

'I feel the need to photograph places with a history'

interview by Marc Feustel

You started out studying architecture. What made you shift to photography?

As an architecture student I was allowed to envision another world far from the existing reality. After I started working in the field of architecture I had to deal with reality instead and was expected to adapt to the tough practices of the new millennium's building boom without any space for reflection and critical research. As I searched for different strategies to develop my own little pieces of research, I became interested in the field of visual arts and especially photography.

What was it that drew you towards photography in particular?

When I was working in the field of architecture, I came across the work of photographers on the transforming urban landscape that seemed to contain hidden proposals for the future. More importantly the works were feeding the debate on architecture and urban planning. This drew me towards the field of photography and I decided to study it. The Düsseldorf school has had a major influence on contemporary photography.

Do you feel affiliated with any particular photographic 'schools' or movements? Who are the photographers that influence and inspire you?

The New Topographics photographers influenced my photographic practice, but the photographers or artists working with photography (and film) who most inspire me are those who construct layered worlds of imagery, or collections of images, mostly presented in the form of installations or spatial interventions that are open in their format and aim to start a dialogue with the viewer. One example is Aglaia Konrad who investigates the contemporary urban space and the side-effects of urbanization. She is building an open and endless archive of images as a source for installations and publications.

Your work deals with architecture, but perhaps more so with the urban and social landscape that derives from architecture.

That's right. My ongoing series and archive *All-Sided* considers architectural objects that have been displaced from their original ideological context at the time when I photographed them, but in most of my projects I investigate the urban and social landscape, or cityscape. Over the last few years, I have particularly focused on utopian cityscapes: realized dreams that have been invented as an alternative to the existing built world, the utopian thinking that underpins these and the ways in which these concepts have been generally perceived over the years.

The Netherlands was the starting point for the ongoing work and archive *Droom als er ooit een was* (A dream if ever there was one). In the Netherlands the post-war Modernist cityscape has become the scapegoat for contemporary social malfunctions and is being rapidly demolished. This demolition doesn't just lead to the disappearance of an architectural environment, but also to the loss of the thinking that underpinned it, based upon the Modernists' critical thinking and will to change the world. All of my work – in addition to the Modernist cityscape,

I have also studied the socialist and neo-liberal urban landscape – dialectically represents utopia as a failure, as well as utopia's fading historical importance.

You have referred to the Modernist and socialist utopias, but do you think that contemporary architecture is associated with an identifiable utopia? What might that utopia look like?

At first sight there seems to be no movement in architecture as universal as the Modern Movement and based on such a widespread manifesto. Nevertheless the book *De utopie van de vrije markt* (The Utopia of the Free Market), by the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis was launched recently, investigating the 'capitalist manifesto'. Achterhuis considers neo-liberalism as a utopia brought to life by Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), a book about an elite of neo-liberal utopians who break with the existing world to construct a new world of ultra-capitalism. The thinking that underpins this utopia is reflected in today's urban landscape.

Your photographs seem to deal with modern rather than contemporary architecture. Do you photograph contemporary architecture or do you feel the need to photograph urban landscapes that have a history?

I feel the need to photograph places with a history. In *Border Theories* I photograph enclaves with complex social and political histories that have experienced difficult times associated with territorial issues. These are places that are extremely susceptible to the utopian imagination. In this series I also collect newspaper articles, utopian planning maps, drawings, in short historical materials that can be seen as critical tools for understanding and figuring out the present and the future.

Despite the neutral approach that you adopt in *Droom als er ooit een was* and the architectural similarities between the locations in the series, one gets the sense that these urban spaces function very differently from each other. Were there any similarities or differences that were particularly striking for you when shooting this work? Was there one particular location that you were drawn to more than others?

In *Droom als er ooit een was* I focused on the post-war period, when large Modernist urban concepts appeared all over the world. The way that these have been dealt with over time differs from place to place, depending on social, political and cultural climates. I was particularly drawn to Lafayette Park in Detroit, a residential area designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In 2005 the French 'banlieues', an example of the Modernist project, were burning, and in many European cities 'superblocks' were being blamed for social strife. As a result whole city areas made up of tower blocks were rapidly demolished to make place for family houses. However in Detroit the burning districts didn't consist so much of superblocks, but mostly of abandoned family houses. Amongst these houses, I found Lafayette Park as a fully functioning example of the Modernist project.

You integrate excerpts from press articles about the locations that you shoot for the series *Droom*... More generally text seems to be an important part of your work. How do you go about integrating text with your images and what is the function of the text for you?

In my work I am in search of elements and essences that are both hidden and revealed. The texts that are part of my work are mostly rewritten from newspaper articles. In *Droom*... the images represent my own findings; the texts show their own truths based on remarkable (historical) facts. In between the images and text, there is space for the viewer to reinterpret the work and to rethink its inherent ambivalences.

Elian Somers *Droom als er ooit een was*



Palermo, Zen (2008)

Imagined as a Modernist concept of community life, Vittorio Gregotti's Zen holds a labyrinth of Mafia tunnels, lookouts and a firing range.

(The Guardian, 2008)





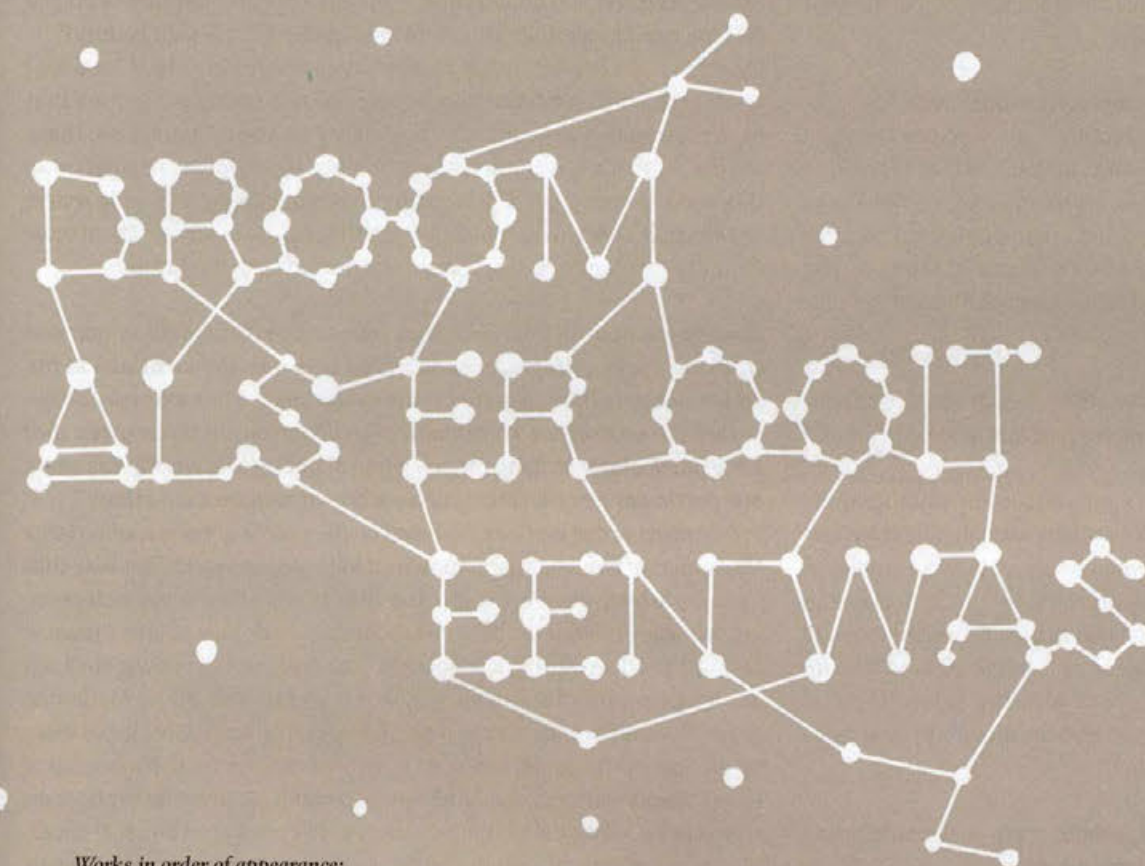


Elia Somers



Cumbernauld (2007)

Honoured with an Award for Community Architecture, Cumbernauld wins 'The Plook on the Plinth Award for the Most Dismal Town in Scotland' (BBC News, 2005)



Works in order of appearance:
Palermo, Zen (2008)
Brasilia (2006)
Detroit, Lafayette Park (2008)
Rotterdam, Kleinpolder (2006)
Cumbernauld (2007)
All images © Elia Somers

Elia Somers was born in 1975 in Sprang-Capelle, the Netherlands. She now lives and works in Rotterdam. She studied Architecture at Delft University and completed the Master Programme in Photography at St. Joost Academy, Breda in 2007. Over the last few years Elia Somers has been working on projects which examine the urban landscape, its architecture, utopia, the utopian thinking and the way utopian concepts have been generally perceived over the years. Text and image provide double reflections on the urban landscape and were shown in various installations, among others at TENT Rotterdam, Foam_3h

in Amsterdam and the Cobra Museum in Amstelveen. Current ongoing projects she works on are *Droom als er ooit een was* (A dream if ever there was one), *Border Theories* and *All-Sided*. Her newest project is about planned cities that just exist in their foundations and that can be seen as new heritage for the future. In this ongoing project, the first city she recently worked on and exhibited is California City. For more information, see www.eliasomers.nl

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