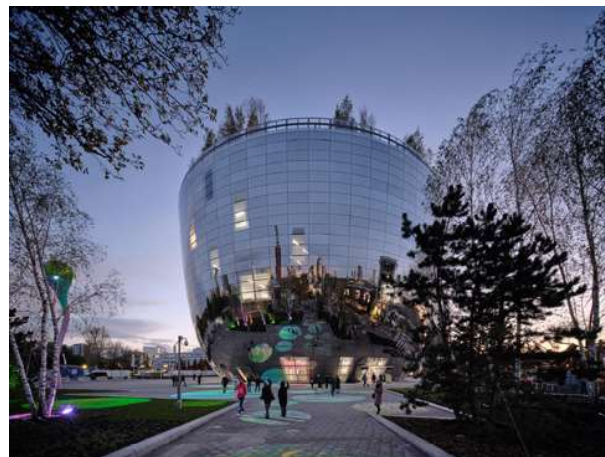


Telling stories of innovation through architecture



What is happening here? And why? For more than 30 years, architect and urban planner Winy Maas has been putting up buildings and designing cities that amaze people and make them think. Urban planning, architecture and landscape architecture are his instruments, which he uses to tell a story and make a difference. Together with his agency MVRDV, he works on the cities of the future all around the world. A look into the future city and the bottlenecks it faces.



A 'rock star architect', 'the Willy Wonka of architecture', who 'like an alchemist for a project in Seoul, turned concrete into gold fabric', when draped around a building like a robe. Clearly, Winy stands out in the world of architecture. Someone who does not shy away from controversy who challenges clients and policymakers to think further, sometimes in provocative ways.

It is also clear that the international community has embraced the Schijndel son of a horticulturist and florist. In his career, he has left an innovative mark on the design of the urban environment worldwide. "I started doing hands-on work. Through my parents' profession and through my education at the Rijks Hogere School voor Tuinen Landschapsinrichting in Boskoop, I learned about plants and animals. Afterwards, I wanted to broaden my vision, so I studied urban planning and architecture in Delft. It is this combination that has made my signature recognisable", he said in a recent interview.

Artistic architecture

Architecture is his medium, his way of expressing himself, says Winy. "I'm not an artist, nor a painter or a writer, although I don't shy away from verbal pressure. I can paint futures with my architecture, set up an argument or cause a manifesto."

He draws much of his inspiration from art, especially literature. Hence, he says, his firm's projects are characterised by trying to be readable. "Even if you are not a connoisseur of architecture, you should walk past it and wonder - what is happening here and why is this happening? The argumentative aspect of architecture becomes more accessible this way. Like when we designed Valley, a tower complex on the Amsterdam Zuidas with a lab, a 'grotto', offices and 198 apartments with balconies and loggias that stick out differently. People saw with their own eyes that plants could be placed on towers and that it becomes a vertical village when you do it right. And that, if you fall, you would only tumble down one floor. It looks a little daring, which is why it shifts the bar of what we thought was possible."

"I advocate denser, greener, more attractive and liveable cities. An approach to design that centres around user-defined, innovative, and sustainable ideas for the built environment, regardless of typology or scale."

Winy on this quote: "In that sentence, there is a whole shopping list of desires that future cities need to meet. The only thing that stands out is the word 'city'. Given that the worldwide population will grow with another three billion people over the next 50 years, the role that cities play will change. Most of those 3 billion people will be living in cities. With it, we can improve and green cities."

In any case, it shows that the future city cannot be described in one word, Winy argues. "It consists of many elements, grouped around three themes; social, economic, and ecological goals. Within those, there is still a world to go. If I look at the ecological goals, then I am faced with the task of changing all the materials, holding water, and cooling despite the huge heat shields that cities build. I also have to give animals more room. Then I have to cough up the energy issues locally and not plop them all on pastures. It's all incredibly complex."

"For the social task, the same applies", he continues. "You want to preach freedom and diversity. That means that you have to be able to influence buildings, that you have to be able to have a say as a citizen. Sometimes even collectively as a community. The Almere Oosterwold experiment is a great example, where people are allowed to do what they want as long as it doesn't become a hindrance to neighbours. You can clearly see the contradiction between freedom and responsibility looming."

Industry in the city

Winy is also an advocate of bringing industry back into the city. He looks with horror at the desolate industrial estates on the outskirts of cities, asphalt plains with buildings that are ecological disasters. "You wouldn't want to be found dead in these areas, but they make up a total of 4 per cent of the Netherlands. If any urban planning typology has helped to make cities worse, ecologically and climate-wise, it's these industrial estates."

Environmental requirements can be a hindrance. "We will have to work hard to alter industrial processes so we can live close to where they take place. We can't risk nuisance from noise, waste

materials or explosion hazards. The Noviotech Campus in Nijmegen is a great example of how to do that.”

Is there any city that is already well on its way?

“Many cities have grown through the industrial revolution. They are struggling with that task. I think Munich is an example of a city where they try to incorporate the car industry a little bit. Although it is not very clever to put the Bayern Munich stadium on the edge of the city. What idiot came up with that idea?”

Almere springs to mind, but it has a huge task. 45 percent of all its residents do not work in Almere. The aldermen are trying to bring companies there, which in turn has led to the selling out of the zoning they still had. That’s another huge task. It could be done there, though.”

And in a conurbation like Nijmegen, would that be possible there?

“Yes and no. That certainly applies to Arnhem-Nijmegen as a combination. There is also a lot of relocation in the area between the two cities. On the southwest side of Nijmegen, there is a number of industrial estates that I don’t quite like. Both cities are pleasant to live in. In Nijmegen, with its east and south-east side, there is a beauty to it that a lot of cities in the rest of the Netherlands lack. In new projects, I notice that their goal is always to radiate that same feeling, and the necessary knowledge is present. The Waalsprong created space for the river, as well as for the green areas that surround it. There is potential to create even more greenery. And if the area would be a bit more expressive, they might be able to position themselves as the two greenest cities in the Netherlands.”

In 100 years’ time

But in the slightly longer term, say over 100 years, he doesn’t rule out a ‘thinning’ process, where we no longer live with large numbers in high-rise buildings in cities, but much more among the greenery and the animals. “If we build everything ecologically, we’d be able to spread the greenery across the planet much more. We’ll need places where people can meet and live close together, but we’ll have to combine those with spaces for greenery. In this scenario, we build biologically – using elements that break down and recover themselves. The result is flexible buildings. Think of them like Barbamma houses – they can turn into whatever they want. Or compare them to the root of a tree, a kind of

Ranunculus of Hamelin, which grows around you and then disappears again in no time. Of course, this will have to develop quite a bit before we can apply it. These ‘thin’ structures have their advantages; they feel less claustrophobic, you are closer to nature, to your food, and they provide peace in social communities. But we can’t build houses like that yet, and it certainly presents a lot of disadvantages in the short term.”

The tendency to continue striving for denser components will therefore remain for the time being, says Winy. “Even more densification or still closer to nature, that’s a question for the future. That depends on our techniques. Let’s have this interview again in 50 years”, he says in conclusion.



About Winy Maas

Winy Maas (62) is an internationally renowned architect and urban planner. Soon after completing his studies in landscape architecture at the Rijks Hogere School voor Tuin- en Landschapsinrichting and then in Architecture and Urban Design at Delft University of Technology, he founded MVRDV in 1991, together with Jacob van Rijs and Nathalie de Vries. With his organisation, Winy is responsible for many award-winning projects, including the Markthal in Rotterdam, the Crystal Houses in Amsterdam, the Boekenberg in Spijkenisse, and the Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen. In addition, he has developed several master plans, including for Greater Paris, the Left Bank in Bordeaux and the waterfront of Oslo and the Almere Floriade.

Winy is also a professor of Urban Planning and Architecture at TU Delft. That’s where he founded The Why Factory, which explores the possibilities for the development of our future cities by focusing on the production of models and visualisations for cities of the future. He is also (co-)author of a dozen books on architecture and urbanism.

Examples



Tainan Spring is a public space design that includes the transformation of a former city-centre shopping mall in the Taiwanese city of Tainan into an urban lagoon surrounded by young plants that will develop into a lush jungle, reconnecting the city with nature and its waterfront. In addition to the new public square and urban pool, the plan includes improved public pathways, a reduction in traffic, and the addition of local plants.



Free design and construction will transform an area of 43km² at Almere Oosterwold. Limits are set to ensure the rural character of the area is maintained: 18% construction, 8% roads, 13% public green, 2% water and 59% urban agriculture. Freeland in Almere Oosterwold is proposed as a radically liberated place where you have the right to define your own living space. By not only developing your own plot but also all the necessary components around it, like energy supply and public parks, you do not only build your own home, but you also contribute to the development of your neighbourhood and your part of town.



MVRDV’s masterplan proposal to transform 35ha of former barracks and railyards in the centre of Bordeaux is an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to European urbanism. The design answers the question of how to create a vibrant neighbourhood that is in the tradition of the European city, but at the same time an update of it: historic, mixed and intimate - light, green, and dense. With the realisation of MVRDV’s masterplan, Bastide Niel will become a lively extension of the city centre with a mixed programme of 3,400 homes; 27,500m² of retail; 25,000m² of offices; 13,500m² of small premises for such uses as clinics, workshops, and studios; and 54,000m² of public facilities like a university building, the municipal archives, a cultural building, a community centre, schools, daycare centres, and sports facilities.



“The green valley that breaks through is the Zuidas of the future”, says Winy. With its landscape of jagged stone terraces, bay windows and balconies, covered in dense planting the valley brings much-needed greening to Amsterdam’s Zuidas business district. The 75,000m² mixed-use project contains apartments, shops, offices, cultural institutes, and a creative centre, highlighted by a publicly accessible “valley floor” located on the building’s podium, on the 4th and 5th floors.