

## THE REBIRTH OF EUROPE



English translation of Fons Elders interview in Het Financieel Dagblad

According to philosopher Fons Elders, Europe has a role to play on the world stage. However, the continent needs to rediscover itself first. The Conference Centres he is developing in Italy should become the laboratories for the rebirth of Europe.

Contrary to popular belief, Dutch novelist Willem Frederik Hermans was a warm host. A visit to Noam Chomsky stirred up so much suspicion at American Customs that an hour-long baggage check was not unusual. And Herbert Marcuse was so grouchy that he sent away visitors who came too late.

Fons Elders knows this all too well. He interviewed all three of them, as well as other eminent figures, like Michel Foucault, Karl Popper and Leszek Kolakowski. Elders was moderator of philosophical television debates for Dutch television.

“One of the things I discovered is how worldviews of philosophers are often diametrically opposed to their personality”, he says. “A perfect balance, of course, does not lead to art; a certain conflict is necessary. A thinker focuses perhaps on a particular domain which is incomplete within him. Alfred Ayer, for example, had an especially stable and integrated personality. But in his philosophy of logical positivism, he applies a sharp division between facts and values. Arne Naess, in contrast, was highly ambitious with a very strong drive. Yet in his philosophy he was actually the one to adopt a holistic approach, in which many different perspectives are interrelated”.

Like Naess, Elders is a holistic thinker. As author of works on philosophy, death, ecology and religion, and as professor at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, he has established himself as a solid systems thinker with a keen eye for interdependence and reciprocity. But he is also the exception to his own psychological rule. Elders lives his philosophy. He wears designer clothes as well as clogs. He lives in a rural farmhouse on the banks of the IJsselmeer, a huge lake that used to be the Zuiderzee (South Sea). Visitors are kindly requested to remove their shoes before entering – “just like in the homes of farmers, the Japanese, and Muslims”. When he speaks – and that he does like a waterfall – he switches with immeasurable ease between the ancient Greeks, Buddhism, the Cold War, the role of women in banking, the importance of recurrent fasting, and back again. The moment nebulous thinking threatens to make its entrance, there follows a down-to-earth, practical comment on financial models or horse breeding. He knows how to interweave these very diverse strands of thought into a self-evident, integrated whole.

### **Globalisation requires exchange of ideas**

Elders has never let himself be boxed into academic pigeonholes. That much is obvious. He taught at the Film Academy and various art institutes, wrote a book for children, initiated landscape artworks. His latest and most ambitious project up till now is also a reflection of his all-encompassing intellectual hunger. Elders is developing two Conference Centres, one in Sardinia and one in Tuscany. Their mission is to foster intercultural dialogue. For, according to Elders, “world conflicts are not only the result of the scarcity of natural resources, but of the deeply rooted differences in value systems. Culture is a key to economy. Just like in ecology, all these differences can be a source of wealth. At the same time, however, globalisation has moulded us into a financial and economic whole. We have to share a continuously decreasing space, whereby the perception of each other’s culture and motives becomes increasingly important”. Elders’ conclusion: globalisation requires a permanent exchange of ideas.

### **Intercultural awareness**

Intercultural awareness is something still strongly lacking in our society. “The Texan is so convinced

of his worldview that it is impossible for him to imagine there could be an alternative to capitalism and the Pax Americana. He sees himself as the endpoint of civilization; Francis Fukuyama even announced the end of history, - happily enough – he understands right now that he was wrong. The United States has proclaimed its national revolution to be a universal revolution. Here we see the union of the romantic and classical spirit, but in a very naïve form: an ongoing, linear approach when it comes to thinking about progress. This way of thinking is an application of Newton's definition of time as an independent, infinite, purely future-oriented entity. Such an ongoing, linear philosophy of Progress clashes with the ancient cultures of China, India and Africa. And with Iraq, off course, where collective memory can be traced back to Mesopotamia. Such an attitude about progress enables you to dominate, but it does not win you authority nor respect”.

## **Umanisti**

Elders has witnessed and experienced many cultures first-hand. The last four decades have found him in many different parts of the world. A journey around the world in 1970 made him aware of the social and ecological dangers of overpopulated cities. Upon his return, he bought a farmhouse amidst the pastures of Edam and immersed himself in the study of nature. A subsequent trip to the Dogon people in the West-African country of Mali inspired his reflections on the balance between individual and society and the relationship between private and public domains. The practical result of all this: **The House of the Four Winds (Vierwindenhuis)**, initiated by Elders, on Wittenburg Island in the Amsterdam docks. In this housing project, 90 privately owned apartments are grouped around a square, communal courtyard. Four tall towers are also communal, just as the 800-meter long external path that spirals along the various floors, all the way to the top.

Communal spaces were not the only thing that Elders came to value in Mali. “In Africa, I also learned to be patient”. And patience he surely needed. It took 12 years before his 17 million guilders housing utopia was completed. Elders has been working on **Salauna**, the Conference Centre in Sardinia, since 1990, the year in which he founded the **Forum 2001 Foundation**.

Michele Saee, former assistant to Superstudio's Piero Frassinelli who designed the **House of the Four Winds**, is the present project's architect. Elders: “Michele was born in Teheran, studied in Florence, lives and works in Los Angeles, Paris and Beijing. He is a man of three cultures, one who understands the idiosyncratic, global nature of our era like no other. Moreover, he is the grandson of a Sufi master; and beauty, enthrallment and serenity play a pivotal role in Sufism. This is clearly reflected in Michele's designs for **Hermes** in Tuscany and **Salauna** in Sardinia. For example, the **Salauna** building blends into the landscape and has an amphitheatre on the roof. It looks as if a large flock of birds has nestled on the hills. An appropriate image, in view of the function of the building. Here, visitors can land and swarm off again”.

The building permit – with a lease according to ancient Roman law – has been signed for the 100.000 m<sup>2</sup> Salauna location, near the Monte Limbara (1359 m) and the 2000-year-old city of Tempio. In Tuscany, Elders signed a sales contract for a second property on behalf of Forum 2001 Foundation. This 6000 m<sup>2</sup> property is situated near the city of Sinalunga in Southern Tuscany, in a beautiful, hilly landscape. “Initially, there were of course discussions about innovative architecture in relation to Renaissance tradition. My argument at the time was that we are acting according to the Renaissance spirit”, Elders says. “We are the true followers of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Umanisti. We embrace and follow their traditions by creating innovative forms for the third millennium, just as they did in their own time for their future.”

## **Deliberate coincidence**

Since he embraced humanism in the late Eighties, Elders' version of this philosophy of life has become deeper and more comprehensive. In his definition of humanism, one crucial feature is indis-

pensable: “A humanist is a person like any other person who, however, can be distinguished by his willingness to enter a dialogue”.

### **Chairs, chair holders and their sponsors**

Dialogue lies at the heart of the programmes in Salauna and Hermes. The most important actors in this dialogue are 30 “chair holders”. “They ignite the centre’s mental fires”, Elders states. “They are selected for their innovative drive and their ability to perceive cultural and societal tensions. They can be specialists in diverse fields: political science, nanotechnology, economics, communication. They can do research, work on a book, or meditate. A prerequisite is that they contribute to the institution that is sponsoring the chair: be it through a work of art, a new marketing strategy, a lecture, or ideas for a logo. New chair holders are selected approximately every three months. I also want a steady stream of musicians in the centre. Musicians are in the avant-garde of intercultural exchange; the world citizens of the globalisation process. Music brings people together and unites them, encouraging new acquaintances and dialogue”.

The architecture, which consists of fluid, interconnected spaces, is also designed to stimulate interaction. Elders: “The chair holders will be present in the public spaces at fixed times, will mingle among the guests and initiate conversations. The guests can be managers, politicians, civil servants, academics, or tourists seeking tranquillity, with an above average cultural consciousness and thirst. We aim at creating a deliberate coincidence by mixing together those present. In this way, a Philips manager can engage in a conversation with an African philosopher or a South-Indian computer expert. Everyone can contribute towards the insight that there are differences in insight”.

### **Salauna and Hermes: local and global**

The multidisciplinary Centres will offer courses in a wide range of topics.

There is room for reflection and meditation. Relaxation facilities are also present.

The kitchen offers – in the tradition of ‘slow food’ – authentic local dishes and dishes from the Mediterranean region in general.

The Centres will also provide online programmes through the Internet, combining Sardinian and Tuscan traditions with a worldwide network of Friends

### **Financing**

Elders is searching for sponsors for the chairs, which will cost approximately 50 thousand euros per annum. In return, the sponsors receive reductions and the creative input of the chair holders.

An idealist with a strong pragmatic streak, Elders is also looking for support from professional investors within the framework of EU-subsidies.

He is also setting up an international network, “Friends of Salauna and Hermes” Participants donate 500 euros à fond perdu, in return for reduced accommodation costs and free access to the programmes on Internet.

### **New Iron Curtain**

The drawings are impressive, the plans ambitious. One question remains: why Italy and not provinces in the North or East such as Friesland or Overijssel? This question sparks off an ode to Italy. “In no other country in Europe do you find such a tangible and palpable sense of history. At the same time, Italy is modern and in several domains avantgarde, such as fashion and design. One feels in this ancient country an unprecedented awareness of beauty, whether it be among intellectuals, entrepreneurs, artists or children of school age. This is tied to her history: 40% of all the art treasures on the UNESCO list are found in Italy”.

The most important reason, however, is a geographical one, says Elders. “Italy lies at the centre of the Mediterranean, the cradle of our civilisation, of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How we, as Europe, relate to this cultural space is, in the long term, more important than how we relate to Russia. There is a present danger of a new Iron Curtain arising across the Mediterranean Sea, separating us from the space of our origins and identity”.

The current migrant issue in the Netherlands, according to Elders, stems in part from this division. "A person like Mohammed B is the product of Dutch-Western culture, but he is incapable of bridging the gap with the culture of his parents. More serious is that he does not perceive this gap. Neither do we. This makes his murder of Theo van Gogh even wrier. In his television drama series Najib & Julia, in which my daughter Tara plays the role of Julia, Van Gogh exposed this gap by revealing mutual prejudices".

### **European unification**

He proceeds by placing the national integration problem into a wider context. He views the rediscovery of a European identity and unity as the primary goal of his Centres. He believes there is a crucial role for Europe to play on the world stage. "The United States has left itself behind, ever since the Soviet Union stopped being an opposing force. The US makes itself dependent on China, which finances its budget deficits, while China is a dictatorially governed megafactory of cheap labour, though there is an enormous potential for change. I hope on a transformation process, inspired and guided by Confucian wisdom. Otherwise, the growing gap between cities and countryside, between the rich and the poor, sooner or later, will inevitably lead to social unrest.

Only a united Europe will be able to play a mediating role between the US and Asia, be it China, Japan, India or the Middle East. Let Europe learn from its past in order to contribute to a more just future."

"Such a united Europe needs a heart, however. There must be more exchange. The 0,03% of the EU budget that is reserved for culture explains perhaps the "non" and "nee" against the European constitution. We must foster interaction through centres such as ours. I am convinced there is a need for such places; places where we can discover each other, savour each other".

*Fons Elders studied philosophy, contemporary history and philosophical sociology. Since 1989 he is professor at the University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. He built the House of the Four Winds in Amsterdam, and in 1990 founded the Forum 2001 Foundation. For a complete bibliography and biography see: [www.fonselders.nl](http://www.fonselders.nl). For architect Michele Sae: [www.michelsae.com](http://www.michelsae.com). Contact: [info.forum2001@xs4all.nl](mailto:info.forum2001@xs4all.nl)*

