



## other spaces

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**Hans Van Der Meer: Off the Shelf** by **Alastair Milne** (<http://www.sukotto.co.uk>)

Van de Meer's portrayal of Dutch small town life presents urban spaces empty of traffic and, almost, of people. Nature too has been relegated to a minor role, the odd tree remaining here and there, poking out of the concrete paving.



Yet these are not scenes of urban blight. True, the public spaces lack much warmth, disappointingly anaemic versions of the original architect drawings, but this is far from pure functionalism. Instead, we are presented with a hodge-podge of indigenous styles, a celebration of Dutch idiosyncrasy. The architects clearly want their buildings to fit in with the past, and with the determinedly small-scale of their setting. Of course, the modern efforts are usually not very good, but they are essentially harmless.

The modern Dutch town can therefore be seen as a rather dull reinterpretation of the past, a reflection perhaps of the innate conservatism of Dutch society. Here the supermarkets are not attractive, but they cannot be seen as threatening the very

existence of urban society, with their use of colour reassuringly taken from the primary school palette.

The few people in these photographs sit comfortably in their environment. They go about their business quietly, putting shopping into the boot of the car, diligently doing their recycling, getting cash out of the machine. They also talk to each other, just catching up, inquiring about the wellbeing of family and friends. This is clearly a civic society, ordered, peaceful and conservative. Yes dull, but protected from the vicissitudes of the outside world. At times, however, the lack of people can be a little disconcerting. There are really too few of them. Van Der Meer must choose the quietest time of day to do his thing. Perhaps he's up early on a Sunday morning. Or, more likely, all the lively people have gone off to Amsterdam. Indeed, Van Der Meer's series on Amsterdam traffic shows that place to be a crush of people and vehicles, all valiantly trying to get from A to B despite seemingly impossible odds. Well, that's their choice.

When I look at these photos I inevitably think of the paintings of Vermeer (no painter induces reflection more than Vermeer). Of course, even the names are similar; Van Der Meer, Vermeer. It is almost as if a joke is being played on us. If we look at Vermeer's 'Little Street' (Het Straatje) it has the same sense of stillness and order as Van Der Meer's photos. Again, we see nature relegated to a supporting role. Again, people go about their business calmly, methodically, as oblivious to the painter as they are to the photographer. We are looking at Dutch urban society, with the realisation that it hasn't really changed in 350 years. Yes, the Dutch are a conservative lot.

