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An Overlooked Renaissance: Dutch Architecture and Building Practices in the 15th Century

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Merlijn Hurx, *Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century*, Turnhout: Brepols, 459 pages, 2018; ISBN: 9782503568256.

The building boom that the Low Countries experienced in the long 15th century was colossal, almost unprecedented, Hurx asserts in his recent book on the architectural practice in the Low Countries (**Figure 4**). In this period of rapid urbanization more than 40 large churches were built in Brabant, Holland, and Vlaanderen alone, as well as numerous guild halls, municipal buildings, ecclesiastical institutions, city walls, and princely residential buildings. Hurx juxtaposes his study with Richard Goldthwaite's seminal *The Building of Renaissance Florence* (1980), the economic perspective of which Hurx seeks in part to emulate. It is through the close examination of the economic and organizational aspects of the building practice – subjects that have previously received too little attention – that the scale and implications of this boom in the Low Countries come to light.

Hurx's *Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century* centres on the argument that it was not the 16th century that hallmarked great building projects and the glorious rise of the architect, but rather the underestimated and understudied 15th century. The oft-cited distinction between the medieval 'craftsman-architect' and the Renaissance 'artist-architect' is unmasked as a fallacy. As underscored by Hurx, the profession of the architect had evolved well before authors like Sebastiano Serlio or Coecke van Aelst published their widely popular treatises. Notwithstanding the fact that van Aelst introduced

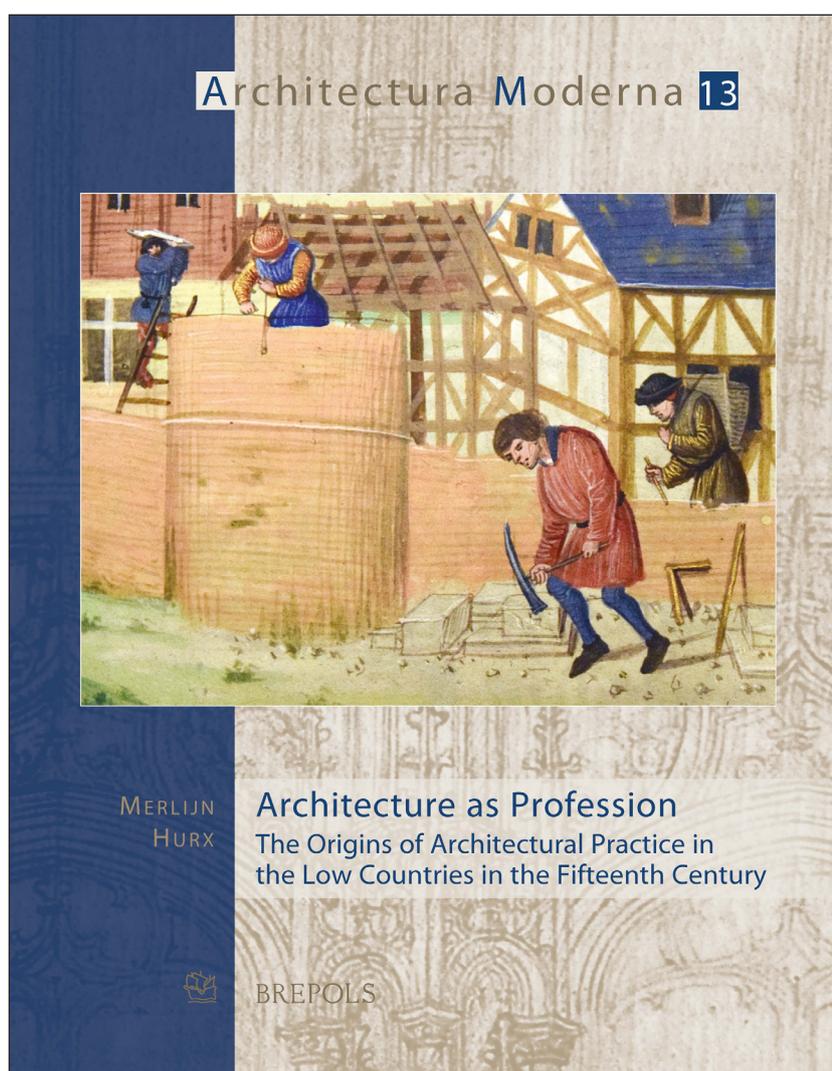


Figure 4: Book cover of Merlijn Hurx's *Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century*.

the neologism 'architect' into the Dutch language, this term did not refer to a new profession. Hurx shows that already in the 15th century a division of labour existed that allowed a designer or architect figure to oversee multiple projects at the same time. In minimizing the importance of the 16th century, Hurx's thesis fits into the recent trend that diminishes the magnitude of the Renaissance. As accentuated by scholars like Jacques Le Goff, William Caferro, and Margreta de Grazia, the medieval period was not as dark as is often believed, and not only in the case of architectural practice; the period of the Renaissance, in turn, was less novel than has long been claimed (Le Goff 2014; Caferro 2011; de Grazia 2007).

So how exactly did architecture in the Low Countries change after 1350? According to Hurx, the substantial economic changes that complemented the region's role as an early centre of capitalism spurred urbanization and the need for prestigious buildings, and ultimately, these developments also incited changes in the construction market. Beginning at the quarries, white limestone from the area around Brussels became increasingly popular in the 14th century, significantly diminishing the use of stone from the Eifel region, which had been the prevalent

building material until then. This geographical reorientation dovetailed with a change of management. While previously rulers had owned the quarries, in the 14th century, independent contractors became increasingly active in the quarrying industry, not only quarrying the stone, but also transporting and finishing it. The advantages of an independent supply of ready-made stone blocks were threefold. The system reduced costs, simplified the organization at the quarry, and streamlined the logistics involved in transporting the stone from the quarry to the building site. Hurx cites historical records that show the satisfaction of patrons who could now outsource jobs and 'would not have to do anything, except provide the money' (p. 145). The quantity of stone that was quarried and brought to the regions of Brabant, Vlaanderen, and Holland was comparable to that in the 16th and 17th centuries. Hurx speaks of the stone production as a 'near-industrial enterprise'.

Hurx's examination of churches similarly underscores the 'proto-modern' aspects of the Dutch design and building industry, challenging narratives that characterize these structures as being 'provincial'. Although few architectural drawings survive, it is evident that graphic documents were used in the building and design process – both rough

sketches and highly detailed, scaled drawings. Furthermore, building fragments from churches, such as the mouldings from column bases and arcade arches, demonstrate a certain level of standardization. The exact measurements of the architectural features vary, yet the high degree of formal similarity they display indicates that 'ready-made building kits' must have existed (p. 322). The 'star architects' who were responsible for the design of the great Brabantine churches were also involved in the creation of the churches in Holland, which do not owe their apparent simplicity to a provinciality, but to the use of rather advanced prefabricated building fragments that reduced costs and simplified and streamlined building processes.

At various points in the book Hurx refers to the 'competitive climate' of building patronage, as wealthy patrons routinely attempted to outshine their peers in the construction of palaces, houses, churches, chapels, and mausoleums. This climate, according to Hurx, propelled the developments in the changing architectural practice in the Low Countries. Yet in so narrowly focusing on the economic and social factors involved in building patronage, it is possible that Hurx discounts the aesthetic motivations that stirred patrons in their building campaigns and contributed to the building boom. Evidence for the importance of building aesthetics is cited by the author himself. Several times in the book, Albrecht Dürer is mentioned as an enthusiastic commentator on architectural production, praising the beauty of the buildings he saw in the Low Countries. A further hint that the appearance of architecture mattered and was probably a driving motivation for builders comes from one of the main protagonists of the book, the architect Rombout Keldermans. When designing the castle of Vredenburg in Utrecht, Keldermans recommended the construction of two expensive but 'plus belles' towers. Aesthetics are not hot in academia today, power, status, and competition are, but in overlooking the importance of aesthetics in the early modern period, contemporary scholars may be obscuring, or artificially simplifying, the various motivations that drove building campaigns.

A hint of anachronism can also be discerned in the author's readily apparent focus on building within the urban context. Notwithstanding the almost unprecedented growth spurt of cities in the period under discussion, life and building also continued outside of the cities. The building types discussed by Hurx include city walls, urban churches, ecclesiastical institutions (monasteries and convents), trade halls, town halls, and princely urban residences. Castles and other elite residences situated outside of the city do not feature in the book. While Hurx's emphasis on cities is justified given the rapid urbanization of the period, neither the book's title nor the introductory chapter hint at a specifically urban perspective. This bias reaffirms Dutch historiography, which traditionally favours the urban over the rural, as well as long-established boundaries within academia, by which scholars dealing with castles (archaeologists) are separated from those examining city buildings (art historians).

This and a few minor inaccuracies aside (such as the consistently incorrect capitalization of surnames in the footnotes), Hurx's *Architecture as Profession* deserves an

unusual level of praise. The book can only be evaluated as impressive. It reveals a mastery of a tremendous amount of archival data, and likewise shows an intimate familiarity with the physical buildings. Perhaps most impressive of all is the fact that Hurx proved it possible to combine the two subjects of analysis, thus opening up a historical world that has long remained hidden. The author's ability to cross-reference between archival entries and realized building forms is supremely demonstrated in the book's final chapter, where facing pages show a reproduction of the 1521 bill regarding the entrance facade Antwerp's 'Het Steen' – part of the city's defence works – and a photograph of the actual building as it stands today. One of the posts in the bill reads, in a 16th-century hand, 'waapen' (coat of arms). The 21st-century photo bears witness to the actual realization of this coat of arms. The striking comparison fills the reader with a feeling that combines historical awe with a sense of time-travel.