past May. Hamfelt, who lives in Amsterdam, also teaches urban design at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. They see their varied and independent experiences as strengthening the debate within the studio. "I don't have to look to outside influences necessarily – or let's say consciously," Dominic Papa explains, "because my outside influence is Burton. And Burton's is Jonathan, and so on..."

Another factor in its slow progression to completed work is the scale at which S333 operates. Among the ideas most important to the practice is the partners' belief in the relationship between architecture, urbanism and landscape. They choose not to consider any element in isolation and consider the building to be as much a piece of the urban totality as it is an independent entity. So while many young firms content themselves with small houses or interior work in their early years, S333 has been big-game hunting from the start. Its largest project to date, Schots 1 and 2, is a recently completed mixed-use development in Groningen, consisting of 149 dwellings (30 percent of which are social housing), 4,500 m^2 of retail and commercial space and 300 underground parking spots. It is a prime example of the skilful integration of architecture, urbanism and landscape.

Set on a former industrial site two kilometres from the city centre, Schots 1 and 2 is the result of S333's 1994 win in the highly regarded Europan 3 competition, which recognizes exceptional

work by young European architects. Schots 1 and 2 combines grass, ivy and water, concurrently extending a green belt that is connected to a nearby park and effecting dense commercial development on formerly uninhabited industrial land.

The resulting buildings are separate units, utilizing different materials and typologies. Schots 1 is a multistorey glass-clad urban block; Schots 2 is clad in wood and features sloped landscaping, intermingled with residents' gardens, that provides access to various levels.

Another recently completed S333 project is a series of 56 housing units in Vijfhuizen, near Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. Their competition-winning plan, part of the national VINEX initiative to develop residential housing throughout the Netherlands, generated a series of almost Monopoly-style houses arranged on a 1.2 hectare site. For Vijfhuizen, five distinct housing sizes are combined within generic house-shaped frameworks of various dimensions that appear to be set randomly within the building site. Here again, there is a component of social housing, and as with Groningen it is indistinguishable from the project's standard market housing.

The clustered housing addresses the perennial Dutch demand for high-density single-family dwellings without resorting to a cookie-cutter solution. To satisfy the desire for privacy, skylights and cut-out patios have been manipulated to eliminate prospects of neighbours' windows and maximize diagonal views of blue sky. Asymmetrical window placement also offsets aesthetically the uniformity of the standard house typology.

A cursory look at other planning and architectural projects underway for S333 reveals no recurring motifs or connecting tissue. A current project consisting of 32 cliff dwellings and 19 row houses in Auckland, New Zealand, is a major departure from the flat-landscape work that prevails in the Netherlands. Likewise, a comprehensive urban-strategy project for the industrial city of Oldham, in northern England, has little common ground with the planning and monitoring of a new town centre in Nieuw-Vennep, the Netherlands. "Closer to home, we have just undertaken a major study of Amsterdam – the first of its kind – documenting and researching the last 47 'forgotten' spaces in the city," Jonathan Woodroffe explains. "These sites have not yet been developed because they are danger zones. There are difficulties with ground pollution, noise pollution, proximity to railroad tracks and other such issues."

Refusing to consciously develop a recognizable body of work, rejecting traditional models of architectural practice and working in several countries and on widely varying projects, S333 has perhaps taken an uncommercial position. However, sophisticated clients recognize a consistency in the firm's innovative work and unconventional practice. In time, S333's unique practice may become a model in itself. A