

Glass Farm

Text by the editors of Project.

MVRDV's Glass Farm in Schijndel, Netherlands is a representation of a traditional regional farmhouse: a hipped-roof structure that appears to have brick facades, a thatched roof and shuttered windows. These features, however, are not produced through traditional means of construction; they are expressed through contemporary technologies of both building and image manipulation. The Glass Farm is a steel frame structure clad entirely in fritted glass panels that are printed with a digitally composited image of a "typical" farmhouse produced from photographs of local buildings of the same type. The primary qualities of the building, and therefore the terms by which it must be evaluated, are achieved through various techniques of representation (in both three-dimensional form and two-dimensional image) and their relationship to the subject that is being represented (local context).

As these techniques encompass both the form of the building and its exterior finish, the Glass Farm calls to mind the terms "duck" and "decorated shed," originally put forward by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown as opposing methods by which architecture might signify its function and relationship to its context.¹ In this case, the Glass Farm is something of both—simultaneously a "duck" and a "decorated shed." A mixed-use building located at the center of Schijndel's historic main square, the Glass Farm has been scaled up relative to its vernacular referent and relocated to an urban setting, in both cases estranging it from the specific context in which traditional farm buildings were produced and used. However, it is not a-contextual if taken as a "duck": a hipped-roof building that signifies cultural context through its geometrical relationship to its familiar local referent. The Glass Farm's façade, reflective glass set among sober brick buildings, might be considered equally alien to its immediate physical context. However, this façade is also an advertisement for cultural context, a volumetric billboard declaring its participation in regional tradition.

A close reading of the project reveals numerous such ambiguities: the formal and material erasure of hierarchy between vertical wall and pitched roof through the wrap-around glass cladding, in which the eaves are suppressed—the emphasis of that hierarchy through the material difference between brick and thatch visible in the photograph printed on the glass; the over-scaled form of the farm house, clearly divorced from the material and functional constraints that once governed its form—the fact that the form coincides with the zoning envelope of the site, and thus is the perfect maximization of its usable area as constrained by contemporary local regulation (another sense in which the project represents an idea of context); the superimposition of images of framed windows on an all glass façade, both of which (repetitive punched openings or clear spans of glass) mask the actual strategy for aperture—irregular areas of the façade where the frit has been subtly erased.

1. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Revised Edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1977), 87-91.

The Glass Farm does many things at once, playing out not just one but many tropes of contextual building: vernacular form, vernacular surface treatment, reuse of existing building elements (through photographic collage), the literal application of images to the surface of architecture and the use of mirror glass as a means of literally reflecting context. Individually, these strategies are not novel or unique to the Glass Farm; they have been developed in other projects before. What is notable is the way in which these strategies are combined to produce new qualities that prompt questions of what it means for architecture to be contextual today.

This combination of strategies does not add up to a contextual building in any traditional sense: the Glass Farm is too big and too shiny; it is a gross caricature of a vernacular building set in the wrong place. But rather than evaluating the Glass Farm as a building that aspires to "respect" its context, it can be read as a critique of the ways in which context has recently come to operate in architecture: the pagoda shaped glass tower in China ("duck") and the delicately patterned geometric façade in the Middle East ("decorated shed"), one of which is grossly out of scale, the other that has little to do with traditional labor practices, materials or tectonics. Context today is often expressed through ham-fisted cultural appropriation and the self-satisfied rhetoric used to support it. By embracing these tropes to an extreme, MVRDV—who are here operating in their home territory—produces something like a satire of contemporary attitudes towards contextual signification in architecture, revealing the absurdity of pursuing such strategies as forms of contextual amelioration or cultural sensitivity.

"Ducks" and "decorated sheds," particularly the latter, were once productive terms of debate that provoked reconsideration of the relationship between form, material and signification, challenging the assumed authenticity of both vernacular traditions and avant-garde expression. The Glass Farm collapses the distinction between three-dimensional form and two-dimensional image as means of representation—the image superimposed on the form is precisely the same as the form, at the same time that it is radically materially different. The project reads like the knowing, untroubled successor to postmodernist anxieties over the relationship between representation and truth: any nod towards contextualism only reveals its own superficiality, but the layering of such superficialities into a new kind of synthetic whole, of the kind proscribed by more "critical" modes of practice, opens new aesthetic possibilities with a particularly Dutch mixture of cynicism and naivety. In the Glass Farm, the familiar material facts of architecture begin to dissipate as image and form fuse, in a way that seems appropriate to a moment in which the slick glass screen of your cell phone displays digital photographs precisely filtered to produce "vintage" effects from within a protective case perfectly wrapped in marble veneer.