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Bridges from Nowhere



Before last fall, this bridge existed only on the €10 note

Could a rebellious Dutch designer bring unity to the euro zone?
By Zeke Turner



Photograph by Ilse Leenders



Robin Stam, 30, is building the euro bridges partly for a laugh

In the early '90s, officials of the newly created European Monetary Institute, the predecessor to the European Central Bank, met to discuss what their new currency, the euro, would look like. They agreed that no one country's iconography should appear on the bills, since there were to be seven denominations—from €5 up to €500—and at least 12 member states. In the interest of fairness, the officials settled on generic monuments to adorn the paper money. The structures would be nowhere in Europe, specifically, but could be anywhere, theoretically. Now, as the currency celebrates its 10th anniversary with understandably little fanfare, and the monetary union appears closer than ever to disbanding, critics in Europe still question the wisdom of those initial design parameters and wonder whether they were symptomatic of a deeper fallacy. But they can no longer say that the designs don't correspond to reality.

A decade and a half later, in the fall of 2009, Robin Stam was waiting to pay for his dinner at Angelo Betti, a busy pizzeria close to his house in Rotterdam. Sitting at his table, he noticed for the first time the series of small bridges that appeared on the back of his euro notes. A young graphic designer with a jagged mop of brown hair, Stam began to research how the drawings ended up on the back of the euro. The bridges were designed by Robert Kalina, an employee of the National Bank of Austria in the mid-'90s, as a tribute to European engineering. When Stam, who has a rebellious streak, learned that the structures didn't exist, he decided to change that. He would build the bridges for the first time in his hometown, the humdrum Rotterdam suburb of Spijkenisse. "They chose bridges on the euro notes to symbolize communication between the countries," Stam explained in December,

"They chose bridges on the euro notes to symbolize communication. Well, that didn't work out"

sitting in studio space he rents with two friends in Hoogvliet, another suburb on the edge of Rotterdam. "Well, that didn't work out."

Kalina's bridges beat out more than 40 other designs in 1996 because, among other factors, they were totally uncontroversial. Each euro note's bridge represents a different European architectural epoch: classical, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo, industrial, and 20th century modern. The higher the denomination, the more recent the style. When the euro crisis started brewing, Stam set to work bringing the bridges, those woebegone symbols of European cooperation, to life. "I thought it was funny that me, just a regular designer, could take something that big and just claim it," says Stam, who is 30.

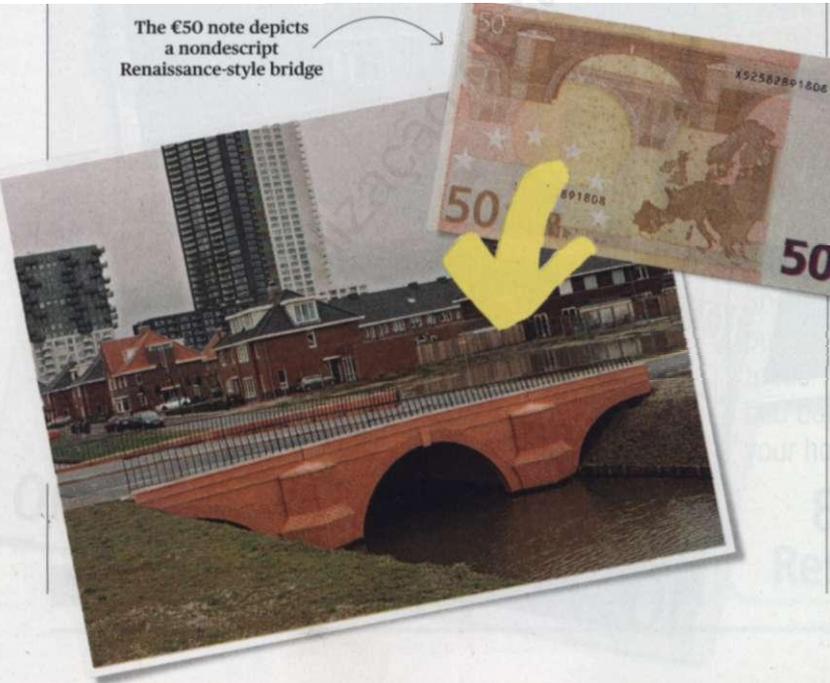
His plan was to build the bridges exactly as they appear on the back of the bills, down to the pastel colors, which would enliven his drab portside suburb. Partly for a laugh, Stam mentioned the idea of building the bank-note bridges to Spijkenisse Alderman Gert-Jan't Hart, who manages new construction projects on the city council. "I thought that was a brilliant idea," Hart says. "Every European citizen and every member of the European community who has the *biljet* in their hands will have a link to Spijkenisse."

The town happened to be in need of a set of bridges to support car, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic over a creek surrounding a new middle-class housing development, Het Land (the Countryside). "We already reserved the money in our budget for six bridges," Hart says. Because the development needs six and not seven bridges, two of the seven bank-note bridges, the €5 classical and €20 Gothic bridges, are being built as a split-personality 20-meter-wide dam. The entire project will cost Spijkenisse roughly €1 million (\$1.29 million). "The euro bridges are, let's say 25 percent more expensive, but all the attention is more than worth it," says Hart.

Stam, who has no background in architecture, teamed up with engineers to design prefabricated replicas of the euro bridges in colored cement to be trucked to Spijkenisse and installed onsite. He supervised builders to make sure the cast-concrete bridges would come out as faithful, structurally sound, embodiments of the bank-note designs. The emerald green, Baroque €100 bridge is Stam's favorite. "When you see the note, you see little shapes of angels," he says. "The little small angels on it are going to be huge, ugly abstract forms. It's going to be very weird, and I think it's going to be very pretty."

Kalina, the Austrian designer who drafted the euro bank notes, told *Der Spiegel* in November that he found Stam's project "very humorous" but that he wishes they were being constructed "in the actual old style of the bridges they were modeled on instead of the kitschy facade." He did not respond to requests for an interview. "He's a serious old man, I guess," says Stam.

The €50 note depicts a nondescript Renaissance-style bridge



A Bridge to Sell You

Self-styled civic booster Stam thumbs through the bills that inspired his structures in Spijkenisse

"The note's apple-green bridge is built in a **Baroque** style, which was hip in the 17th and 18th centuries and notable for its fine feminine shapes. In my version, the statues are enlargements of the shapes on the note, so they will look more amorphous."

"A **modern**, mid-20th century suspension bridge. This one, too, looks gigantic on the note, but it will be very small in this housing project. And like the €200 note's bridge, it will be made of steel. The others are made of concrete."



"This design is based on **Gothic** architecture, which flourished during the high and late medieval period. My bridge (a dam, actually) is exactly the same as on the note—it's going to be the same bright blue. Not really medieval, but pretty nice, too!"

"This is a bridge in the **Art Nouveau** style of the turn of the 20th century. You see many structures like this today, especially in Italy. Of course, bridges of this sort tend to be enormous. Mine is only accessible to bicycles and pedestrians."

Het Land, the site of the bridges, stands in the middle of a plot of land about the size of four football fields, near the center of the town. The houses, all modern variations on the same traditional Dutch red-brick row house concept, are listed on the developer's website for €222,500 to €392,500, depending on the model. So far the development has only two streets, both of which end in construction sites. "Everything slows down," says Hart, explaining how the construction schedule at Het Land has been delayed by economic conditions in Europe. "We're still building, only in a new tempo." Because money for Stam's project was set aside in the city's budget, the bridges will be completed by the end of 2012 even as construction of the housing development stagnates.

On Oct. 24, while representatives from the 27 European Union member nations were convening for a summit in Brussels to address the urgent problems in Greece and the euro zone crisis at large, the town of Spijkenisse held an opening for the first two completed bridges, the €10 red Romanesque and the clay-colored €50 Renaissance. Dutch Finance Minister Jan Kees de Jager was scheduled to attend the opening but was called away to Brussels, so Jan Franssen, the Queen's commissioner for South Holland, showed up in his place. The mayor of Spijkenisse, Mirjam Salet, and Hart thought it would be funny to play Greek music in the background while they cut loose a giant yellow and blue helix of balloons that had been attached to the €10 bridge. Some of the television reporters on hand for the opening asked Salet if it was in poor taste to play Greek music,

given Greece's economic woes. "They said you're mocking a little bit," the mayor recalls. "We said, 'It's a joyful day, it's a joyful project, so there must be some laughter in there as well.'"

Maybe because the euro design is so tame, it seems every European misses their old national currency. In Germany, the economic motor of Europe, there is still political and aesthetic nostalgia for the deutsche mark. An article published by *Der Spiegel* online in honor of the euro's 10th anniversary referred to the bank note's design as both "*schnöde*" (contemptible) and "*lahm*" (lame). Michel Prieur, a French numismatist, would prefer that European masters, great artists and thinkers, appear on the bank notes. "The people in Brussels are so stupid that they consider that if they would put Picasso or a painting by Picasso on a bank note of Europe, the other countries but France and Spain would be jealous," he says. "This is an insanity. Picasso is from the European culture. You cannot say that he is a Spaniard or a French. He's European! The guys in Brussels are so small that they cannot think big. They try to fight this nationalism, but it existed only in their narrow minds."

The windfall from the bridge project gave Stam enough cushion to start his own design firm. He confesses to nostalgia for discontinued Dutch guilders, which, in their last run, had abandoned any type of symbolism and were decorated with purely abstract polychrome geometric patterns. When asked directly what he wanted to say about the euro with the bridges, he demurs. "I totally think that it speaks for itself," he says. "It makes the whole project a little bit ridiculous or something." **B**

Reporters asked if it was in poor taste to play Greek music, given the country's woes