‘Superdutch’ architecture has always been more of an export brand than an architectural categorisation that makes sense. There is no architect who likes to be associated with the term. It is probably one of those words that is best explained by what it is not: Superdutch is not a style, and certainly not a conventional style, it is not ordinary or common, it is – despite the name – not locally grounded or regionalist and it is most definitely not in favour of tradition. Yet Superdutch is a word that sticks.

Now that the revival of Dutch experimentalism is itself passing into history, one can again reflect on other sources as an architect in the Netherlands. The forerunner of Dutch modernism, HP Berlage, surely looked eastwards and not westwards for his references. It is possible to think that an important part of his rationalism is continued by continental architects and theorists of the city like Aldo Rossi and Luigi Snozzi. Berlage’s experiments were engaged with the durable city that was conceived in brick and stone.

Not all Dutch architecture is about wild eclecticism and compulsive innovation says Hans van der Heijden, and recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in construction that is ‘real, solid and urban’.
can take it for what it is and simply enjoy the architectural trompe l’oeil.

Big’s lowest-cost housing estate in Langerak near Utrecht makes an urban gesture in a site extension area that is still lacking vitality and architectural firmness. It is a large prismatic form, with rectangular shapes seemingly carved out. This is about composition and proportion and little else. The shape rests on a dark plinth that forms the entrance porticos, thus defining itself from the surrounding public space, distancing itself from the surrounding public space, and arranging in the overall composition.

The smaller scale work of these practices is in that sense slightly different. Joo Koehne likes to say he makes iconic buildings. The homogeneity of his office proudly shows a matrix of facade diagrams. Something similar can be said of a design by Wingender Hovenier for a low-rise estate in the village of Nieuwkoop in the western Netherlands. The village house may be articulated in a rural way, as replicas of cattle sheds or improvised farm houses, but here we find simple pitched roofs and neutral repertoire. The typological awareness that dwelling is deeply rooted in our culture is an obvious analogy with the stately domestic architecture surrounding the estate. The house-like articulation of the dwellings is downplayed by a continuous projection that runs around the yard, connecting all volumes on the site and framing the car parking that is provided between the houses. Both the front and back facades have double doors, the front doors a fraction smaller than the back doors. This arrangement makes it possible to think of the front yard and the back garden as outdoor living spaces without diminishing the status of the garden as a private space for withdrawal and the yard as a shared space for meeting.

Wingender Hovenier’s scheme for a small neighbourhood in Vijfhuizen plays at the scale of an entire block with 98 houses. Vijfhuizen is a village on one of the youngest pieces of reclaimed land in the western Netherlands. The physical context of the estate is literally minimal and has yet to fully develop. Since little in the way of useful architectural precedent was present, Wingender Hovenier had to work with general
The refractory and conventional requirements posed by our domestic culture on the one hand and by the building industry on the other are not denied. It is understood that any architectural representation is unfinished business in housing. Residents take possession and express themselves, either via their double doors at Vaartweg, their gardens in Vijfhuizen or their aluminium window frames in Bospolder. Such realism in architecture might be likened to performance in the double meaning of the word. Performance relates to the improvised theatrical act which is based on a given script, but also relates to delivery and result-orientation. Ambitions are clear. The work of Wingender Hovenier, Kühne & Co and biq is real, solid and urban. There are Dutch architects who have not given up on durable volume housebuilding.

architectural notions. Its proposal can be taken as an attempt for an architecture of the village. A variety of different houses types have been spread loosely over the block. The Dutch custom is to make blocks with strict differences between front and back. In Vijfhuizen private gardens sit between stretched houses. These are cubic pieces of architecture with yellow wire-cut brickwork, steel lintels and timber window frames in between. An explicit tectonic diagram allows a range of manipulations of typological and facade composition. One might think that the layout of the block responds to the small grain inherent to the notion of the village. The resulting visibility of the gardens from the street and the apparent typological variation contributes to the village idea. Yet the architectural object is clearly urban in nature. Its structural robustness adds to a more urban reading of the estate. With great precision this ambiguity is played out in a scheme where buildings, gardens and streets are approached as one integrated design problem.

In Joost Kühne’s scheme for the renewal of the nineteenth century Bospolder district of Rotterdam, the architectural context is hardly present. Kühne designed an ensemble consisting of a long row of three storey townhouses and larger apartment buildings at the street corners of two different perimeter blocks. The facades are brickwork, and window frames come in three different sorts. Most dominant is the vertical window, obviously derived from the historic sash windows found all around, and forming dense graphic patterns in the facade. In a slightly subverted move, recent and ‘incorrect’ local precedents, such as the folding garage door at street level and large gold anodized aluminium frames, contaminate the rigidity of the facades. The golden window frames have cast iron railings with a deliberately decorative appearance. The representation of the town houses is strongly iconic. They look familiar, but are actually unorthodox. Is this iconic? Is this nostalgic? Is it contemporary? Is it good or bad or indifferent? Kühne’s Bospolder architecture is probably all at once. The project has not been widely published, but is appreciated locally. It is again conceived as an ensemble and

integral design that plays at a the urban scale. The refractory and conventional requirements posed by our domestic culture on the one hand and by the building industry on the other are not denied. It is understood that any architectural representation is unfinished business in housing. Residents take possession and express themselves, either via their double doors at Vaartweg, their gardens in Vijfhuizen or their aluminium window frames in Bospolder. Such realism in architecture might be likened to performance in the double meaning of the word. Performance relates to the improvised theatrical act which is based on a given script, but also relates to delivery and result-orientation. Ambitions are clear. The work of Wingender Hovenier, Kühne & Co and biq is real, solid and urban. There are Dutch architects who have not given up on durable volume housebuilding.

Hans van der Heijden is a director of biq stadsontwerp, based in Rotterdam. The practice’s extension to the Bluecoat in Liverpool recently won Building of the Year at the Brick Awards 2008.