
Welcome to TOMMOR- ROW land

While the phrase “starchitect” has entered into common day parlance, in the case of Winka Dubbeldam, the title is almost lacking. Here she talks about the future of the field, what it means to be sustainable in design, and the next generation of architects.

BY MATTHEW FRANCIS



Archi-Tectonics proposed design for a mixed-use structure near Manhattan's The South Street Sea Port

Founder and principal of the groundbreaking firm, Archi-Tectonics, as well as Chair of the graduate architecture program at University of Pennsylvania School of Design, Winka Dubbeldam is a force in the field of architecture today. With an innovative approach to design that incorporates an emphasis upon sustainability, urban renewal, and the desire to engage with local inhabitants, she has come to be regarded as a pioneer in a field that has often overlooked its impact upon broader social communities.

The recipient of numerous prizes, whose work has been exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Dubbeldam's architectural practice has been the subject numerous publications and scholarly articles. Dubbeldam sat down with *FourTwoNine* to discuss her recent projects and the key theories that underline her very active practice.

Matthew Francis

You have several projects on the horizon at this time, both residential and commercial, are there any that you are particularly excited about.

Winka Dubbeldam

Yes, well one project I am excited about is the waterfront development in New Rochelle, New York, where we were asked to develop a concept that aims to rehabilitate an urban site and more fully integrate it within its environmental context.

Where also entering into a new area for the firm, specifically, the production of a line of furniture. For several years we have designed one-off furniture pieces for specific projects – a client will ask us to do their home and often a piece of furniture for it, as we did for several clients at the 497 Greenwich property we built – but this is the first time we've had a furniture company approach us and ask to design a line of pieces for them.

MF That must present a new set of challenges for you in designing multiples, as opposed to the fabrication of one of works where you are largely interfacing with the production team in more direct manner. What are some of the complexities that you have encountered in the switch over?

WD Yes, there are to be certain a unique set of circumstances that differentiate to the two modes of production – the large-scale from the more custom made – but we've been real lucky to work

with a team that has the process and incredibly easy one.

MF A compelling facet of your approach to urban design is what you have termed Bottom-up, an approach to urban planning and design that you have incorporated in several recent large-scale projects, including your ongoing rehabilitation program for downtown Bogotá, as well as your proposal for the Chinese city of Jingzhou. Key to Bottom-up is a conceptual approach that prioritizes local and public needs, distribution of the population in key urban centers and the revitalization – or introduction of – green landscapes. For readers who are unfamiliar with this concept of urban planning and design, what is at the heart of the Bottom-up?

WD That's a great question. The essence of Bottom-up has been an concern that has been of interest to various elements of the academic community for some time, it is in fact not all that new, but it is not often found in contemporary urban design. We first really thought about the implications of implementing the Bottom-up approach when we commissioned to present a proposal for the redevelopment of downtown Bogotá. This was, in many ways, the first time the academic theory behind Bottom-up was intended to be put into practice.

Key to our approach is an emphasis on the revitalization of downtown urban centers, in this case Bogotá's. But what we found there is equally evident in many American city-centers where the people have moved out to live in other communities.



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Ordering obscure and unknown cocktails in order to draw attention to oneself.

See figure 1.

People come to work in downtown centers, and then they leave at the end of the day. This perpetual ebb and flow creates a lot of problems in terms of what an urban centers offer to inhabitants—with regard to services, utilities, even safety. When we began to look at the demographics of downtown Bogotá, it turned out that some 273,000 people live in the area, while something on the order of 1.5 million commute to it for work.

Also what set this project apart was that the clients in Bogotá have been—and continue to be—engaged with the middle class, for they make up the majority of the inhabitants in the area and are the. For first time in Bogotá too, there is a huge middle class and, perhaps, most importantly, that reflects a community that has greater access to means – the material resources needed—to effect change in the city. Archi-tectonics teamed up with Rodrigo Niño to launch “Mi Ciudad Ideal/My Ideal City,” a web-based platform that allowed residents to input their responses to a questionnaire we developed to gauge how their needs would be best met. This was an example of how Bottom-up works best.

- MF** And this differs because it emphasizes the community and its needs over the implementation of a design that originates in more abstract principles?
- WD** Well, traditionally, cities have been designed from the top-down. By that we mean that a master plan is drawn up and applied to the existing grid of a city – in a sense, it imposes itself upon it. There was little concern for the effects such plans would have upon urban centers of their inhabitants. It turns out such thinking is a complete failure in approach to urban planning. So we decided to the exact opposite. We spent a good deal of time researching downtown Bogotá, learning about the very particular points that needed attention in order to affect a sort of re-alignment for the city. I like to think of it in terms of acupuncture. With the smallest intervention, we could get the greatest result.

But just as importantly, not only does this effect a changes – like acupuncture in relation to healing – we saw that Bottom-up also had the potential to stimulate growth on the economic, cultural, and social level. It was, for me, a complete revolution in the way we think of urban development. As one exciting development from all of this, Archi-tectonics, in collaboration with Niño, was invited by Berlin’s Aedes Am Pfefferberg in 2013 to showcase our proposals and findings for an exhibition titled, “Downtown Bogotá/My Ideal City.”

- MF** There appear to me, in the Bottom-up approach, echoes of Jane Jacobs’ groundbreaking book from 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.
- WD** Yes, that was absolutely influential. But while she was revolutionary in her concept, she had never been able to implement it as strategy and that is where, as with the case of our project with downtown Bogotá, we could see many of these principles of urban planning

actually put into action.

- MF** And concurrent to your Bottom-up approach is something you refer to as Smart Landscape, which was a cornerstone of the proposal made by you for the New Rochelle-Echo Bay waterfront development scheme. What are the core principles that inform this concept of a “Smart Landscape?” It appears that projects identified as Smart Landscape often promote programs that entail a degree of environmental regeneration.
- WD** This is absolutely correct. One of the key ideas that inform our Smart Landscapes derives from development practices I noticed were taking place in America in the 1930s. A wealthy landowner would purchase a large section, upon which a property would be sited, leaving the rest of the land to remain undeveloped – in a sense, establishing a nature reserve. I was thinking about this as I imagined a proposal for New Rochelle’s Echo Bay waterfront. I wanted to create a landscape that was focused upon tenets of environmental preservation and sustainability. And while my client for this project was a hotel, as part of our proposal I really urged that we get the local community involved, gauging what they would like to have access to in terms of the waterfront. We were very interested in seeing how we could make this something for the city.
- MF** Relative to your own vision, how do you manage such a global practice when, as you have indicated, you are so invested in working at such a local scale?
- WD** Well the benefit maybe being from Europe, having grown up in a social democratic society, has made me quite aware of how many different cultures can operate simultaneously, and mindful of how they interact together.
- MF** Is there a new facet of architectural design that is exciting to you?
- WD** Well, what is absolutely fabulous in architecture is the ability we have to design things in 3-D, to conceptualize incredibly complex buildings in very in-depth, visual modalities that revolutionize the design process.
- MF** You are also the Chair of the graduate architecture program at University of Pennsylvania School of Design. For your students and other young architects, what do you see as the challenges facing them, particularly in the context of urban planning?
- WD** When I talk to my fellow faculty members, I like to say that I feel there is this interesting flip that is occurring in the field of architecture, in part, I think, in response to a whole new set of complex problems that face it – natural disasters, war, displacement of populations, income inequality and so on. As a response to these issues, we are training young architects to be very socially and intellectually responsible—to think well beyond the design of their structures and look towards a broader horizon of concerns that need to be addressed.

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