

## **Architect looks for 'a room with a view'**

Award-winning Dutch designer says 'mobility is an expression of cultural identity'

*Christina Foerch*

*Special to The Daily Star*

Last week, Notre Dame University architecture students were told that "mobility is a room with a view." Rooms, they heard, are not necessarily only spaces inside buildings. "Looking out of the window of a train, a ship or a car is also a room with a view," Francine Houben explained during her lecture.

But the well-known Dutch architect was in town to explain, as well, about the First International Architecture Biennial in Rotterdam next May. Houben invited 11 cities, including Beirut, to participate.

NDU will be the gathering point for the Lebanese proposals, under the guidance of Nadim Karam, dean of the Faculty of Architecture.

This will be Rotterdam's first gathering of international architects, and its theme is mobility. According to the event's website, mobility "refers to the physical movement of people from place to place ... The essence is how mobility and its infrastructure shape and reshape the city and its landscape, in the past and in the future."

Essentially, then, viewing mobility "as an expression of cultural identity from an architect's point of view."

Mobility is a topic Houben is familiar with. Houben is a founder of Dutch architecture firm Mecanoo, and a professor of architecture and mobility aesthetics at the Technical University Delft part of Holland's "high establishment of architecture," according to Karam.

In 1999 Houben introduced the idea of mobility aesthetics in the context of spatial planning, and has since won numerous awards on that theme.

Before explaining her concept of mobility further, Houben talked about the importance of history in architecture.

"Your country consists of a thousand years of layers of history, mine only a few hundred," she said.

One of her first architecture projects to bring her recognition was the conversion of a church into an avant-garde theater, "avant-garde meaning no money," she quipped. The architect had to choose cheap materials, and she then was inspired by the nature of theater. "They work with light and with colors, so I did the same."

Later in her lecture, Houben discussed how the view from a car window of rows of traffic, with the roads lined with boxy office buildings and shopping malls, is becoming increasingly dominant. Urbanization is spreading almost uncontrollably, replacing nature and landscape vistas.

"It is a big problem. We must do something about it," she said.

Mecanoo made a case study about the infrastructure of the most densely populated area in the Netherlands, collecting facts about mobility and infrastructure: How many kilometers of highway there are, what means of public transportation exist along the roads, how many gas stations there are, where are they located, how many cities and industrial centers are connected by the highways.

Afterward, Mecanoo installed four video cameras in a car to capture the views along the highways.

The architects subsequently determined that most views were not pleasant at all. "We asked ourselves: Where are the typical Dutch landscapes with the windmills?" Houben said. Well, there were some left. "But we noticed the uncontrolled urban spread: Holland is becoming as suburban as the United States."

In response, Houben drew sketches of houses and high-rise buildings along, above and underneath the highways.

"The idea is to concentrate the buildings in one area, thus leaving room for the historical Dutch panorama of channels, tulip fields and windmills," she explained in her lecture.

She said that she likes the skyscrapers of Rotterdam, "the only Dutch city with a high-rise policy," which create the "Dutch mountains."

"Our landscape is mostly below sea level, so a concentration of high-rises is a creation of artificial mountains which I find beautiful," Houben said. "People can identify with these modern panoramas, as well as they identify with historical panoramas of landscape."

But does this concept work for a country like Lebanon? Beirut is squeezed in between the sea and the mountains, thus a concentration of high-rise buildings seems inevitable. But do Lebanese identify with the ugly concrete buildings rather than with the red-roofed villas?

"I am proposing solutions that are specific to the Netherlands," Houben said.

"Every country is different and therefore, it has to have different solutions to the same problem."

This is why Beirut's attendance at Rotterdam's International Architecture Biennale is so important for Lebanon. The most important criteria is to give a future perspective to the problems of mobility, thus creating visionary projects that can be implemented. Rotterdam will be the forum to discuss these projects. As for whether any of these projects will ever be implemented "I am not yet a politician," Karam said laughing.

He added that "NDU will collect the hard facts and make the case study for Lebanon. But the call for proposals is open to students and professionals."

The call for proposals isn't limited to architects only, however, but is open to landscape-designers, urban-planners, interior-designers, graphic artists, film-makers and artists as well. Although certain basic methods are required in each proposal such as the case study collecting facts about the city's mobility, and

the videos recording the views out of a car's window Houben "would like to see an interdisciplinary approach to the project."

The project proposals will be sent to Houben, who will select the best ideas to present in May in Rotterdam.

"I think it's great that Lebanon was selected to participate in the biennial," Karam said. "We should profit from this opportunity."

For more information check out [www.1ab.nl](http://www.1ab.nl), or e-mail [info@lab.nl](mailto:info@lab.nl)