



Architecture in wood

Wood Works Onix. Architecture in wood
Hilde de Haan, NAI Publishers, 2009, (pp. 324, € 47,00)

The book was presented in Italy on 3 December as part of the conference *Il clima dell'architettura in Olanda e in Italia, tra costruzione e sostenibilità*, organised by the Dutch Embassy. Hilde de Haan has edited a text that tells a clear and well-documented story about the works and theories of the duo from Groningen (Alex van de Beld and Haiko Meijer), going back to their beginnings in 1995 when the two newly-qualified architects teamed up and began building small buildings in the area of their home town, before leading up to the more recent works, completed by a collective made up of around thirty professional and based in both Holland and Sweden. The studio, born in an area that lies a long way from the architectural spotlight, has always preferred to address local reality, investing their energy in research orientated towards the culture of the place and the use of a material. Wood is used more in rural locations rather than in the standard building of new Dutch residential districts.

In the land of bricks Onix has found a source of inspiration in the *schuur*, wooden farm sheds, typical of the agricultural settlements in the north east of the Netherlands. The model has, according to the architects, a dual valence, one is aesthetic – its pitched roof is a landmark rooted in the local imagination – and another functional – it is a flexible structure whose form suits a number of functions. The archetype of the rural shed has been metabolised in a highly personal and contemporary way. The work of the studio reinterprets the forms belonging to the past using a modern alphabet, retaining its own identity. The buildings are designed with care through each and every stage (from the first study models to years that follow leading up to completion). They are constructions that do not seek the judgement of professional or specialised magazines but of the inhabitants. When one visits a building by Onix one experiences a sensation of strange familiarity: an initial distracted reaction leaves the building camouflaged in the context, pervaded by the same identity as the place in which it lies. After a more careful look something subtle and measured makes us change our minds: one discovers that a traditional facade can coexist with an elevation that uses contemporary language, the primordial form of the pitched roof with a surface treatment that is typical of the present. This ambiguous reality, defined by the architects with the oxymoron *strange confidente*, does not have an exclusively philanthropic end - the identification of the inhabitants with their history - but has arisen above all from the research and personal history of the designers.

One might say that Wood Works transcends the 15 years of activity of the studio and deals with an exploration that began in the childhood of the two founders (the book contains an image of a house in a tree made by Haiko Meijer in 1969) or that perhaps is connected to previous generations, those that through their activities defined the natural-artificial reality of the landscape in which Onix were born. To paraphrase some of the metaphors used by the author and the architects, the book examines a story that seems to correspond to the biological life of a tree, which overcomes the generational limits of man and is rooted in the land from which it draws what is necessary for its existence. The choice of wood, as a material applicable to any part of the construction (structure, cladding, roof, interiors, windows) is described thus by Alex van de Beld: “ I think that an architect, in the same way as a painter, seeks to find the material with which to best express himself, in the most personal and autobiographical way”.

Wood is born from an expressive and autobiographical choice, it is part of the history of the architects and it allows them to build those forms and spaces that are in line with their sensibility and that of the inhabitants. After the early works Onix began to apply wood also to the roofs, creating that continuous envelope that has become one of the distinctive characteristics of the studio. In this way, houses, schools and office buildings acquire a sculptural and monolithic quality in which cuts, subtractions and thicknesses become events that contain the inhabitants and from which it is possible to observe the surroundings. The use of wood has evolved over the years; the studio has experimented with design after design, new possible ways of using it, placing themselves in a position that is halfway between architect and artisan. Onix work in close contact with those who physically build the designs, often participating in the construction, making the exchange with those who build it and above all with those who live in it, an important element in the design development. The studio works in a way that is open to variations, experimenting a collective and participated process (both founders are musicians and share both professional activities and a passion for music) where each new project and the people that take part in it, represents a new step in a continually evolving exploration.

Wood Works tells the story of this exploration, looking at the work of the studio, with over forty buildings constructed over fifteen years, revealing the thread that runs through all the realisations of the studio in Groningem. The central theme of the book, the use of wood and the local component, are combined with the broader vision that the studio has of architecture and man, in a path that is clear and coherent, or as Coltrane said in reference to being a musician “sincere”.