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Merlijn Hurx, Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century

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Merlijn Hurx, *Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century* (Brepols: Turnhout, 2018, 459 pp., ISBN 978 2 503 56825 6).

As for many of the arts that both contribute to our material existence and please our esthetic senses, the practice of architecture (and the building it supports) occupies a liminal position in our disciplinary schema. To design a building is artistic, to ensure that it does not collapse is engineering, and to bring it to fruition with the employment of labor and materials is economics. We might even go so far as to add that to occupy it in one way rather than in another is culture. We should not be surprised then that the study of historical buildings and the building of them, is equally riven by disciplinary divides. It is the rare research endeavor that can compellingly bridge the esthetic appreciation of art and architectural historians, with the market concerns of economic historians, while attentive to the technical expertise of construction historians, and knowledgeable about the broader cultural, political and social context of a specific moment in time and space. Merlijn Hurx manages to succeed beautifully at this herculean task in his recent book *Architecture as Profession: The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century*, an extended English version of his prize winning 2012 publication *Architect en Aannemer* which was based on his dissertation at the Delft University of Technology (2010).

His inquiry is embedded in a number of old debates, most importantly concerning the chronology of when architectural practice developed into a stand-alone design activity distinct from the nitty-gritty work of turning that design into a structure, as well as the geographic locus of that development. For both questions, the standard textbook answer is Renaissance Italy, and the usual reason given is that it was the time and place when the highest practices of antiquity were revived first and most fully. In this casting, the Low Countries are at most a bit player, and late to the game at that. Hurx does much to dislodge multiple aspects of the standard narrative, emphasizing the truly impressive scale of building in the Low Countries already well under way by the fifteenth century, its continuity of practice between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries despite developments in nomenclature, the impressive expertise of its engineering (particularly in the context of so much building on reclaimed marsh land), and the remarkable modernity of its economic organization. The kinds of standardization that we typically associate with much later industrial practices were already well developed by the end of his period of inquiry, allowing for both consistency of finalized products and

considerable efficiencies in the employment of labor and conservation of materials.

The level of Hurx's detailed knowledge of every aspect of late medieval and early modern design, quarrying for stone, training of skilled labor, the building process itself, and the political and social competition that spurred it all on, is truly remarkable. It is widely appreciated that the location and quality of stone quarries are essential pieces of the puzzle of late medieval ecclesiastic and public building, and Hurx does not disappoint on this important issue. His investigation of the Brabantine market for stone, among others, is as exhaustive as it is illuminating, from geology to ownership, to shipping, to the politics of competitive business strategies. But his remit extends far beyond the obvious. At one point the reader is treated to archival records of the cost of obtaining the large sheets of parchment necessary to execute large scale designs, as well as the annual provision for additional paper purchases necessary for both ongoing template production and the communication of information between designers in one location and master builders in another (243-244). It is his attention to this kind of easily overlooked, but in fact essential, minutiae such as the paper on which project development depended, that makes his book both a delight to read, and allows him to garner historical insights that might otherwise be overlooked. Large historiographical debates are not only fully within his grasp but are made richer and more complicated by the breadth and depth of archival evidence he brings to bear on them.

Historians of the complex political and social interactions among the numerous cities that populated the late medieval and early modern Netherlandish landscape will find much here of direct interest. Hurx makes a compelling argument that interurban competition was key to spurring the spike in civic building (114). Indeed, even ecclesiastical construction projects were particularly noteworthy for their explicit evocation of civic pride as the main fundraising strategy, unlike the more typical appeals to personal salvation found behind building campaigns elsewhere in Christian Europe. He argues further that it was rapid urbanization, in concert with architectural rivalry between cities, that provided the catalyst for architectural innovation (208). Without the great number of individual building projects spread over multiple cities at the same time and competing for the same design talent, there would not have even been an opportunity for architectural designers to specialize their practices such that they could remove themselves from the day to day work of supervising a building site. Urban growth, social competition, and artistic development cannot be separated in his account.

So while the late medieval rise of architectural practice in the Low Countries is his title theme, Hurx's book has much to offer to a wide variety of other specialist historians who might not ordinarily pick up a book with this title. It would be a shame if they did not. Florence, and the Italian Renaissance more generally, is not the only place to look for innovation in building

design and business organization during this period. Economic and business historians will also find a treasure trove of material relevant to their specialist pursuits including, but not limited to, the economic underpinnings of interurban competition for prestige, a remarkable case study of the effects of labor specialization, the rise of a new type of wealthy contractor active supra-regionally, the advent of the public tender, and a market-driven building boom that favored both innovation and standardization. As a bonus for those who enjoy beautiful books, this one is also a stand-out, richly illustrated with a plethora of carefully explained and clearly relevant photographs, illustrations, maps, and archival documents. Even the text font and page layout design are visually stunning, making Hurx's book a feast for both mind and eye. What better testament to his subject matter could we ask for.

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