



Review of 'False Flat Why Dutch Design is so Good'

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FALSE FLAT WHY DUTCH DESIGN IS SO GOOD

By: Aaron Betsky with
Adam Eeuwens

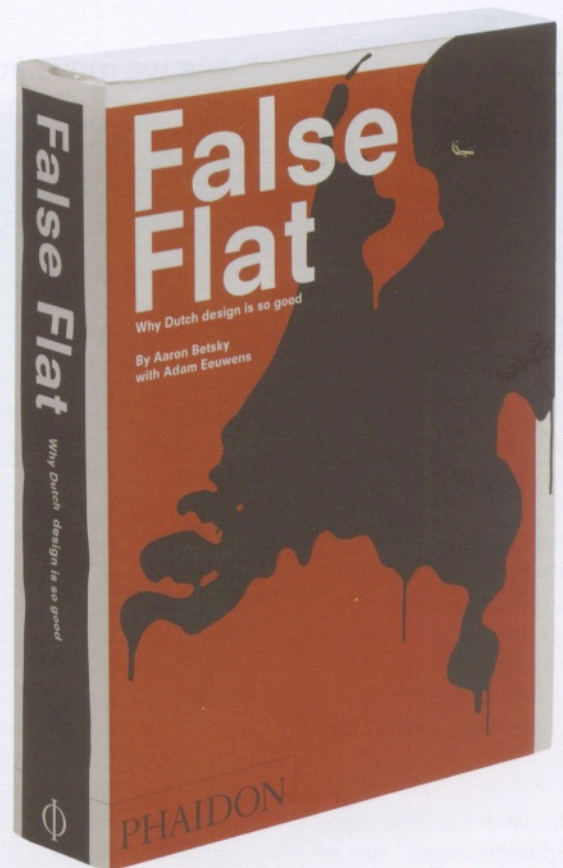
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When Aaron Betsky judged the 2004 AAI awards, he was critical of Irish architecture. Describing it as "caught between collage and concrete fetishism," he wondered was there hope for an approach that was seemingly locked into an endless repertoire of quotations from Louis Kahn to James Stirling. What was missing he felt, was a greater awareness of the landscape.

False Flat written with Adam Eeuwens, reveals exactly why Betsky believes "Dutch Design Is so Good." Central to the book is his notion that the Dutch have an inescapable sense of their own landscape: a collective and cooperative energy that maintains a delicate artificial balance against the forces of nature.

Designed by Irma Boom, **False Flat** begins as a sea of tiny words that cover the first three pages. The introductory essay 'Surfing the False Flat' is a description by Betsky of his bicycle ride from his home on the outskirts of Rotterdam, to his office in the centre of the city. His journey explores the subtle forces and forms he rides against: the dykes and polders with their slowly ramping level changes, of the shifting weather patterns of the Vermeer-like sky and the differing urban settlements and infrastructures. His journey uncovers the layers of history and architecture that are intertwined with the landscape.

The dripping black profile of the country on the book's cover, symbolizes its aqueous conditions: an alluvial plain at the mouth of the Rhine. Having reclaimed the land, and recovered from the many difficulties that have beset their history, the Dutch are proud of what they have made. The collective cooperation of what is termed 'The Polder Model,' is what Betsky cites as central to the Netherlands success. Everything is discussed and consensual agreement reached before anyone can leave the table. Perhaps one of the few mistakes the Dutch have made, is in exporting their invention of 'Big Brother' instead of that of the 'The Polder Model,' which could have been put to good use in parts of the world where willingness for collective cooperation has been somewhat harder to achieve.



"Political will delivers targeted subsidies and incentives to facilitate experimentation and research."

Through his essays, Betsky suggests that the historical spirituality of the Netherlands has been re-directed into art, making it such a highly visual culture. The realist tradition in painting – held like a mirror to the world – has found its way into the modus operandi of Dutch designers who are often referred to by critics as "Dirty Realists."

Characteristic Dutch frankness and self-criticism have nurtured design debate. *Archis*, the international architectural magazine based in Rotterdam, is typically probing and critical. An engine for cultural debate, their declared motto is "without friction there is no shine." Each new architectural project comes in for critical review. No one is immune. In **False Flat** there is nowhere to hide. Disagreements and criticism are aired, debated and resolved in public. The Dutch expect criticism and welcome debate as a way of life.

Director of The Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) since

2001, Betsky is also a qualified architect who drives the cultural agenda behind this famous institution. Culture, he believes is essentially political. Initiatives are shaped and supported at the highest political level. Architecture is a subject to be discussed in the Dutch Parliament. The Ministry of Spatial Planning, Housing and the Environment (VROM), work with all the other ministries and agencies to secure and fund strategic planning initiatives.

Political will delivers targeted subsidies and incentives to facilitate experimentation and research. What other country would commission one of its most famous group of young architects (MVRDV) to study the implications of pig farming in the landscape, and then take the proposal for seventy six towers that are seven hundred meters tall, seriously? The planning system has also been reformed to encourage participation and innovation. 'Quality Teams' are now common practice. ▶

► Young architects and designers are encouraged and valued, with numerous prizes and grants to promote both travel and research. Commissions are directed to younger practices as part of a highly pro-active architecture policy.

While some critics have hinted that the golden age of Dutch design is over, Betsky is keen to discuss the impact of the current slow down in the economy and the political shifts and rising multicultural tensions that are taking shape in the Netherlands. He questions also the gender imbalance in high profile Dutch architecture. But in the end, he turns always back to the redeeming qualities of cooperation implicit in Dutch culture.

In tandem with Betsky's essays, and presented as a stamp book collection of images, Adam Eeuwens takes us on a detailed review of the work of all the major designers, architects and graphic designers. Droog, West 8, Experimental Jetset, Van Berkle and Bos, Women on Waves and Crimson are some of the many names featured.



As the book closes with this list of famous names, the text dissolves once more into the sea of words that opened the book. Suitably for a country that is 27% below sea level, we are left pondering the presence and delicate balance of the horizon. **False Flat** is a useful guidebook for anyone interested in exploring the wide horizons of

Dutch design. Like their landscape, it has been carefully cultivated. ●

Paul Clarke

FALSE FLAT Why Dutch Design Is so Good

By: Aaron Betsky with Adam Eeuwens
Published by: Phaidon 400pp Hardback
Price: £35 www.phaidon.com

“This volume will appeal to the design student and design lover in equal measure, and to those with a broader interest in the history of continental Modernism.”

Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999) was a brilliant interior designer, noted for her close association with Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. Perriand worked on furniture design with Corbusier, in his studio, for ten years from 1927, and afterwards under her own signature she produced an oeuvre of work that in the words of the editor of this volume, Arthur Ruedg, ‘along with Andre Bloc, Pierre Jeanneret, Serge Mouille, Alexandre Noll and Jean Prouve, defined the quality of the modern French interior after the war’. In other words, she was a significant figure and worthy of attention.

After Perriand died, a large compendium of annotated notes and drawings was discovered in her cellar-archive, and it is these that are reproduced in facsimile form here, along with a sizeable, detailed and contextually illustrated introduction and chronology. The facsimile itself is fascinating, allowing the reader to

chart the development of Perriand's work, as well as that of the Corb/Jeanerret/Perriand trio – their work is epitomised by the ‘Fauteuil Grand Confort’ and the ‘Chaise Longue Basculante’. The introduction, meanwhile, is very well done, with a wealth of good black-and-white shots of Modernist interiors displaying the iconic furniture (not to mention views of the inside of the houses themselves, such as Le Corbusier's Pavilion Church). One can't help also being charmed by the old photographs included of Perriand herself – with her short, slick hair, the very latest modern 1920s/30s clothes and fresh-faced demeanour, she looks like she fully enjoyed life and being at the cutting edge of ‘design society’.

This volume will appeal to the design student and design lover in equal measure, and to those with a

broader interest in the history of continental Modernism. ●

Paul Harron

Charlotte Perriand: Livre de Bord, 1928-1933
Edited by Arthur Ruedg, Birkhauser
286pp Hardback

CHARLOTTE PERRIAND: LIVRE DE BORD, 1928-1933

Edited by Arthur Ruedg

