

Losing grip on the world

*In the beginning, there was chaos
Man came, and named and
categorised each thing
and he felt that everything had its
place.*

*Man came and saw a heaven
above him and called it The
Kingdom of God
and he felt he understood what
could not be seen.*

*Man came and decided what was
good and what was evil
and he felt he had a purpose.*

*Man came and divided the space
between heaven and earth
according to human scale
and he felt at home on this earth.*

Robert Kromhof

The world is far too complicated for our limited human minds to comprehend.

For as long as people have been on earth, they have reduced the complexity of the world to an extreme extent to come to a simple, understandable view of the world. In the twentieth century, people are gradually beginning to realize that everything they believe in is manmade. Because before mankind was on earth, things did not

have names; there were no gods; good and evil had no meaning; and space had not been divided according to people's needs.

The security this simplified image of the world has given people for centuries is diminishing: science is beginning to see that it will never truly know things; churches are emptying; wars cannot be avoided by calling them evil; and people are no longer feeling at home in the constructed environment surrounding them.

The question is if we will succeed in creating a new and lively image of the world that will return the feeling of security and will make people feel once more that they have a grip on the world. Or is mankind slowly slipping away into a period of drifting?

The concept of being set adrift can be clarified by looking more closely at the aspect of "man and his environment". This aspect specifically shows how people have been trying to come to grips with the world from the beginning. The first people were entirely at the mercy of their environment; unspoiled nature was chaotic and harsh to them and therefore, it terrified them. For centuries, they have been fighting this "wild" nature, which has become visible in the far corners of the world. Mankind has simplified nature by turning it into agricultural landscapes, cultivated forests and spaces for people: the towns and cities from which nature has been more or less banned. People have adapted nature to their simplified view of man, and thus taken control over their environment.

Mankind has modified nature by *limiting* and *simplifying* the envi-

ronment, and by *structuring* it hierarchically.

Limiting

It is not the taking away of limitations that gives people freedom, but it is the opposite: setting limits. The first thing people or animals did was mark their territories. In doing so, they created their own piece of land: a place on earth where they were master of the domain. On this piece of land people built huts, with even narrower limits, but in which they gained total freedom. To each, his hut became the centre of the world, in which he was completely free to do as he pleased.

Limitless space will not have significance to man until limits are set; no matter if it is a bedroom, market square or car; the limits will define the space. People will not feel free until they divide the limitless space between heaven and earth into smaller spaces, adapted to their needs.

Simplifying

Unspoiled nature was chaotic and pluriform in the eyes of man. Manmade construction is essentially a repetition of identically shaped elements. And thus the chaos of nature was reshaped, through construction, to become order. What used to be naturally pluriform became uniform.

Another way of simplifying is achieved through the application of simpler shapes.

The simpler the shapes are that surround people, the quicker they come to grips with their environment. This is the reason why mankind has always preferred simple shapes such as the straight line,

the square, the rectangle, and the circle. These shapes are often used in modern-day as well as old architecture.

The simplification of the environment can therefore be attained both by repeating identical shapes and by applying simple shapes.

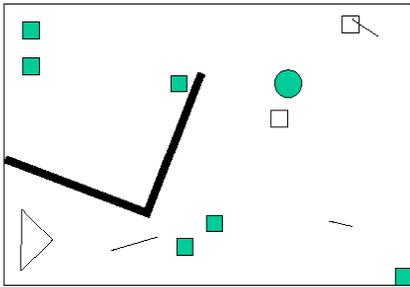


Figure 1. no hierarchy: chaos

Hierarchic structure

Contrary to chaos (see figure 1), in which people are unable to discern any structure, hierarchy is the structuring of elements according to their importance. Hierarchy works on the basis of a structured positioning of elements in a recognizable context (see figure 2). But two different hierarchic structures of equal value (see figure 3) can be just as confusing as no structure at all.

People need an environment that is structured hierarchically in order to have a sense of direction. When their surroundings have no hierarchic structure, people can feel lost. In an unstructured environment, people have no sense of direction and will lose their way.

The three universal principles mentioned above help people come to grips with their environment. It is important not to push these principles to the extreme because: limitations that are too strict will curb people's freedom; simplification to too far an extent will lead to monotony; hierarchy pushed to the limits will force people in one direction.

The three universal principles should create an environment that will more or less effortlessly support people's actions.

Example

The three universal principles are clarified in the following example of "the road system".

Limitation:

- the line along the middle of the road is a limitation that brings freedom to motorists.

Simplification:

- the white or yellow lines, the traffic lights, the road signs, the crash barrier, and lampposts are repetitions of simple and uniform elements; the road itself is also a very simple element because of its use of material and constant width.

Hierarchic structure:

- the importance of a road can be read from its width and use of material; most important is the tarmac motorway; least important the dirt road.

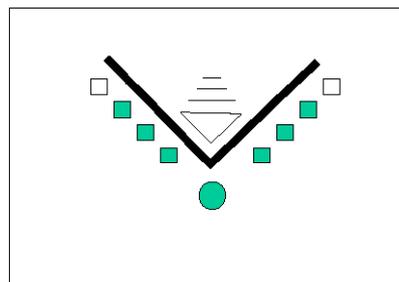


Figure 2. hierarchic structures:

- placing the largest element at the centre
- ordering the elements; largest element in first position
- symmetry

Lively image

Over the centuries, technology has blossomed: it hands people concrete tools to help them come to grips with the world. Technology has given us wings; eyes that can see across the entire world; and the possibility to get in touch with anyone without even having to get

up out of our chairs. Airplanes, TV, the internet; they are means that would have been brushed aside as fantasies centuries ago, but that have become reality today. On the other hand, there is no rise in religion, morals or aesthetics; each generation has to breathe new life into these.

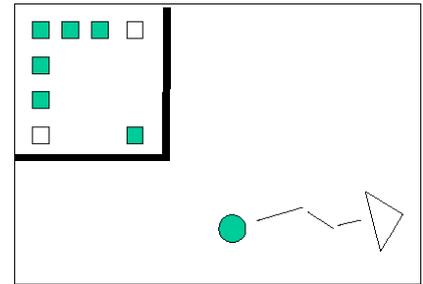


Figure 3: hierarchic structures:

- two competing hierarchies

Science, religion, morals and architecture are all methods of simplifying the incomprehensible world and turning it into an understandable one. People limit, simplify and structure the world in such a way that creates a world they can live in. This human view of the world gives people a sense of security. Over the past 2,000 years, many revolutions have taken place, but man's primal need to come to grips with the world has remained unchanged. This is why the three universal principles that are deduced from this primal need do not depend on aesthetics (taste), culture (values), and time.

Each generation has to start over again limiting, simplifying and structuring the world. Each generation has to start over again creating a lively image of the world in order to feel that they are coming to grips with the world. If they do not, they will lose their direction; lose the sense of solid ground beneath their feet; in other words: they will lose grip on the world.