Living in imaginary places: on the creation and consumption of themed residential architecture
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Citation for published version (APA):
Meier, S. O. (2013). Living in imaginary places: on the creation and consumption of themed residential architecture

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3 Theming architecture: from classifying styles toward theming culture

Submitted as:

Abstract. This paper argues that, in order to represent particular meaning and thereby attract the attention of the viewer, theming architecture is a more general than a specific phenomenon of postmodern architecture. Themes in architecture have been invented and used for many centuries. In the context of theming historical styles, architects and theorists of the nineteenth century related physical construction, and with that the structural principle of architecture, to the notion of timeless architectural essence. It was out of such a style-related theming of construction in the ornamented built form that a new and modern identity of architectural design developed. It is argued that, since World War Two, many architects and cultural theorists have abandoned the idea that there is an architectural essence expressed by its material-based structure. Instead, the idea has continuously been put forward that the main function of architecture is to be an artistic expression of culture in terms of modernity, history or regional building traditions. These days no culture seems to be able to escape being themed in architecture which distinguishes contemporary themed architecture from architecture of earlier periods.

3.1 Introduction

Theming in architecture has hitherto most often been analyzed as a sociocultural process related to commercial culture. Scholars like Sorkin (1992), Hanningan (1998), Gottdiener (1997) and Alan Bryman (2004) argue that, in a postmodern consumer society, people’s desires extend far beyond basic needs like shelter, clothes and food. Rather, desires have continuously been reproduced by broadening the functionality of architecture and objects with symbolic meaning. This process informs all aspects of cultural everyday life (Featherstone 1998). Zukin (1995, 2010) suggests that culture - in terms of artistic representation of human capabilities - commutes into
mere *commercial culture* if it first and foremost serves to induce people to buy products (so that they primarily act as consumers). Symbolic meaning is, for instance, conveyed by architectural forms or by narratives about the place and people living there. Following Bryman (2004), contemporary architectural theming basically constitutes sources of meaning which are *external* to architecture, like the reference to popular culture, the past or future, magical places, certain music genres, literary figures and so on.

Studies from this perspective are interesting and relevant due to such questions as, firstly how and why commercial culture, in particular, has become an element of urban planning and architectural production (Warren 1994, Zukin 2010), and secondly how consumers use and interpret themed architecture (Bagnall 1996, Chaney 1990, Goss 1993). However, the studies fail to do justice to the intrinsic capability of architecture to express meaning. In other words, while contemporary theming primarily uses this intrinsic capability as an instrument for commercialization, architecture has been conceived - since it beginnings - as a means of artistic expression23 (besides as a means to fulfil practical functions).

In general, architecture has the potential to express architectural (i.e. *self-referential*) and/or non-architectural, that is to say *external*, meaning in a concrete visual way. Self-referential meaning engages with meanings concerning all levels of architectural design, from spatial layout via physical structure to figurative details of the built form. External meaning refers to meanings going beyond the immediate realm of architectural design while they nevertheless have artistically brought to expression by the means of architectural design.

This paper aims to explore how, from the nineteenth century onwards, architectural design has been linked to certain themes. It discusses what kind of ‘themes’ has been used and which demands have guided their artistic implementation. We do not pretend to provide here a complete historical overview, but rather an attempt to elaborate the argument by discussing, first and foremost, the nineteenth century theming of historical styles, including the focus on structure and physical construction as well as its change into the subsequent development towards twentieth century modernism. Second, attention is paid to the postmodern concept of architectural sign, including its focus on architectural language. Third, the practice of theming is illustrated by two recently built, themed housing schemes in the Netherlands: 1) the new small town of Helmond Brandevoort, where a reference to traditional building culture is artistically expressed in the urban and architectural design and 2) the housing scheme situated in Rotterdam called Le Medi, where a Mediterranean ambience

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23 In this study, artistic expression has been used as a translation of the German expression *künstlerischer Ausdruck* or *artistieke expressie* in Dutch language (see section 1.2.2).
has been reproduced. By doing this we want to provide a more balanced view on the issue of architectural theming and its limited postmodern interpretation.

### 3.2 Architectural themes from nineteenth century to Modernism

The nineteenth century was a century of historicism. As regards architecture, historicism took the form of the so-called ‘battles of styles’, that is to say the battle of the revival of Greek and Roman antiquity, of Gothic or Renaissance architecture. Regarding historicism as a whole, the reference to history should explain architecture, that is its artistic production, as part of a historical process, instead of as a result of a universal (divine) order. The simultaneous classification of architectural history according to specific styles reflected the additional attempt to systemize that historical process. Such classification into well-defined styles took place on the basis of design-related characteristics as well as their connection with certain periods in history and specific geographical, mainly European, regions which were a fairly new perception at that time. While in the eighteenth century, architects and theorist still had a complete different concept of style. For instance, Blondel, who was one of the main theorists of classicism, regarded style as meaning ‘the authentic character which should be chosen relative to the purpose, and was thus the poetry of architecture.’ (Collins 1998:63). In contrast to this understanding of style as individual artistic quality, the nineteenth century conception of style represented an abstraction from the individual architectural artefact and related its design to historically determined production. Here, historical styles were (and have been up to today) distinguished by the spatial configuration of buildings, the mode of physical construction, and their figurative shape.

Two well-known examples of corresponding style-specific characteristics are the round arch and vault of Roman antiquity or the pointed arch and vault of Gothic architecture. Such classification included a descriptive and an interpretative level like the reference to more general characteristics and, for instance, to the spatial verticality of Gothic church architecture. Furthermore, certain cultural meanings addressed styles while embedding them in specific cultural contexts. In this regard, some architects perceived the Gothic style as essential Christian architecture (Pugin 1841), while to others it represented, first and foremost, German building culture (Bötticher 1846). Such cultural or national connotations enabled the implementation of Neo-styles - like the Gothic revival – to be affirmed and legitimized within a wider socio-cultural and national context.
Besides being the century of historicism, the nineteenth century was the century of industrial revolution and, therefore, of economic growth and societal modernization that had been unknown until that time. From the point of view of architects and theorists, architecture should not lag behind socio-economic developments which, in turn, are bound up with developments at scientific, engineering and technical levels. Instead, architecture should be harmonized with these developments and, accordingly, the legacy of pre-modern building history should be harmonized with these developments as well. Schwarzer (1995:8) suggested that ‘[T]he harmonization of architecture’s pre-modern and modern identities would be one of the greatest sources of conflict during the nineteenth century.’ This conflict had been solved by exploring building history not only as a system of styles, but by also exploring the different styles from an explicit rational that is to say from an engineering-technical and craftsmen-technical perspective. The former focused on the structural concept and corresponding physical construction (promoted by, for example, Viollet-le-Duc or Bötticher) while the latter focused on the artesian-technical fabrication of a building’s physical construction (favoured by, for example, Semper or Ruskin). As a result, both perspectives traced the aesthetics of architecture back to its material-structural basis. This connection had addressed the notion of revealing a certain timeless essence or ‘truth’ in architecture. A truth that enabled the favoured (either Gothic or any other) historical style to function as a basis for a contemporary modern, rational building style valid for the nineteenth century and for future developments in architectural design.

3.2.1 Core-form versus art-form and the dressing principle

Before continuing with the further development, we want to provide a little bit more information on the above-mentioned connection between the aesthetics of architecture, on the one hand, and its material-structural basis, on the other. We do so by referring to two contributions to the architecture-theoretical discourse of the time which were extremely influential for the German speaking area: Carl Bötticher’s (1852) theory of tectonics and Gottfried Semper’s (1851, 1977 [1860]) principle of dressing.

The central part of Bötticher’s theory of tectonics is his well-known scheme of core-form and art-form. By dealing mainly with the design of temples in Greek antiquity, Bötticher conceived the ornamented art-form as the artistic expression of a structural principle which, in the case of the Greek temple, is the principle of horizontal load (entablature/pediment/roof) and vertical support (columns). To him the ornamented shape of the art-form symbolically expressed - in all its parts and as a whole of these parts, from the convoluted and channelled column to the detailed triglyph
- the static logic (hence: the core) of the structural principle. Just in their interconnection, core- and art-form represented the tectonics of a specific building which Bötticher interpreted as the essence architecture as building art.

By contrast, Semper believed the essence of architecture was the result of an evolving building practice which he conceived as a culture of building. He traced this culture back to four basic and prehistoric building motives, associated modes of fabrication and the building materials used.24 His idea of tectonics was also bound up with the structural principle of a building, namely with skeletal timber construction and its artistic refinement in the built form. Furthermore, he referred to tectonics as representing specific aspects of building as well as universal cultural meanings and their evolution throughout history. From an evolutionary point of view, Semper linked the structure of a stone façade, for instance, to the woven structure of what he regarded as the original and essential element of space separation: the prehistoric spatial enclosure, made by wickerwork and carpets. Due to the link with the weaving of fabrics, Semper added to this ‘textile’ context the additional cultural meaning of dressing, which he conceived as the most essential art of all. As Von Buttlar (1997) points out, it represented the basic principle of all kinds of decoration, applied on the body as jewellery, tattoo, and garment. By doing so, Semper added further cultural and historical meaning to the aspect of decoration and the entire artistic expression in architecture. As a consequence, he linked physical construction and technical fabrication on the one hand, and artistic expression of the built form on the other, in a mere indirect way.

Semper’s principle of dressing was part of a development that ultimately resulted in a dualism of these both aspects: the artistic shape changed into mere cladding, conceived as being completely independent from the underlying physical construction. Accordingly, and in line with the building practice at that time, the ‘battles of styles’ changed into an arbitrary and eclectic mixture of styles. The architectural production had been increasingly criticized as an arbitrary and outdated collection of historicizing decoration (see also section 5.2.1). The metaphor of capsule of style and core appeared, expressing this transformation from an interconnection towards a dualism of artistic expression and physical construction. As part of the objective to develop an up-to-date respectively modern style, which was then still basically valid, this metaphor contained an additional meaning. The core was now conceived as the ‘true’ and modern core which had to get rid of the ‘untruthful’ historicizing capsule. Werner Oechslin (1994:6) quotes the architectural theorist Joseph Bayer from an article entitled ‘Modern types of

24 The mound, the roof, the wall and the hearth and their artistic fabrication by: masonry, carpentry, wickerwork (weaving) and metallurgy.
buildings’ from 1886 with the words: ‘...and the actual, true, and essential built shape of the age grows with strong limbs inside the conventional masks and drappings of style. And when she is completely structured and matured to be present, then certainly, the so beautiful ornamented historical capsules of style come off, for ever they peel off and the new core comes pure and clear to the sunlight’. The idea was that ornament would lose its artistic function and the theming of historical styles would disappear, at least for quite a while.

To conclude, artistic expression in architecture, realized throughout the nineteenth century, was bound up with both the ‘theming’ of specific historical styles and the ‘theming’ of structure and physical construction. The latter developed out of the first, replaced it and constituted a new and modern identity of architecture and artistic expression, namely that of spatial design.

3.2.2 Artistic expression of ‘the core’

By leaving behind all historical references, the discussion on physical construction as a central element of modern architectural design continued. The further developing focus on physical construction and technical fabrication of the built form and the appropriate use of building materials led to a much more functional and reduced modes of artistic refinement of construction in the built form. Additionally, the understanding of construction was influenced by the production-related and economic-related function that had been addressed in the context of modern building practice. As a result, the immediate link to artistic expression had been superimposed by understanding construction, again as a means of design. In this vein, a paradigmatic shift in architecture, namely from building art to applied design, started to be expressed which, in turn, characterized the understanding of architecture in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1928, Siegfried Giedion (1928:58) claimed: ‘Konstruktion wird Gestaltung’ (construction becomes design). With this phrase he was attempting to express the essence of modern architectural design as it had clearly been developed on the basis of the engineer-technical developments of the nineteenth century. Hilde Heynen (1999:36) argues that Giedion aimed to express the idea that ‘architecture is no longer concerned with representative facades and monumental volumes; instead, its aim is to design new relationships, based on structural logic.’ With new relationships, Giedion basically had in mind the opening up of inside spaces to the outside space. In this context he related the new modes of skeletal steel and reinforced concrete constructions to the quality of enabling spatial interpenetration of inside and outside. In this vein Giedion, like other members of the Modern Movement, conceived the new modes of construction as a means
of artistically realizing and expressing a principle quality of modern architecture: ‘Like no one before him, Corbusier had the ability to make resonate the ferroconcrete skeleton that had been presented by science (...). We mean the skill with which he knows to translate construction, the frame, into a new housing form.’ (Giedion 1995:168). As part of the aesthetics of the first ‘machine age’ (Banham 1960), physical construction simultaneously changed into a means of ‘theming’ space and spatial use.

3.3 After World War Two: toward the theming of (everyday) culture

Although the aesthetics of the ‘machine age’ had been realized in many European countries between 1920 and World War Two, the corresponding identification with the artistic expression of space and spatial use did not resolve societal questions concerning the expression of cultural meanings like the issue of representation of collective memory and cultural identity. Architectural critics like Peter Meyer and, remarkably, Giedion himself at a later date, argued that the austere appearance of modernist architecture did not meet the need of ‘the people’ to represent their cultural everyday life in the built form (Sert et al. 1958). This very human need would go beyond functional fulfilment and requires a certain architectural monumentality. However, set against the background of totalitarian monumentality, architects searched for another, democratic monumentality (Moravansky 2003). Based on the rational analysis of traditional urban compositions, typologies and geometries, several architects attempted to create a new monumentality of the human scale - in particular for the housing design - via the reappreciation of the city as an artistic entity. Here, the artistic expression of separate (residential) buildings was expected to be subordinated to a consistent urban structure. After World War Two, this viewpoint had been developed further by architects like Aldo Rossi, Peter Eisenman, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Léon and Rob Krier and, at later on, by representatives of the New Urbanism Movement who were concerned about (suburban) residential places (Chapter 2 and 5).

Moreover, another viewpoint had been developed from the 1960s onwards, which aimed not so much at creating a new human-scale monumentality but focused instead on new ways of expressing human, everyday culture. This entailed a new requirement being imposed on the artistic expression of architecture and cities and, consequently, new ways of practicing ‘theming’ were invented.

With the contemporary Dutch way of theming in mind (see below), we limit ourselves here to the elaboration of two main threads alongside the expression of culture in architecture had been realized. Initially, some
architects and cultural theorists claimed that architecture has to be, first and foremost, a means of communicating with its users. This view linked up well with populist ideas of the design of architecture. Secondly, others dealt with the question how architecture could fulfil the need to represent (and realize) specific culture and identities without being exclusive. This perspective formed, to some extent, the counterpart to the first one. Accordingly, the contradictory issue of regional identity of places in terms of their cultural history and traditions had been raised. These issues took the centre stage in studies of critical regionalism in particular.

3.3.1 Architecture as language: denoting function, connoting cultural meaning

As regards the first thread, scholars like Umberto Eco and Charles Jencks attempted to relate the spatial design and architectural sign systematically to the idea that both are part of a system of signs (Broadbent et. al. 1980). They were inspired by the theory of semiotics which has a mixed parentage: contemporaneously, but not in collaboration with each other, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist (1857 - 1913), and Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 - 1914), an American philosopher and logician, developed a theory of sign. Based on the study of language, De Saussure defined the sign as consisting of two components, the signifier, i.e. the sound of the spoken word or an image, and the signified, i.e. the concept or thoughts which the signifier ‘stands for’. The way in which the first component is expressed and the second one appears is arbitrary but, in any event, influenced by the specific cultural context. Pierce shared this view and his study of signs contributed to the search for a concept of truth rather than an exploration of language as a structure conditioned by cultural processes. He interpreted the sign as a three-part relationship consisting of a vehicle similar to the signifier that conveys a perception to someone’s mind, then the pre-existing ideas of a person through which the received message is interpreted and finally, the real object which is actually noticeable for everybody (and which is a collectively known concept for which the sign ‘stands’)25.

Though different in emphasis, both theories dealt with signs which are not architectural in the sense of being a three-dimensional built form that could be bodily experienced. After all, architecture is designed to meet basic human needs and functions rather than being a mere transmitter of signs. Therefore, transferring the theory of semiotics into a theory of the architectural form primarily meant exploring the question of how functionality is related to its possible capability to communicate. Umberto Eco asserted that a certain architectural form ‘communicates’ its function

like a flight of stairs provides the possibility of vertical movement. However, this message is not a spoken request (signifier) followed by an inevitable behavioural or verbal response. Hence, Eco and Jencks\(^{26}\) admitted that architecture does not ‘communicate’ in an unambiguous way but should be seen as a sign-vehicle that is basically able to denote its (social) functions and connote certain cultural meanings (of these functions).

In this (semiotic) vein, architecture had been broken down into innumerable fragments which were more or less arbitrarily defined. For instance, Eco distinguished between three different architectural codes: 1) technical codes referring to the architectural physical construction (like columns, beams, insulation techniques and so on), 2) syntactic codes concerning the architectural structural principle (like building typologies, geometrical forms) and 3) semantic codes like windows, roof, and stairs. The semantic codes were seen as particularly purposeful in terms of denoting functions and connoting cultural meanings.

Similar to Eco and Jencks, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour also suggested that the main function of architecture should be the legible artistic expression of cultural and symbolic meanings. In effect they grappled with the representation of advertising and commercial culture. Based on their well-known study of the Las Vegas Strip, they argued in favour of a ‘symbolism of the ugly and ordinary’ in order to challenge the attitude of modern architects who they conceived as the upper-class, white, male and avant-garde (Venturi et. al. 1997 [1972]: 90). The latter were not able to meet the desire of many middle and lower class people to decorate and express individuality (with sparse means) because they had dismissed advertising, and therefore popular culture, as tasteless and vulgar. By contrast, builders who had developed affordable suburban condominiums like Levittown\(^{27}\) were able to support the owner’s individualism by providing a range of ‘commercial vernacular’ housing\(^{28}\).

Moreover, the Modernist concept of functionalist urban space had been challenged or at least enlarged. Venturi et. al. asserted that two-dimensional

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27 Levittown (New York) had been built at the end of 1940s by the firm of Levitt & Sons (founded by William Levitt) who afterwards built a number of comparable suburban neighbourhoods.

28 Herbert Gans not only studied one of these Levittowns (Willingboro, New Jersey) but also advocated a more ‘human’ suburban architecture which would satisfy functional, comfortable and aesthetic needs. See the collection of his writings H. Gans, *People, Plans, and Policies. Essays on Poverty, Racism, and Other National Urban Problems*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1993).
signs were significant to shape spatial relations rather than buildings themselves. The Las Vegas Strip is mainly experienced by car and signs were therefore crucial to orientate and to reach destination. By adopting this view, they clearly distanced themselves from the ‘orthodox Modern architects’ who believed that symbolic meaning ‘was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure.’. Venturi et al. (1997 [1972]) argued that the ‘decorated shed’ should been equally valued like the self-referential symbolism appreciated by the Modern Movement. This suggested a democratic but nevertheless ‘commercialized’ monumentality created by symbols and decorated sheds.29

It is striking that categorization of codes by Eco and the ‘decorated shed’ of Venturi ignore the intrinsic logic of physical construction and structural principle of buildings. Therefore both contrast sharply with the idea of architectural essence as conducted by the nineteenth theorists Semper, Bötticher and representatives of the Modern Movement. Eco and Jencks perceived architecture first and foremost as a kind of projection screen of external, cultural meanings, rather than an autonomous object with a spatial logic and certain structural principle. To them and to Venturi et al., the expression of ‘truth’ by theming styles or physical construction was irrelevant.

33.2 Theming regional culture while defamiliarising it

As regards the second body of thought that deals with theming culture in architecture, Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzionis shared the idea that people’s functional and cultural needs have to guide the architectural artistic expression.30 However, in the European context, the theming of commercial culture had been criticized by a number of architectural theorists who maintained that precisely the disconnection between place and form was a poor characteristic of the Modern Movement that had to be overcome.31

29 This perception is not only based on their study of the Las Vegas Strip but has its roots in Venturi’s predilection for the complexity of baroque architecture. M. Delbeke, ‘Mannerism and meaning in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture’. The Journal of Architecture, 15 (2010), pp. 267-282.
30 Dutch architects like Nikolaas John Habraken and Carel Weeber advocated taking account, first and foremost, of the desire of ‘the people’ (N.J. Habraken, 1961, De dragers en de mensen. Het einde van de massawoningbouw [Bearers and people. The End of mass housing], Amsterdam, Scheltema and Holkema) and Weeber therefore argued in favour of an end to welfare state architecture (C. Weeber, 1998, Het Wilde Wonen [The Wild Housing], Rotterdam, o10 Publishers).
31 See, for example, Norberg Schulz who elaborated the idea of genius loci, see reference below; scholars like John Turner and Amos Rapoport developed the idea of vernacular residential architecture as the most intense expression of identification of people with place (Rapoport, Amos. 1977. Human Aspects of Urban Form. Towards a Man-Environment Approach of Urban Form and Design. Oxford, et. al.: Pergamon Press).
Lefaivre and Tzonis (1972:31) illustrated in their article *In the name of the people* that disconnection and displacement and the search for fulfilment of cultural needs basically lay at the heart of the populist movement which was nevertheless contradictory: ‘Design forms have finally been disengaged from a normative mould of false authority’ [here, they referred to the welfare state rather than the authority of the architects, comments of the authors] but building for ‘the mass’ means simultaneously supporting ‘mass’ consumption whereby ‘the fetishist quality’ of architecture had left intact. The populist movement tried to replace the belief in the goodness of a universal fetish with the glorified cult of the individualized fetish and by dismantling the authority of universal norms, to reject the last remaining vestige in the built environment representing the collective nature of society.’ Or, to put it simply, the populist movement has indeed provided the consumer with more opportunities to participate in, for example, the planning process of housing but the consumer is still in a dependent position because he or she always needs case to ‘consume’ to fulfil basic needs.

Whereas this aspect of the populist debate was initially concerned with the social position of producers and consumers during the planning process, the secondary focus was on the question of how local and regional culture could actually be expressed in architecture. This involved advocating a reconsideration of the architectural design and the idea of placeness. Placeness has often been related to the expression of local or regional culture. The concept of regionalism that already had been prominent from time to time in different European countries was put forward again. However, the revival of this concept presented challenges. While architectural theorists like Lefaivre, Tzonis and Frampton appreciated its ‘commitment to ‘placeness’ and a use of regional design elements as a means of confronting a universalist order of architecture’ (Tzonis and Lefaivre 1990), they denounced its adjacency to unprogressive political regimes such as the fascist ‘Heimatarchitektur’ or Picturesque regionalism in the early eighteenth century, when pure Englishness and yet a certain socio-cultural group had claimed a certain architecture.

In order to solve the contradictory representation of a place-bound but nevertheless universal artistic expression of culture, the method of defamiliarisation was introduced which was intended to incorporate regional elements in a strange and unexpected, rather than familiar, way. By so doing, reference to regional building traditions was possible while keeping simultaneously a certain distance from it. By so doing, following Lefaivre and Tzonis, the usage of regional elements did not support the emancipation of a regional group, nor was one group being set against...

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another. Through defamiliarisation, critical regionalism wanted to be rational, self-reflective and polemic in contrast to earlier regionalisms where the indented meaning was to produce overfamiliarisation and hence, sympathy and a nostalgic feeling of attachment by the viewer.

To conclude, comparable with the theory of semiotics, the idea of defamiliarisation was being borrowed from literary theory in order to create a new view on the artistic expression of regional culture. As such it was more a cultural than an architectural strategy (Frampton 2002).

For architects the distinction between the disliked ‘commercial vernacular’ and built forms recommended by critical regionalist still stayed unclear. Moreover, the legacy of Learning from Las Vegas played a considerable role in strengthening the application of external themes which are rather universal in the sense of them being insensitive to the local geographical context. In this vein, the contemporary practice of theming ranges from the usage of external and commercialized themes (which are often related to fake architecture and commercialization of places) on the one hand and the theming of physical construction as self-referential meaning which celebrates a ‘supermodern’ architecture, on the other. Both are in conflict with the idea of creating placeness. In architectural practice, ‘making the difference’ by reference to local and regional cultures is contradictory and elusive as the two examples below will illustrate.

3.4 Two examples of contemporary theming in Dutch housing

3.4.1 Theming (regional) culture to make the difference

One approach to ‘make a difference’ by referring to regional characteristics is the anatomization of regional building cultures into structural and spatial principles like geometry, symmetry, spatial proportion, compactness and so on. This approach is based on the rationalist point of view and has basically been perpetuated by representatives of the New Urbanism movement (McCann 1995; Marshall 2003). The architect Douglas Kelbaugh, for instance, advocated an abstract and rather rational kind of side-specific design (that he related to the concept of genius loci) which constitutes

33 In the book Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture (London, Academy Editions 1979) Christian Norberg-Schulz attempts to relate ‘structure’ of places to ‘meaning’ given by people to it. He argues that ‘structure of place ought to be described in terms of ‘landscape’ [i.e. natural place, note by authors] and ‘settlement’ [man-made place note by authors]. Landscape and settlements are spaces with character: ‘space’ denotes the three-dimensional organization of elements which made up a place while ‘character’ denotes the general ‘atmosphere’ which is most comprehensive property of any place.’ (p.11). Particularly settlements are meaningful to people. ‘From the beginning of time man has recognized that to create a place means to express the essence of being.’ (p.50). Hence, Schulz’ concept of genius loci refers to the genius of the locality where peoples’ life takes place and specific natural or/and man-made characteristics of the loci (p.18).
traditional typologies of cities and buildings rather than the implementation of coincidentally chosen historical style elements. In this vein, Krier and Kohl architects again implemented primary spatial principles of the traditional European town in order to design new residential areas. They prefer the ‘traditional approach to the city in which buildings are components of the urban fabric and in which this fabric defines the urban spaces’ and suggest that ‘typologically similar buildings must differentiate themselves formally, so that they can be places of identity.’

In the Netherlands, they designed a number of housing projects like Noorderhof and Meander in Amsterdam and suburban neighbourhoods like Citadel Broekpolder and Helmond Brandevoort. In the latter case they were asked to design an entire new ‘traditional’ small town that includes references to the rural building culture of the region of Brabant.

![Real original: traditional farmhouse of the region of Brabant (Mierlo).](image)

**FIGURE 7**

‘Real’ original: traditional farmhouse of the region of Brabant (Mierlo).

*Photo by Sabine Meier*

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34 See Doug Kelbaugh, ‘Towards an architecture of place: design principles for critical regionalism’ in S. Amourgis. *Ibid*, p. 181 - 188. His argumentation is contradictory. On the one hand, he argues that the reference to traditional typologies is a means to create side-specific design: ‘[w]hat makes a place unique is worth celebrating and protecting with architecture: finding and keeping the differences that make a difference’ (p.182). On the other hand he suggests that critical regionalism is more an attitude of building professionals rather than a style. Architects and planners should be aware of five ‘senses’ while designing: the senses of place, nature, history, craft and spatial limits.

35 [http://www.archkk.com/about_us](http://www.archkk.com/about_us); visited on 29 of May 2012.
They designed a small town with a centre and surrounding outskirts. The centre, with its enclosed housing blocks and clearly defined entries, refers to fortified towns built throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The architecture of the centre is, in our view, ambiguous, at least, as regards its embeddedness in the regional context (Figure 2). Although the architects analyzed the typologies of several Dutch small (fortified) towns in the region and intended to include references to it, the spatial principle (the enclosed small-sized housing blocks) actually outbalances the reference to local characteristics. The low-density housing outside the centre seems to be a better reflection of the regional austere, small-scaled, scattered building culture (Figure 8). Although some houses also include features that are reminiscent of American suburban housing schemes based on the guidelines of New Urbanism (examples are the lack of difference between the street and the sidewalk, the front gardens, the white low wooden fences and wooden terraces) (Figure 9).
Another approach to ‘make the difference’ is the idea of fusing references to different cultures. For example, contemporary Dutch architects like Wilfried van Winden (2010), Jeroen Geurst, and Korteknie and Stuhlmacher architects claim that the fusion of Western and non-Western building cultures alone could create a new artistic expression. The latter two architects designed a housing project (known as Le Medi) that is situated in an urban neighbourhood of Rotterdam. It consists of rows of houses bound together by a wall. From the outside, the project therefore looks like an enclosed housing
The architect Geurst explained in an interview (authors’ interview The Hague, 23 August 2007) that the aim of the local municipality and a couple of housing corporations was to express artistically the non-Dutch cultural background of some inhabitants of Rotterdam in residential architecture. As a result, Mediterranean architectural and urban elements were anatomized and implemented into the Dutch context.

‘At an urban level’, the architect argued, ‘a number of ‘icons’ were invented which are able to evoke a Mediterranean ambience: an archway, a fountain, an enclosed square, water .. at any time, we were in search of Mediterranean design elements which are in accordance with local characteristics like the material brick or a certain manner of detailing. We did not attempt to make the architecture more exotic, but rather relate the two building cultures with each other .. Sure, it is a kind of mixture, a kind of fusion of elements that I do like personally. Hence, you could not exactly trace them back to specific roots .. the design also expresses your own knowledge and personal manner of designing.’

![Figure 11](image)

The study by architects Korteknie Stuhlmacher, who were inspired by ‘characteristics of North-African houses like symmetry, direct relation between the outside and inside at ground floor level .. and the filtration of light through filigree constructions’36. These filigree constructions refer to the traditional Mashrabiya window made of wood latticework. See gazebo in the white house on the right of Figure 12.

The quotation illustrates the architect’s search for defamiliarisation of traditional (Mediterranean) culture by fusing it with Dutch building culture while Korteknie and Stuhlmacher architects chose to defamiliarise by fusing it with modern building techniques (Figure 11).

36 http://www.kortkniestuhlmacher.nl; 6th June 2012
To sum up, as regards the artistic expression of regional building traditions in recently built Dutch residential architecture, the two approaches do react to the regional geographical context. However, the reason to do so seems not to be guided so much by the idea of ‘critically’ expressing regional differences, but rather by a focus on reinvention and fusion. These approaches tend to lead to universal rather than locally bounded artistic expression.

We therefore argue that the creation of placeness by referring to traditional regional building cultures seems to be a theoretical construction that, in practice, is dominated by the search for uniqueness and continual innovation. External themes (historical small town, Mediterranean ambience) were used to ‘make the difference’ while outbalancing continuity with local building traditions. This feature is nowadays consistent with the idea of commercializing regional distinctiveness. However, there no longer appears to be any need or pretension to ‘critically’ refer to a particular traditional building culture.
3.5 Conclusion

Theming architecture - in terms of using self-referential and external themes in order to design buildings - took several forms from the nineteenth century onwards. The motivations for expressing meaning with a certain artistic expression appear to be different, though continuous perceptions were also observed.

Nineteenth century theorists like Viollet-le-Duc, Bötticher and Semper related first and foremost the physical construction, and with that the structural principle of architecture, to the notion of timeless architectural essence. Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, the ornament lost its artistic function. This is a rationale which we did not elaborate here in detail. Instead, we have suggested that, in succession to the emerging dualism of physical construction and ornamental shape, construction continued to play a central role in the evolutionary development towards modern architecture. At the end of this development, construction had changed from content to an instrument of theming and becoming an artistic expression of modernization and modernity in architecture. The corresponding austere artistic expression of modern architecture had been criticized due, for example, to its lack of ability to represent collective memory and cultural identity and therefore its lack of monumentality.

After World War Two, this criticism had been complemented mainly by cultural theorists who claimed that artistic expression should, above all, be intelligible and legible for lay people, that is for most of its users. The invention of new themes in the form of signs, codes of expressions and the like was no longer intended to represent architectural essence. Instead, scholars like Eco and Jencks searched for appropriate ways to communicate functionality by inventing self-referential and new external themes. Besides, however disputed, the study of the Las Vegas strip had basically pioneered the entry of populist ideas into architectural artistic expression by advocating the theming of commercial culture. Remarkably, in the meantime, this idea has become obsolete because, apparently, the reference to whatever culture in architecture seemed to serve commercialization of architecture and place. Or, to paraphrase Zukin (2010), the artistic expression of architecture became part and parcel of an all-encompassing symbolic economy. Culture was expressed by ‘supermodern’, regional, historicized, fusion architecture and so on. These days, building and human cultures seem to be unable to escape from being themed.

To conclude, the increasing interest of architects in cultural theory on the one hand and the engagement with architecture by cultural theorists on the
other, can be seen as a sea change (cultural turn) due to the requirements imposed on the architectural artistic expression. Put briefly (and simply), the representation of cultural identity exceeded, or at least equally complemented, the expression of modernity and technical progress by mere physical construction. On the other hand, while building techniques became standardized and therefore part of the ‘mainstream’, technical progress in the sense of being modern and up-to-date has increasingly been expressed via new building materials or new technical personal equipment. Accordingly, the building facade as a ‘capsule’ had been set completely free to absorb cultural meanings like a reference to regional traditions and the idea of craftsmanship.

As the examples have illustrated, some contemporary architects have used this ‘freedom’ to create a new civic monumentality of the human scale expressed by the enclosed housing block, combined with facades decorated with historical style elements. At the same time, others have attempted to create ever new artistic expressions by fusing different traditional building cultures. Both notions are evidence of the search for legitimization of contemporary design by referring to traditional building cultures. In the nineteenth century, architects and theorists also attempted to develop a whole up-to-date style by referring to historical styles. The sense of continuity apparently always serves the creation of a timeless but nevertheless up-to-date architectural artistic expression.