


Re-reading Dutch Architecture in Relation to Social Issues from the 1940s to the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

his paper seeks to connect the work of J.J.P. Oud, Aldo van Eyck, and Herman Hertzberger, the three Dutch protagonists to the dominant social issues that occurred from the 1940s to the 1960s. They addressed the following issues: poverty, the housing shortages from the pre-World War II period, the sociopolitical issues in the collective expression of the public, rapid economy recovery, large population growth, and white-collar labor in the post-World War II period. The author will examine the role played by the Dutch government in advancing a progressive social agenda, and will demonstrate both continuities and discontinuities between them.

Keywords: *J.J.P. Oud, Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Dutch modernism, architecture culture*

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of World War II, Dutch Modernism began to catch world attention, and its architectural movements were widely discussed in English writings, both its mainstream and rebellion in architecture discourses. Mainstream refers to buildings related to the 'quantity' of the post-war reconstruction and projects influenced by American culture or reflecting the new economic prosperity. Rebellion means buildings related to the 'quality' of architecture and life, the local social issues, and the critique of pre-war functionalism.

From looking at the history of Dutch Modernism, a distinct characteristic is identified in each of the three postwar decades, there have always been two or more evolutions and movements of architecture. Generations of architects proposed different discourses, either opposing each other or relating to different issues. Given this distinct characteristic,

one could say that the architectural community in the Netherlands was more open to the fresh ideas of younger generations than in other countries. Via the history, young architects unconsciously learned the rebellious culture in architecture. Therefore, in this study, the focus is on the architectural discourses of rebellion and their representative projects in relation to social issues that occurred from the 1940s to the 1960s. These recurring issues include; poverty, the shortage of housing from the pre-World War II period, the sociopolitical issues in collective expression of the public, rapid economy recovery, large population growth, and white-collar labor in the post-World War II period. The Shell (I.B.M.) Building in the Hague by Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, the Children's Home in Amsterdam by Aldo van Eyck, and the Centraal Beheer Office Building in Apeldoorn by Herman Hertzberger are selected to illustrate the issues of the 'quality' of architectural expression, of everyday life, and of working environment respectively.

THE DUTCH GOVERNMENT AND ITS INTEREST IN ARCHITECTURE

Dutch architecture is distinguished by its close relationship to national and municipal politics, so it is important to mention the rise of the Dutch social democratic government and its interest in architecture. The SDB, Social Democratic Bond, first won the election and sent the first socialist member to the Dutch Parliament in 1888. The SDB later became the SDAP, Social Democratic Workers Party, in 1984, the biggest socialist party of the time. Its main task was to solve the housing shortage and to provide better housing for workers. This led to the Housing Act, established in 1902, which consisted of two mandatory sections, number one and six, focusing on housing and city. The first section, "Standards concerning the quality of dwellings," forced the municipal councils to create a building code containing regulations for the quality of new housing. The sixth section, "Growth of towns," required the municipalities with more than 10,000 people, or with rapid growth of population, to draft an extension plan that had to be revised every ten years at least. In addition, the seventh section, "Municipal subsidies," allowed municipalities to pay government funds to non-profit housing associations for public housing (Casciato, 1996, p.20-26). The government subsidy was a very powerful tool for directing architecture and making it representative to the social situation of the time. Ironically enough, rebellion in general means resistance to authority, especially against a government, but the Dutch government itself during most of the twentieth century set rebellious policies in architecture against the mainstream that seemed to serve capitalism more than the social welfare.

THE HOUSING PROJECTS AND THE SHELL BUILDING (1938-1942) OF JACOBUS JOHANNES PIETER OUD

Since the Dutch government has had a major role in architecture and used it as a means to improve social welfare, unlike other countries, key figures of Dutch architecture have been largely involved in government-subsidized projects. In 1918, due to a very serious housing shortage after World War I, the government established a double policy: on the one hand, to build as many new housing projects as possible to ease the shortage; on the other hand, to restrict the scale of the building industry so that the economy would develop gradually (Ibelings, 1992, p.92).¹

The first prominent architect is J.J.P. Oud and his workers' housing projects of the 1920s. His projects illustrate the interrelation of government policy and the architecture discourses of the time. Oud began his profession with the government working as a municipal architect in Rotterdam the year after he wrote "The Monumental Townscape" (Ockman, 1993, p.103), an article published in *De Stijl*, October 1917. By this time, Oud had left the *De Stijl* group and joined the Functionalists. He proposed that the image of a city can generally be determined by streets and squares, and a civic monumentality can be achieved by determining space with "mass building and building blocks" (Polano, 1997, p.52). His position gave him the opportunity to put his idea of monumental housing blocks into effect in many districts in Rotterdam such as Spangen (1919-20), Oud-Mathenesse (1922-24), Hoek van Holland (1924-27), and Kiefhoek (1925-29) (Figure 1-4). The low-rise schemes of these housing projects were apparently responding to the government policy about a gradual economic development.²

¹ See Gaillard (1983) for more historical context of public housing policy in the Netherlands between 1850 and 1925.

² See Wit (1983) for a discussion about the difference between individuality and universality in Michel de Klerk's housing block III at the Spaarndammerplantsoen in Amsterdam (1917-21) and JJP Oud's housing block VIII in the Spangen district of Rotterdam (1919-21).

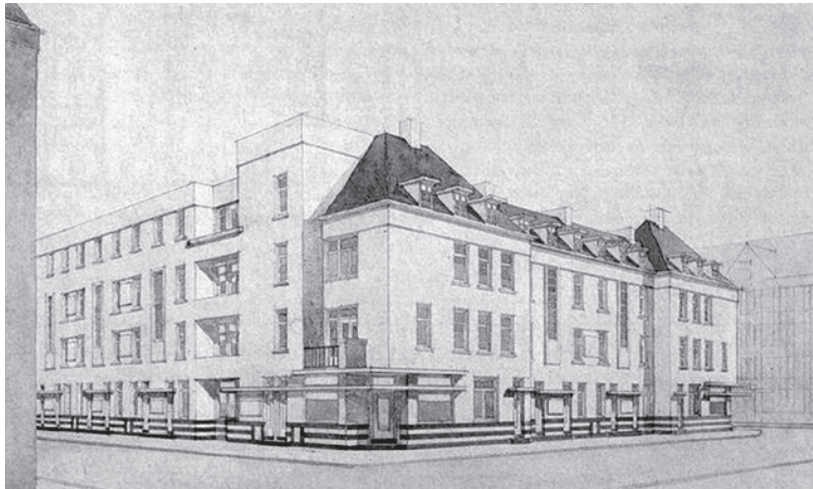


Figure 1:
J.J.P. Oud's design of workers housing projects of the 1920s. This figure illustrates 1919-20 Spangen municipal housing scheme. Retrieved from <https://i.pinimg.com>.

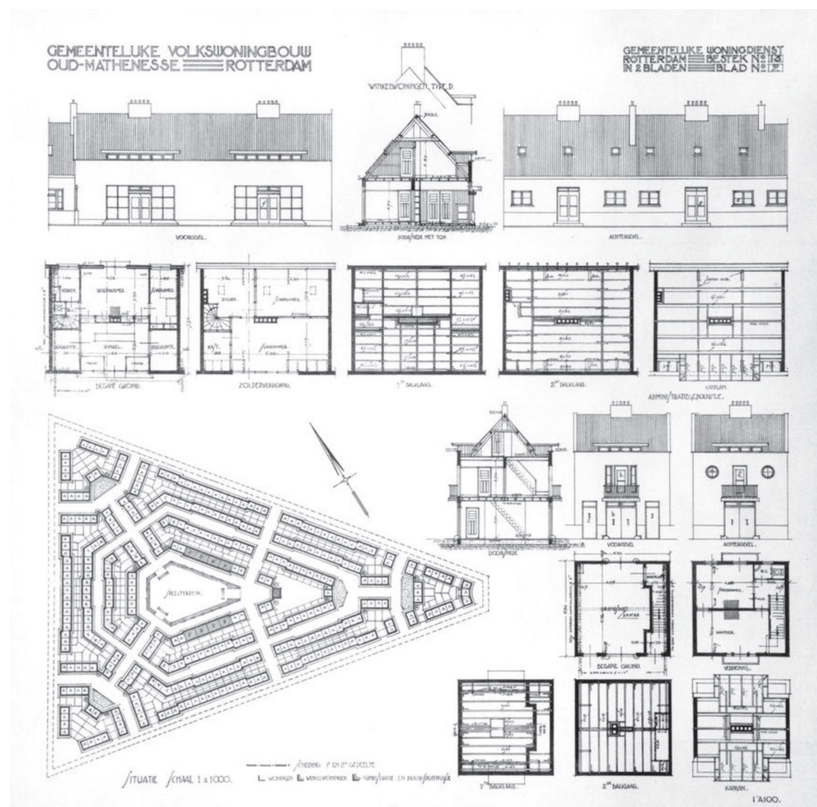


Figure 2:
J.J.P. Oud's design of workers housing projects of the 1920s. This figure illustrates 1922-1924 Oud-Mathenesse municipal housing scheme. Retrieved from <https://www.cca.qc.ca/img-collection>.



Figure 3:
J.J.P. Oud's design of workers housing projects of the 1920s. This figure illustrates 1924-1927 Hoek van Holland municipal housing scheme. Retrieved from <https://i.pinimg.com>.



Figure 4:
J.J.P. Oud's design of workers housing projects of the 1920s. This figure illustrates 1925-1930 Kiefhoek municipal housing scheme. Retrieved from <https://www.architecture.com/image-library>.

Oud's housing designs can be marked as excellent examples of Functionalism, and he should be credited for improving qualities in the social estates. Philip Johnson, curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was impressed by Oud's housing schemes. Johnson, together with H.R. Hitchcock, in 1932, selected Oud, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and Mies van der Rohe to represent Europe in the "International Style Architecture Since 1922 Exhibition," Oud was widely known before 1932 and gained an even greater international reputation within the International Style movement from this exhibition. However, he quickly lost status ten years later by the unexpected shift in his design of the Shell Building.

During the 1930s, Functionalist buildings took over architectural practice in the Netherlands, but there was also a domestic movement led by an architect Sybold van Ravesteyn, who started to reject the straight line of Functionalism and be concerned more about the emotional and artistic aspects of architecture. Arthur Staal and other young fellows joined Van Ravesteyn, and together they became known as Groep'32 in 1932. Van Ravesteyn

designed Tiel-Utrecht in Utrecht (1936), and reintroduced ornament into his architecture. This was about the same time that Oud proposed a design with strong monumental impulses for the town hall in Amsterdam (1937-38), and started to design the Shell Building in The Hague (1938-42) (Figure 5).

It is difficult to determine what are the exact reasons for Oud's unexpected shift in his design of Shell Building; the internal movement in the Netherlands, the World Exposition in Paris, the German occupation, the depression of the war, the desire for artistic expression, Oud's personal doubt about his early work, or it might have been the combination of all these. He wrote a retrospective essay for the Dutch "Jahrbuch 1957" ("The Work and Writings of J.J.P. Oud," 1963, p.308-309) in which he stated that there was a turning point in his thinking after he designed the house for Philip Johnson's mother in 1931. It had become clear to him that the strictly utilitarian nature and cleanliness of form had become a trap for him, not allowing him to express differences and feelings. He saw a danger in Modern architecture, and felt it needed to be protected from turning into a "purely



Figure 5:
J.J.P. Oud's monumental design. This figure illustrates 1938-1942 The Shell Building in the Hague.
Retrieved from <https://www.cca.qc.ca/img-collection>.

technocratic discipline” (Taverne, 2001). Therefore, he transformed classical ornaments to create unique decorations, for his architecture. He reintroduced traditional language, like the symmetrical plan, the imposing monumentality of the façade, the addition of ornamental details above the main entrance, on the side walls, and on the roof terrace. On the other hand, he integrated the International Style into the traditional, such as the glass staircases, the refined circular dining hall, and the vertical elements on the dining room walls (Stamm, 1978).

The Shell Building in The Hague came to be seen as defining his attitude toward International Style architecture. He indicated that, “The Shell Building is an effort to strive again after architecture as a matter of the soul. As a consequence you will find in it resources that through ages have proved to be good bearers of psychological feeling: of forms that have some underlying substance for universal apprehension” (Taverne, 2001, p.414). There are three principles underlying the Shell Building, that are consistent in all of Oud’s arguments: the architectural symbolism refers to the social status of Shell, the symmetrical form presents architecture as a craft and a science, and emotion in the architecture relates to the architect’s role in modern society.

From juxtaposing Oud’s early social work with the Shell Building, it can be seen that he kept exploring the cultural values of the time in relation to the place that architecture should hold within the society. He made the effort not to let architecture be molded extensively by economic and political considerations. It is also helpful to see the renewal of the issue of social conscience from the post-World War I into the post-World War II period. This continued into the 1950s.

ALDO VAN EYCK AND THE CHILDREN’S HOME IN AMSTERDAM (1955-1960)

Through the government’s regulation of a gradual economic development, the Netherlands achieved a solid growth and prosperity by the 1950s and needed no more economic restrictions. The scope of government-subsidized projects expanded to

support projects other than housing. The United States, in addition, initiated the Marshall Plan to support the Dutch economic recovery after World War II. As a result, there was a rapid growth in the building industry. Additionally the American way of life penetrated the Netherlands, in particular, “to youth culture (MTV, Nike, McDonald’s), business-speak (headhunting, downsizing), and the ubiquitous Calvin Klein underpants (available in any decent-sized shopping center)” (Ibelings, 1997, p.6). While the post-World War II trend of Dutch architecture was leaning towards modernization and internationalization, as evident in various factory buildings, commercial buildings, and shopping centers, the “humanist rebel” (Lefaivre et al., 1999) Aldo van Eyck was proposing a more humanistic discourse on architecture. Van Eyck, like his predecessor Berlage, had studied architecture at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) in Zurich. There he became familiar with the international avant-garde and became identified as one of “the youngers” of CIAM, Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne, or International Congress of Modern Architecture. Van Eyck and the youngers later in the first half of 1950s formed themselves into a group called “Team Ten.”

Van Eyck began his professional career in 1946 by designing public works in Amsterdam. After attending his first CIAM meeting at Bridgewater in 1947, he put his ideas concerning architecture of ‘everyday life’ and ‘situation-based’ designs into designing playgrounds. He turned vacant spaces in the city into playgrounds for children (Figure 6). His work and the work of the Team Ten criticized CIAM and postwar reconstruction for mass-produced projects being carried out in the name of Modern architecture that favored the guidelines of CIAM and the Athens Charter of urbanism. Van Eyck and the Team Ten, therefore, committed themselves to creating a ‘humanistic’ architecture against the ‘mechanistic’ ones of postwar reconstruction (Figure 7).

Van Eyck’s playgrounds not only pointed out the failure of Modern town planning, but also the neglect of children within the social conscience. Children had rarely been taken into account in architecture or urban design. Continuing this thinking from the playgrounds, his children’s home in Amsterdam (1955-60) brought him international fame. It was

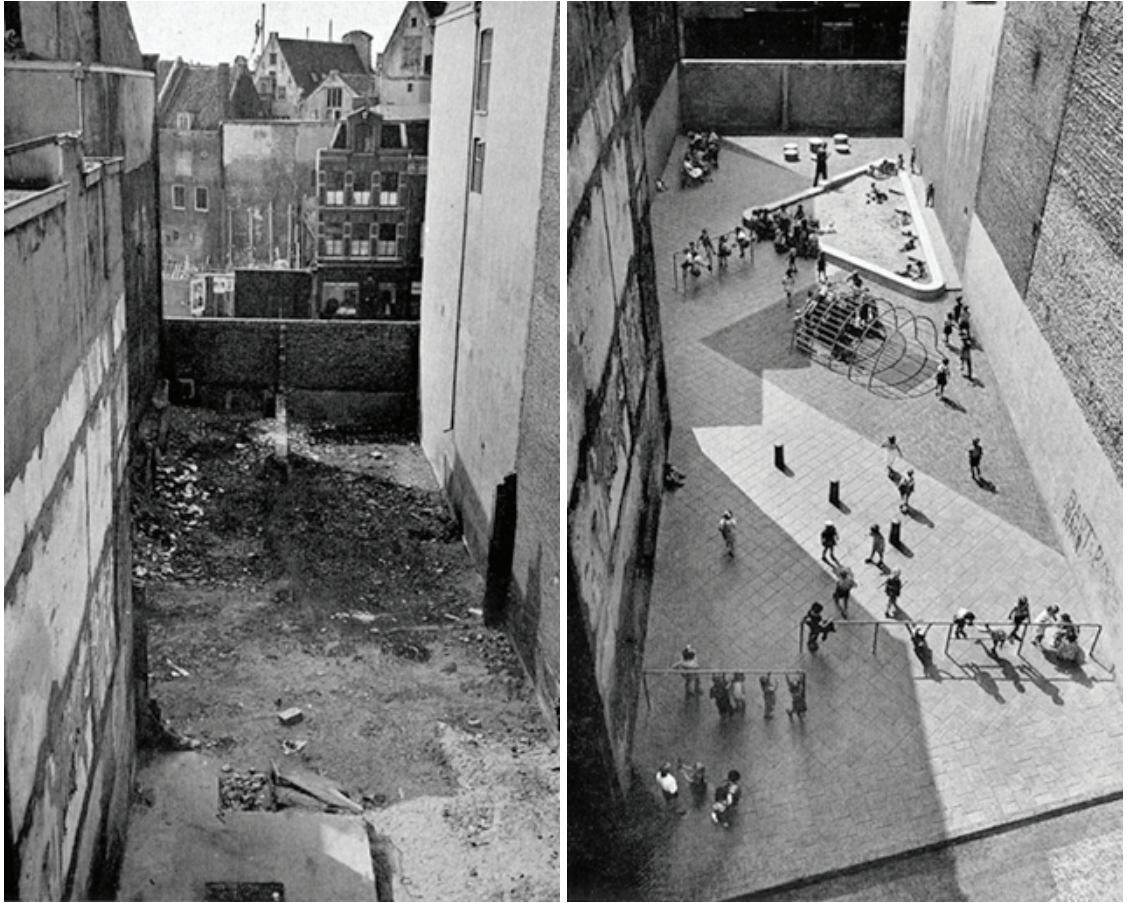


Figure 6:
Aldo van Eyck's ideas on the architecture of 'everyday life' and 'situation-based' design. This figure illustrates the before and after photos of 1954 Dijkstraat playground, Amsterdam (Lefaivre et al., 1999).

a home for approximately 125 children of ages between a few months to twenty years. The children were divided into eight groups: four mixed groups of younger children and four groups of older children. The children needed to be divided into groups because each age and sex had its own needs and appropriate facilities. These needs were recognized by Van Eyck. In order to organize the diverse complex, Van Eyck chose a "syncretist" approach for the design. This approach connected the classical,

modern, and vernacular traditions in architecture,³ and proposed the idea of "twinphenomena". The twinphenomena canons referred to the combination of the classical canon and De Stijl. Thus Van Eyck put the ground plan of the children's home side by side with Piet Mondrian's Victory Boogie-Woogie (1942-1944), with Cesare Cesari's classical canon in De Architectura (1521), and with Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren's composition diagram in L'Architecture Vivante (1925).

³ See Risselada & Heuvel (2005, p.63) for Van Eyck's Otterlo Circles, a diagram visualizing his "syncretist" approach in design, connecting the classical, modern, and vernacular traditions in architecture. The Otterlo Circles was presented at CIAM'59 congress, 7-15 September 1959, Otterlo, the Netherlands.

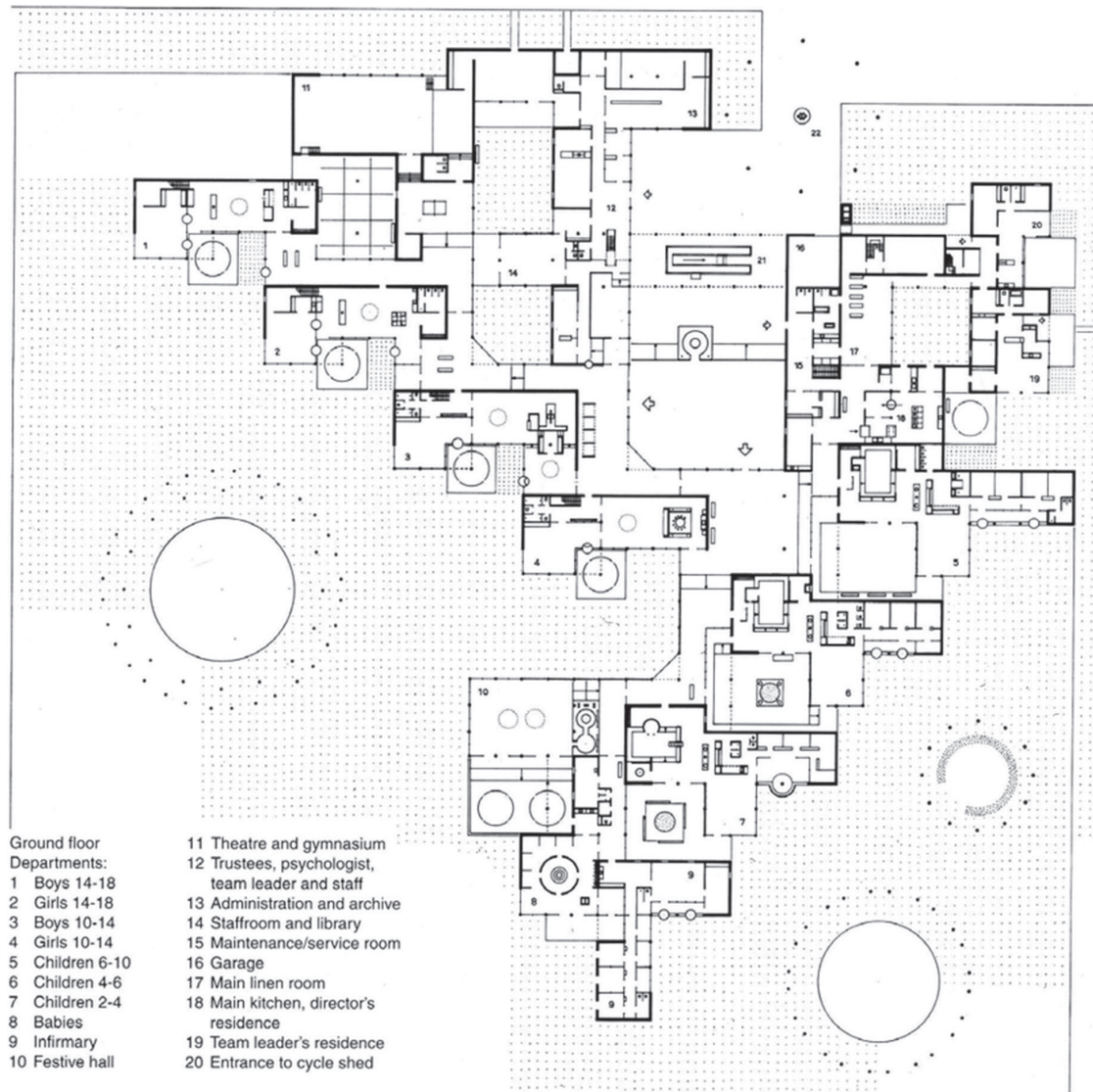


Figure 7:
Aldo van Eyck's 'humanistic' architecture. This figure illustrates the ground floor plan of 1955-1960 Amsterdam Children's Home. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Francis_Strauven/publication.

Van Eyck's ideas underlying the children's home included:

- the architectural "reciprocity" of twin sets: unity-diversity, part-whole, large-small, many-few, and etc.
- the idea of "other spaces," the present utopia, and the primitive structure that can be related to Louis I. Kahn's Community Center, Trenton.
- the idea of "path-based design," as opposed to the "universal space" of Mies van der Rohe's Crown Hall.
- Van Eyck also referred to Kahn's idea to give back "servant" spaces for better functioning and "served" spaces for human community.
- the idea of "inbetweening," interwoven centers, nested interbetween, interweaving of positive-

negative space, and interweaving of “competence” and “performance.”

- “right-size,” customized space, individuality of each age and sex group.
- “time-centered” and “polycentered” that the center can be shifted from time to time depending on children’s activities.
- the idea of everyday life, human community, and “dwelling.”

Aldo van Eyck’s ideas were an attempt to redefine the nature of work, play, collective event, and individual activity and to bring about a closer relationship of functionality, humanity, and environment. Above all, Van Eyck tried to solve the issue of alienation between people and their environments. His children’s home in Amsterdam became a prototype for the use of primitive forms, the heavy construction, and identical units in the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s leading to Structuralism in the Netherlands.

HERMAN HERTZBERGER AND THE CENTRAAL BEHEER OFFICE BUILDING IN APELDOORN (1968-1972)

The increase in the number of constructions,⁴ the large scale, the expression of technology, and the sculptural forms are the characteristics that distinguish the 1960s from other decades. These features were the results of a large growth in population and the economic prosperity that led to the new approach of city planning in the Netherlands. In the city center, new commercial buildings replaced old residential districts and factory buildings which were then relocated to the suburbs. The city accommodated an increase in automobile traffic. As more and more new developments were generated in the center of the city, the more expansion there

was in suburbs (Ibelings, 1995, p.110). Therefore, municipal subsidies gave more support for suburban projects. As a result of the population growth, the large increase in white-collar workers became the social issue that the Dutch government took into account. The government provided subsidies for office building projects that moved out to suburbs, supporting the building of the very best working environment in order to encourage existing staffs to move out of the city and to increase job opportunities for the people in other suburbs (Mellor, 1974, p.109). Centraal Beheer, a large insurance company, thus decided to move from Amsterdam to Apeldoorn and commissioned Herman Hertzberger to be the project architect.

Herman Hertzberger studied architecture at TU Delft with Professor Marius F. Duintjer who had worked with Le Corbusier before coming to teach there. Hertzberger’s early work, therefore, was Corbusian, such as his student housing in Amsterdam with its gallery-street theme. However, his work from the end of the 1950s was more strongly influenced by Van Eyck and his idea of “dwelling” in which everyone would feel at home and people would not feel alienated from their surroundings. He had developed a design series of an assemblage of repeated autonomous units to stimulate mutual contact between people including the Valkenswaard Town Hall (1966), Amsterdam City Hall (1967), and Centraal Beheer (1968-72). Influenced by Structuralist thinking, he started from the universal unit and repeated it, allowing units to be inserted, juxtaposed, interlinked, or interlocked freely everywhere (Figure 8). Due to the building code of the required natural light for every working space, he created a sky-lighted atrium that provided an inside window with natural light for every working cell. In terms of the overall space concept, he created a three-dimensional grid where the internal and external relationship was conflated. People were neither inside nor outside. The identical units of the grid provided spatial equality rather than a hierarchical order (Figure 9).

⁴ “Large” number of construction has to do with meeting needs of expanding population as well as quantity of construction.

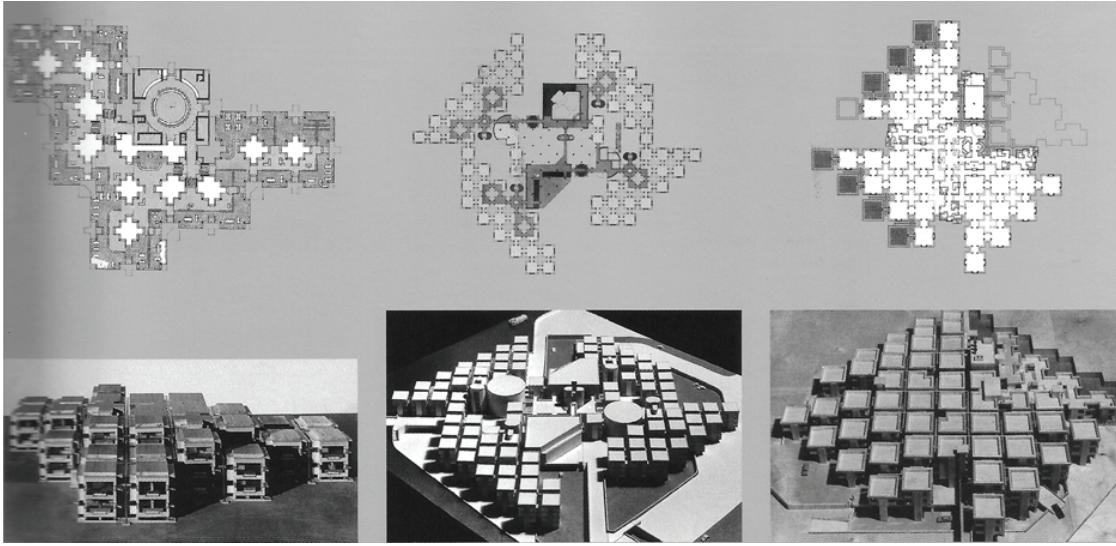


Figure 8:
Herman Hertzberger's universal unit in design influenced by Structuralist thinking. This figure illustrates, from left to right, Valkenswaard Town Hall (1966), Amsterdam City Hall (1967), and Centraal Beheer (1968-72) (Hertzberger, 2002, p.85).

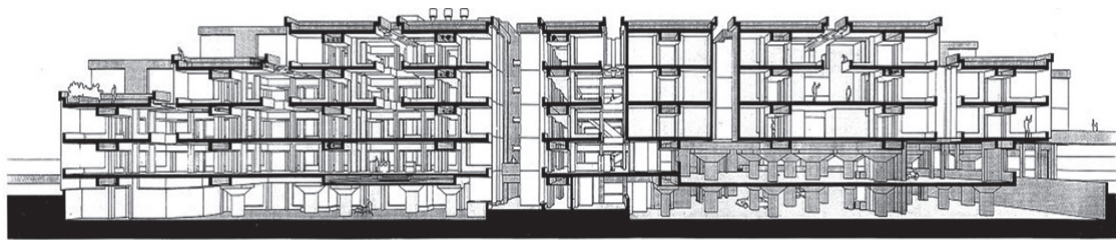


Figure 9:
Herman Hertzberger's conflating spaces. This figure illustrates section in perspective of Centraal Beheer (1968-72) (Bergeijk, 1997, p.54).

To create an environment where everyone felt at home, Hertzberger saw the office building as a house for 1,000 people. He tried to achieve a balance between personal identity and a controlled awareness of others. The working cells had to be opened to stimulate contacts between people but at the same time to be private. He did achieve a balance that improved contacts among employees

and gave them sense of belonging to the space, which they started to define and personalize by putting their own posters on walls and decorating their work station with flower pots. Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer successfully put Van Eyck's call for humanistic architecture and against human alienation into practice in the multi-story office building.

CONCLUSION

The discourses of Dutch architecture in relation to social issues from the 1940s to the 1960s were largely influenced by the social democratic government. The rebellious architects thus worked for the government on government-subsidized projects and public works, which were always concerned with social welfare. It would not be wrong to call them socialist architects. They allied themselves with those who had the same ideas to discuss, exchanged their opinions and formed a group similar to a political party. Situations change, people grow, ideas change, groups ungroup, but the original ideas of architecture for improving social welfare and quality of life continued. Thus the author believes that the architecture in the Netherlands will continue developing rebellious movements and discourses, distinguishing Dutch architecture from the rest of the world. The non-Dutch architectural community will continually learn from them as well. In addition, by looking at the selected three prominent Dutch architects: J.J.P. Oud, Aldo van Eyck, and Herman Hertzberger, and their work, it can be seen how powerfully architecture can shape and direct culture values in society at different times. It is far-sighted of the Dutch government to realize this potential of architecture and to use it as an important tool to solve social problems.

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