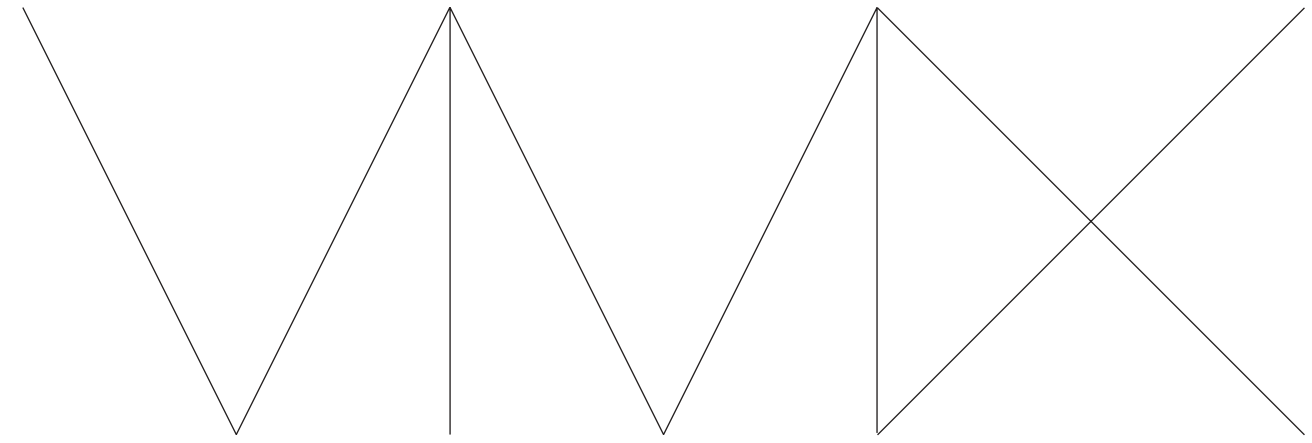




VMX Architects Agenda



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## PREFACE

The concept of time represents two extremes. On the one hand, time is regarded as a scientific instrument of measurement, anonymous and objective. On the other, it deals with the psychological effect of duration, personal recollection, and experience. An agenda combines both aspects. At the outset, a new agenda is primarily an anonymous notation of empty time. After use, the same agenda turns out to be a source of personal remembrance. Besides its role as a written justification of time expended, the concept also refers, at a more abstract level, to the (hidden) goals that one nurtures or has nurtured. In a society in which time is money, we are inherently inquisitive about how we have spent our time. This also applies to VMX Architects. Their own experience has indicated that the most frequently asked question from real-life practice has always been the one least answered. A true answer to the question: "How did you manage to set up an office and how did you realize your plans?" has not yet been formulated. The genesis of this office has thus remained veiled.

Within architectural history there is no tradition of charting this process of generation. The discipline is primarily oriented toward the built results that are analysed according to the rules of art review. With the VMX Agenda, we wished to prove that a different approach is possible. Instead of wondering about the results of its work, VMX posed the question: "What is the basis of our office?" — not in a literal sense but rather in the context of influences. Who or what has formed us and continues to inspire us? Flipping back through ten years of office agendas, the influences of architectural debate, social context, education, personal conviction, and coincidental action are gradually unveiled.

The history about which one seldom speaks has been recorded in the VMX Agenda. Personal recollections alternate with historical facts, speculations, and anecdotes. The narrative is both unique and generic. It is the personal history of the individuals behind an office, but also a description of events that are recog-

nizable to every architect. A speculative form of historiography was preferred above the more rigid approach of the trained biographer. With the question: "What actually happened?", the ghostwriter of this history has reconstructed the evolution of VMX in interviews with those involved. The VMX archives were also comprehensively investigated. No attempt has been made to plug irreducible gaps; the fragments found have been combined and ordered in time. The result is a narrative on how time was spent, on 'lost time', on time won, and on ideals surviving through time. The VMX Agenda is the truth inasmuch as we have been able to reproduce it. It is a description of an office, its working method, its euphoria, its frustration, and the context from which everything originated.

1994 — 1996/ VAGUE IDEAS

At the outset you have a vague idea. You start with ambition and you think you are going to rocket. You naively trust a group of people and you are manipulative, you have to be. Than you lose money extremely quickly, and there is a lot of waiting around and trying. But slowly you find your way.

## DON MURPHY: CORK, 1965

In 1989 I completed my architectural education at London South Bank Polytechnic, a typical left-wing university. It was the Thatcher era, in which the distinction between 'left' or 'right' was still significant, certainly in the UK. In the architectural education, the Italian theorist Manfredo Tafuri was of great importance. Le Corbusier, the figurehead of modern architecture, was depicted as the architect par excellence for whom architecture had become synonymous with technology and production. In the ideas of Le Corbusier, Tafuri recognized the destructive effect of capitalism, which he vehemently opposed.<sup>(1)</sup> In the capitalist process of civilization, the architect had become an organizer instead of a designer of objects. After all, the role of the architect was to keep people 'awake', to come to terms with everyday life and, above all, to improve the welfare and cultural values of ordinary people by means of architecture.<sup>(2)</sup>

Elements from Tafuri's work could also be traced in the ideas of Aldo van Eyck and, later, in those of Herman Hertzberger. These two were passionately searching for a more exact relationship between physical form and social-psychological requirements. To me and my fellow students at the time, the work of these Dutch architects was a major source of inspiration. Besides the icons of modern building in the Netherlands, such as the Rietveld House, the Zonnestraal Sanatorium, and the Van Nelle Factory, the topicality of the work of Van Eyck and Hertzberger was a good reason to organize excursions to the Netherlands. I first participated in this kind of excursion when I was in my third year, and I primarily remember the relaxed ambience of Amsterdam in that first acquaintance. Being used to London, which was rather hectic even then, Amsterdam seemed to be a somewhat hippy-like city where a blind eye was turned to all excess. This culture difference became even more obvious on a later excursion. During my stay in Amsterdam I bought a bicycle from a man on the street, unaware of the fact that he was probably a junkie and that the bike had almost certainly been stolen. It was an old 'oma' bicycle (bicycle for old ladies), black and without

(1) According to Tafuri, the Appel aux Industriels by Le Corbusier on the one hand, and the attempt to exert political influence via the CIAM on the other, were examples of the changing role of the architect.

(2) Because the building practice is always rooted in the capitalist system, architecture can never be socially critical. Architectural criticism withdraws from this system and that is its critical capability. In Design and Utopia Tafuri proposes a distinction between architecture and architectural criticism. In L'architecture dans le Boudoir he pursues this issue further. He writes that avant-garde architects have failed to build a better world and that the only task for architects is to create architecture without ideology.

lights of course. When I wanted to exit the station in London on my Dutch bicycle I was immediately stopped by a policeman who fined me because I had no lights. No one had regarded that as a problem in Amsterdam. This is only a trivial happening, of course, but to me it was a clear illustration of the difference between the open Dutch society and the regulated British society.

In the final year of my study in London, I visited a lecture by Herman Hertzberger at the Architectural Association. It was a marvellous lecture in which Hertzberger criticized the work of a then-still-unknown architect called 'Jean'. It turned out to be Jean Nouvel. Hertzberger showed hilarious pictures of what he regarded ill-considered architecture of the Nemausus building in Nimes. In an attempt to be original, Jean had had the house numbers painted on the gallery floor in front of the door instead of next to the door as is usually done. Of course, when the building was occupied, people placed doormats in front of their doors and various houses suddenly no longer had numbers.<sup>(3)</sup> Hertzberger was in fine form that evening and his remarks were very convincing.

When he mentioned that he was going to launch a new school for architects in Amsterdam — the Berlage Institute — I knew for sure that I wanted to attend that school, there was no doubt whatsoever.<sup>(4)</sup> I subsequently worked hard on my portfolio, which I personally delivered to the Institute in Amsterdam. Mirjam Jsseling, the study co-ordinator of the Berlage Institute who received my work, told me that I would hear whether or not I had been accepted in the first week of June that year. In my recollection, I spent that week next to the telephone until deliverance came: I had been accepted.

On arrival in the Netherlands, a new culture shock awaited me. I was accustomed to a political and ideological tone in the UK, but I had the impression that the students and lecturers at the Berlage Institute were completely apolitical. Even Hertzberger appeared to be no dogmatic ideologist but someone who man-

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Final presentation at Berlage Institute 1990-1991. In foreground, from left to right: Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Wiel Arets, Tadao Ando. Behind Hertzberger, Reinier de Graaf.

(3) Hertzberger was not the only person who criticized Nouvel on these points, the criticism was general. In the *Architectural Record* of June 1998, the criticism is challenged in a project description: "Nouvel presented the town with a pair of metal-clad caterpillar-like structures, jointly called Nemausus 1, that contain loft-type apartments. In a radical departure from the existing local stock of stucco-and-terra-cotta-tile low-income housing, Nouvel's design effectively dismisses neighbouring precedents, a move the architect justifies with appropriately leftist ideology: 'Bourgeois wallpaper and curtains do not guarantee that people will be happy in such places.' Although Nouvel admits that Nemausus 1's industrial aesthetic and loft-style interiors 'do not universally appeal, pleasing all the potential occupants was not a criterion for the project.'"

(4) The first prospectus for the Berlage Institute dating from 1990 indicates what Hertzberger was aiming at. He wrote: "The aims of the Berlage Institute are: to provide a first-rate postgraduate course in architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture; to promote innovative activities in education and research, both nationally and internationally, in architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture; to promote international cooperation between leading educational institutions in the fields of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture." *The Berlage Cahiers* no. 1 (1990).

aged to 'sell' his own work and ideas in an adroit manner. In the UK, I was used to well-defined positions with supporters and opponents but there seemed to be no good or evil in the Netherlands. No one knew exactly what the rules were at the Berlage, so that the programme made an extremely chaotic impression on me and disappointment quickly set in.

In retrospect, my disappointment is understandable. Hertzberger had a completely different idea about architectural education than I had. In the first prospectus on the Berlage Institute, he writes: "The Berlage Institute should not be seen as a school in the narrow sense of the word — somewhere which mainly concentrates on teaching — but more as an 'atelier', a workshop for project education."<sup>(5)</sup> And he continues: "The teaching is mainly carried out by visiting professors who are always invited for one project, that means in principle for one term. The aim is thus to provide the widest possible range of views thereby keeping alive the intensity and actuality which are prerequisites of a genuine architectural discussion."<sup>(6)</sup>

Hertzberger ensured these promises materialized, people such as Ando, Doshi and Libeskind were invited to talk about their personal enthusiasm for architecture. However, it was precisely this broad assortment of visiting lecturers that compounded my confusion. From their narratives, it was impossible to grasp a definitive ideology or notion I could follow. It was only after some time — actually only after my own study had finished — that my disappointment made way for the sense of excitement that Hertzberger intended. The richness and diversity of the programme gradually permeated my awareness and I realized that exactly the diversity of ideas and the directness by means of which we students became acquainted with the architects behind these notions represented the true education at the Berlage Institute. Besides the formal lectures various opportunities were also created to discuss with architects that one only knew from books or magazines. And once you got involved in the discussion you acquired the feeling that you would be capa-

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Night view of the design studios of the Berlage Institute in Van Eyck's orphanage house.

(5) Ibidem pp. 9-12.

(6) Ibidem.



ble of assuming this type of position in the future. The Berlage Institute reduced renowned architects to human proportions. On the one hand this was rather sobering, and on the other, there was a chance of overestimating oneself. In the first few years that I had my own architectural office, I suffered more than once from such overestimation. It turned out to be much less straightforward to be a celebrity architect than I imagined: this was the Berlage illusion.

#### Reichstag Story

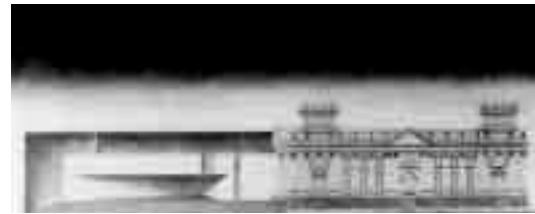
Before I came to Holland one of my teachers in London had put me in contact with Pi de Bruijn. Upon arrival at the Berlage I was offered a summer job in his office: the Architekten Cie. I was enthusiastic about the work of De Cie.

After the summer I received a phone call asking if I would like to work for Pi as a project architect on a competition entry. It turned out to be the competition for the Reichstag in Berlin.

We had almost four months to arrange things. I worked full-time and Pi came along regularly to discuss his ideas with me. Gradually, a concept began to develop. After some time, Jan Richard Kikkert — who now has his own office, K2 — was added to the team, and later still, an internee from Denmark. In the last few weeks before the date of submission, a team that functioned almost as an office within an office had been formed.

The final design clearly illustrates how much I was influenced by the work of Oscar Niemeyer at that time. It even went so far that I asked Pi if we could visit Niemeyer if we were to win the competition. Pi, a calculating man, answered “Yes”, probably because he thought that we would never win.

The regulations stipulate that we were allowed to explain our design with a limited number of panels and with the aid of two scale models — one situation model and one model for the meeting room. The panels were sent to Berlin by post, but I had to take the models by car. The idea was to drive to Berlin along with a fellow member of the office. A little nervous because I



Elevation of winning entry for Reichstag competition, 1992. The new meeting hall is situated on the left, on a new and elevated square.

had never driven in the Netherlands before, I rang his front door bell. But no matter what I tried, the door remained closed.

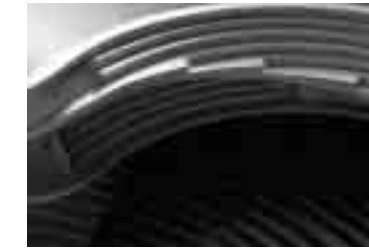
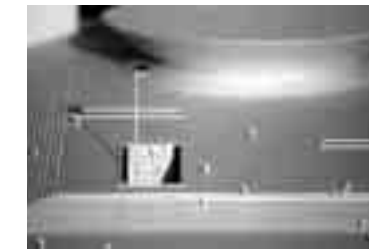
Because the items had to be in Berlin by the following morning, I suffered a light form of panic. In a kind of frenzy I returned home and convinced my wife Sylvie that she had to take me to Berlin because I thought she drove better than me.

On the day that the result was to be announced, I decided to phone the organizers in Berlin and ask them if there was any news about the competition. “Haven’t you received our fax?” was the response. “You share the first prize with Norman Foster and Santiago Calatrava.” When I called Pi to relay the good news, he couldn’t believe it!<sup>(7)</sup> The following day I flew with Pi and Jan Richard to Berlin. At the airport, we saw a newspaper: “Foster wins the Reichstag competition”. We knew that wasn’t the case, but Foster had manipulated the German media in such a way that the general public thought that he had won. At the exhibition for the winning designs it became clear how this misunderstanding had arisen. Against all the regulations, Foster had submitted enormous panels and various models. In contrast to Foster’s overwhelming material, our work and that of Calatrava looked rather provincial. It was simultaneously fascinating and humiliating to watch how Foster stole the show.

The specialist press was less outspoken in designating a winner. They saw shortcomings in all three designs, particularly as a result of the complex spatial conditions. “This competition had a significant problem: excessive spatial requirements force architects who were true to the programme to add extensions to the Reichstag. Thus, entrants were faced with a Catch-22 situation: whatever one proposed could potentially disagree with the urban design of the adjacent government centre.”<sup>(8)</sup> Arjan Oosterman, among others, commented in the Dutch press on Pi’s design. He emphasized the choices of the various architects to retain or demolish the historical dome of the Reichstag in terms of historical awareness. In his article, he did not say a word about exotic Niemeyer influences in Pi’s design. He stat-

(7) Pi kept his promise and I went to Brazil. When there, I phoned Niemeyer and visited him at his office. I spoke to him and he told me that Zaha Hadid had visited him the previous day and that he thought she was a journalist.

(8) Pepchinski, Mary. ‘Berlin struggles to accommodate a capital’ in *Progressive Architecture* no. 4, p.20 (1993). Complex preconditions arose primarily as a result of the simultaneous organization of the Spreebogen competition for the ground just to the north of the Reichstag.



Details of the elevated square outside the meeting hall for the Reichstag, and the balcony inside.



Model for the second phase of the Reichstag competition, the meeting hall is now situated inside the existing building.



Photo taken on my trip to Brazil, after winning first prize ex aequo in the Reichstag competition.



Exterior of Oscar Niemeyer's Palácio do Congresso, taken on my trip to Brazil.

ed: "Pi de Bruijn sees the building primarily in terms of its historical-symbolic identity. In a comprehensible, typically Dutch reaction, De Bruijn does not wish to accommodate democracy in this charged environment and therefore places the large meeting hall outside the building. (...) The building has been returned to history but only after it has been castrated thrice: without the dome, without the centre, and without a representative function corresponding to its exterior. This approach is richer and more successful than Foster's design but is based on the same negative appreciation of the building."<sup>(9)</sup>

In the second round, the winners were given an individual assignment to adapt their design. Unfortunately, I cannot remember what Calatrava had to do, but Foster was told to omit the roof he had designed over the existing building — which he did by stealing the dome from Calatrava's design. We had to adjust our design in such a way that the meeting hall was included within the existing Reichstag building instead of outside, as had been allowed in the competition. I worked hard to adapt our design but the new design did not possess the same quality as the first one. We had to present our new design in Amsterdam and this time Pi saw his chance to apply the Foster trick himself. He hired an exhibition area — the Rode Hoed — and organized an excursion along a number of the buildings that he had realized. The delegation from Berlin was collected by a VIP bus at Schiphol airport, went via the Houses of Parliament building in The Hague to the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam, and then by water taxi to the Rode Hoed. We had set up an impressive exhibition there but the complex did not convince the delegation. There is a rumour that Foster flew the delegation to London and only presented a few sketches in his office on the Thames. But the effect of his presentation in Berlin had been so overwhelming that it actually made little difference what he presented. People were so impressed by Foster's plans that they simply wanted him as the architect for the Reichstag. I became quite ill after the presentation in Amsterdam and did

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(9) Oosterman, Arjan, 'Rijksdag wordt Bondsdag', in *Archis* no. 4, pp. 8-11, 1993.

not participate in the later stages of the project. Winning this kind of international competition was a high point in my career. It gave me the idea that I was capable of designing prominent architecture. After the Reichstag, none of the projects at De Cie. were good enough for me. My relationship with Pi had also changed. Pi was someone who always needed a 'boy', a right-hand man, in a project. I had been his boy in the Reichstag project, but now that the project had ground to a halt, it was time for someone else.

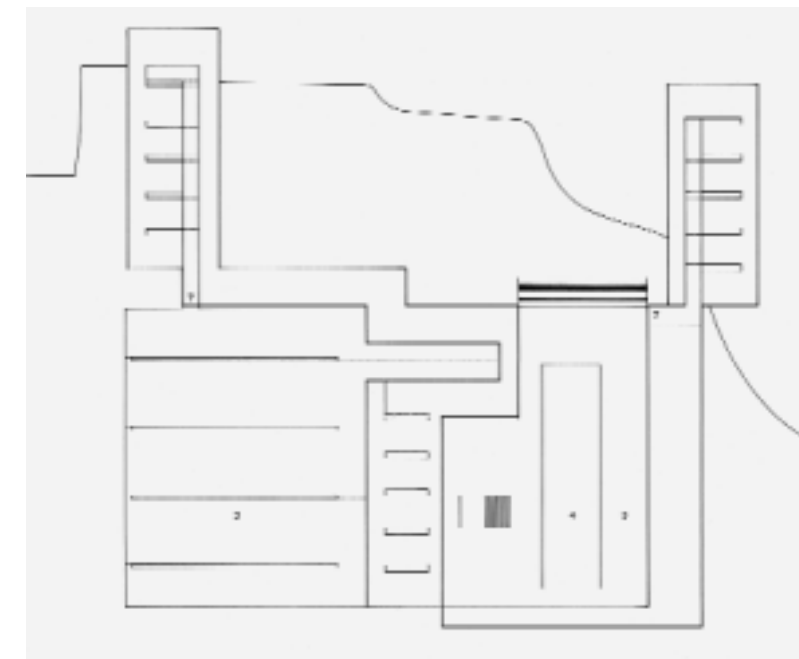
#### Heaven can wait

Besides working for De Cie. I also co-operated with Reinier de Graaf, a fellow student at the Berlage Institute, on the Europan 3 competition. Initially, we had opted for a location in Madrid but at the last moment Reinier suggested to take a location in the Netherlands. He said that the location at Den Bosch would be the best option.<sup>(10)</sup> In the summer of '93 I was following a language course given by nuns in Vught when I discovered that Vught is situated near Den Bosch. Along with Elisabeth Vente, one of the conversation teachers who was extremely interested in what I was doing, I visited the location on the last day of the course. It was indeed a splendid site, a former swimming pool situated beside a small lake. I remember that Elisabeth wished me lots of success with the competition.

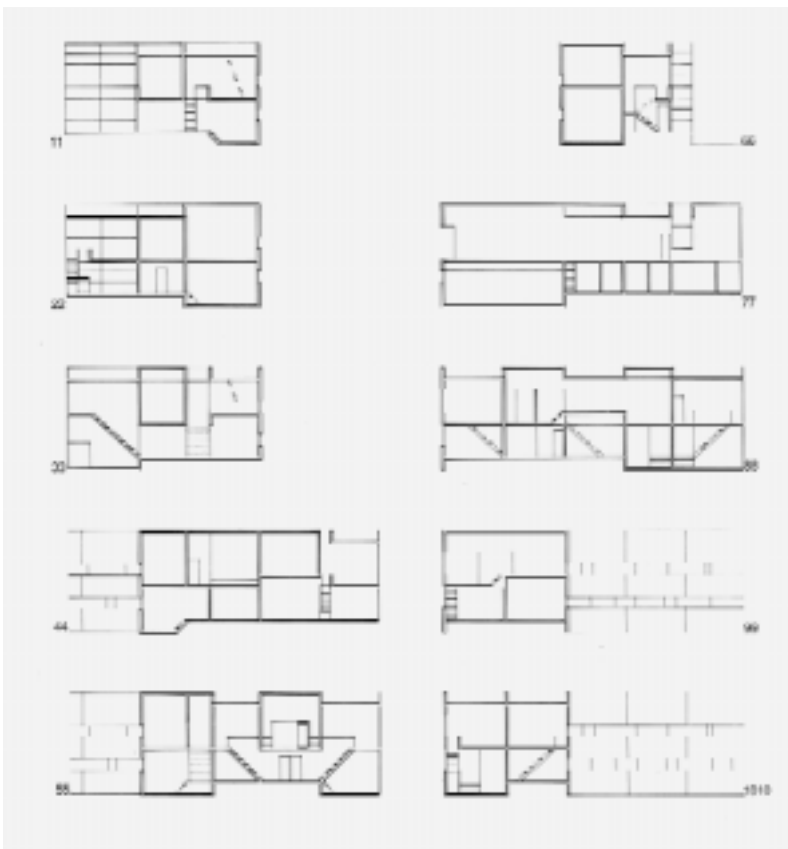
The assignment was to design 120 luxury houses for senior citizens. We realized that, after the yuppies in the eighties, this category of residents would become an important target group in the nineties. Senior citizens were no longer the kind of people who wished to enjoy their well-earned rest after a long working life, they were lively people in their fifties and sixties who still had plenty of energy. They were people who retired early and wished to live luxuriously and therefore placed high demands on their accommodation and living environment. There was (and still is) a conspicuous lack of accommodation for this kind of resident. Everything is actually geared to those with a minimum

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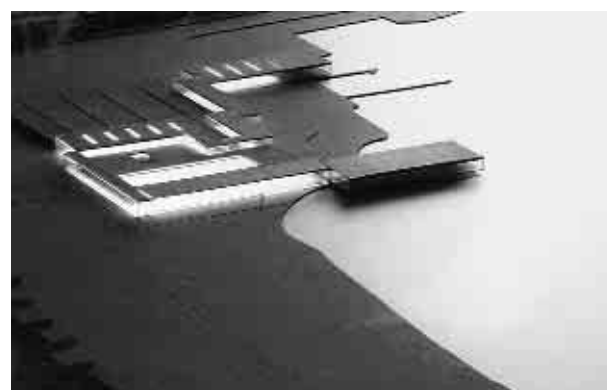
(10) Both locations appear to have received the most submissions for the whole competition.



Plan of our winning Europan 3 entry: Heaven can Wait, 1993.



Sections, Heaven can Wait, 1993.



Model view, Heaven can Wait, photo by Jan Richard Kikkert.

income here — geared to social housing — so that luxury accommodation only means more surface area and more exterior decoration than cheap housing. A typology that genuinely allows scope for personal choice simply was not available in the Netherlands. Or, as we ourselves described it at the time: “The premise of this project is to investigate the needs of seniors in relation to their financial position and to understand the consequences for the development of luxury housing; choice being the ultimate luxury that these people can afford.”<sup>(11)</sup> With these thoughts in mind and with Mick Jagger as an example of a tireless fifty-year-old, we designed hedonistic residences that completely exploit the luxury of personal choice. The existing covered swimming pool was retained in our design but it was transformed into an open-air swimming pool. By taking an adapted standard house cross-section as the basis, a system in which variable ceiling heights and floor plans was possible. The building subsequently meanders in a domino-like structure between the swimming pool and the shore of the lake. The houses themselves also interlock like a jigsaw puzzle within the building. The level of the old swimming pool — one storey above the ground floor — became the entrance level by means of a central meandering deck-like construction. The car parking area lies hidden under this deck.

Reinier and I worked on the competition mainly in his house in the evenings and, to be honest, we did not devote a great deal of time to the design. It was primarily a principle, a mathematical system, that we had conceived and things like elaborated facades, for example, were still missing. While we were thinking of a name for our project, I remembered a story that Sasha Randic had once told me. He was sitting in a bar in Split when a beautiful yacht entered the harbour. On it were two gay middle-aged men with four or five handsome boys. The name of the yacht was Heaven can Wait. It was a great name and I thought that our project, at that beautiful location on the water, should

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(11) ‘European, Heaven can Wait’ in *VMX '95*, p. 20, Amsterdam, Architectura & Natura (1995).

also bear the same name. We later discovered that it was also the name of a film.

However, as the date of submission approached, the co-operation with Reinier became difficult due to the strain we were both feeling. I remember asking myself what we would do if we actually won the European competition. When I was at work at De Cie. one Sunday I heard that an Irish/Dutch team in Den Bosch had won the competition. Ultimately it turned out that we shared the first prize with Njiric & Njiric, two Croatian architects. We were delighted of course, but the next day, when I spoke to Herman Hertzberger who had been on the jury, he mentioned that it was not an important prize. Friends at De Cie. held a different opinion and told me that we could expect lots of work as a consequence of the prize and that we should set up our own office.

Prior to the prize-giving ceremony in the Groninger Museum I sent a letter to Elizabeth in which I mentioned that we had won. She attended the ceremony along with her husband who learned there that he was related to Bob Geerlings — the chairman of European.

After winning the European, Reinier and I decided to found a company that we called Murphy de Graaf and we both applied for a starter’s grant from the BKVB Fund.<sup>(12)</sup> When we had submitted our work, the committee expressed the opinion that it was ‘too beautiful’ and they wanted to decide during a studio visit whether or not to give us a grant. We then took everything out of my house so that it looked like a working studio. We installed our models and panels, and Bart Lootsma and Maarten Smit arrived to assess the work. They finally gave us the starter’s grant.

#### Flirt with commerce

After two years at the Berlage, my experiences at De Cie., and winning the European with Reinier, the idea of founding an architectural office with him seemed logical. It would be an office that, in terms of organization, would fit better with present day

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(12) Het Fonds voor Beeldende Kunsten, Vormgeving en Bouwkunst, Fonds BKVB, (Netherlands Foundation for the Visual Arts, Design and Architecture) is the national organization for subsidizing individual artists, designers, architects and intermediaries. The aim of the Foundation is to promote the quality of the visual arts, design and architecture in the Netherlands.

requirements and would be more capable of formulating the new architectonic assignments that were appearing as a result of changes within society. The work of Anthony Giddens, among others, and particularly the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck — which was very popular among architects and critics in the mid-nineties — made it clear that Western society had been undergoing a new phase in its modernization in the last few decades of the twentieth century. After the industrialization stage — ‘simple’ modernity as Beck referred to it — the phase of ‘reflexive modernity’ had arrived. What distinguishes this phase from the previous one is the fact that the production attitude of the industrial era is supplemented by an endless pursuit of inventiveness aimed at ameliorating life in general. The relevant Dutch history that illustrates this development begins after the difficult recovery from the two oil crises in the seventies. The eighties brought better times (for trade and industry). This tendency continued through the following decade. In the view of many, the Netherlands then underwent all the necessary restructuring, and now only needed refining. To the man in the street, the nineties meant more consumption, more (commercial) television channels, affordable computers, and an explosive growth of new (mobile) communications technology. In addition to the societal context of the nineties, the influence of the Berlage Institute on our thinking about a modern architectural office was unmistakably present. As students at the Institute we were confronted by architects who regarded architecture as an artistic discipline; Hertzberger himself was the most illustrative example of this. Besides people who had similar thoughts about the profession, such as Abel Cahen, Theo Bosch and DKV, Hertzberger also invited architects who had a completely different view of the profession. When thinking of contemporary architects, people like Libeskind, Hadid and Nouvel did not possess the visions of the artistic craftsman but rather that of a pop star. They were rising celebrities and Hertzberger was interested in the contrasts with his own ideas. Along

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with many of my fellow students, I found the artistic architects generally old-fashioned and occasionally even sad.<sup>(13)</sup>

I had the idea that, at that time, architecture should be able to appeal to both the cultural and the commercial worlds in a heroic manner.<sup>(14)</sup> In continuance of the discussions on privatization and the working of the open market that were held in the Netherlands in the mid-nineties, we also thought that the market ought to play a more important role for architects. We believed that architects should go looking for new target groups and that they should participate in public-private co-operative ventures. In conjunction with Reinier, I therefore began on an almost cynical attempt to avoid well-trodden paths and to flirt with commercialism.

My Irish/British background probably played a significant role in this decision. The British political climate in the eighties was strikingly different to that in the Netherlands. In fact, Britain under Margaret Thatcher was ahead of its time and discussions on the workings of the free market were already being held there in the eighties. In a certain sense, Thatcherism prepared me for the changing role of the architect in the free-market economy. Mark Swenarton describes the intended changes as follows: “Perhaps the most important issue here (in the UK under Thatcher) is the clash between the notion of architecture as a social service and the notion of architecture as a commodity. For modernism, which constituted the architectural orthodoxy from the 1940s to the 70s, architecture was a means of delivering to the population the services provided by the welfare state. Thatcherism, by contrast, has been pledged to replacing the welfare state with the market economy, and to replacing the philosophy of service with that of profit and the market.”<sup>(15)</sup> In other words, the architect in the UK had to come to terms with the free-market economy, so that his social agenda disappeared into the background. Within this context, it is understandable that Hertzberger’s work sounded attractive. His arguments were social and humane and seemed to be an attractive alternative to

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(13) To illustrate this category of architects, a quote from ‘In Memoriam for Theo Bosch’ by Ruud Brouwers in *Archis* no. 5, pp. 4-5 (1994) is interesting. He describes Bosch as: “In his practice (that of Theo Bosch, ed.) the relationship with the user and the almost moral obligation to the user were central. This is the reason why a construction must have a high degree of practical usability, functioning well in the environment, and ought to be beautiful in a direct manner.”

(14) With these words I deliberately challenge Tafuri who wrote in his famous book *Design and Utopia*: “The entire body of modern art presents itself as a deliberate ‘heroic’ act and as bluff, in which it is completely aware of its own mystifying character.” Tafuri, Manfredo, *Design and Utopia*, p.105, SUN (1978).

(15) ‘Thatcher’s Years — Mark Swenarton looks at the political implications for architects in the 80s’ appeared in the November supplement of *Building Design*, pp. 4-15 (1987).

Thatcherism. However, disappointed in Hertzberger after two years at the Berlage Institute, and confronted by a government that was also retreated from subsidizing and stimulating building practice, I became convinced that I wanted to take another approach, one which was more market-oriented than previously.<sup>(16)</sup>

When we began in 1994, the economic climate was not favourable. The starting grant that Reinier and I had received gave us a little financial leeway but I had the feeling that we needed more. In view of the anti-commercial attitude of many of the established architects, it seemed 'cool' to enter business relationships with commercial architects and thus test our ideas on the workings of the market, new target groups, and our architectural ambitions. Via Bogdan Bocanet — whom I knew from De Cie. — I came into contact with Ed Veenendaal: a commercially successful designer. The first conversation with Ed took place in his office opposite the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Because I had always been fond of good clothes, I dressed in a smart suit for this meeting. I showed Ed my work and he was extremely enthusiastic, although I have my doubts about whether his enthusiasm was the result of my cryptic work or my person. After all, I fitted perfectly into the image that Ed had of a young architect who could revitalize his office: an architect with taste and with a more substantial grounding in design than he himself had.

The first discussion between Reinier, Ed and myself took place at Ed's home on the first floor of the former mayor's house on the Amstel River. The outcome of this discussion was that Ed was prepared to invest in young talent, he was prepared to invest some initial capital, and was willing to offer us free working space in his office for a year. Reinier and I were impressed, and had the feeling that we should not miss this opportunity. An important issue for us was the way in which we would work with Ed. He suggested that we should work as partners, and Reinier

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<sup>(16)</sup> In his text on Thatcher, Swenarton gives an interesting description of the new role of the architect. He writes: "In the provision of a service, the architect's job was, like that of a doctor, to provide what people needed; but in commodity production the architect's job was, like that of the fashion designer, to provide what people could be persuaded to buy." At various times later, VMX would draw a parallel between clothes and architecture, the fashion designer and the architect. Whereas Swenarton implicitly emphasizes the ephemeral nature of fashion, VMX accentuates the new opportunities. See also the chapter on Discovering Materials in this book.

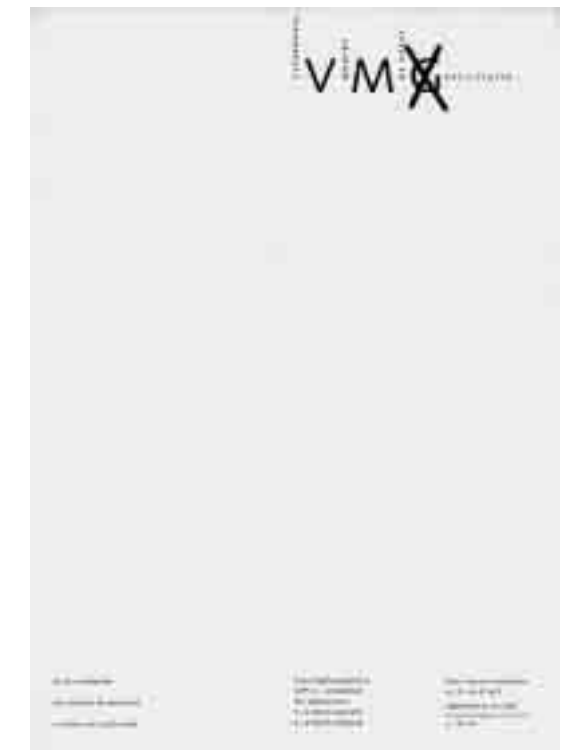
and I agreed, wondering how on earth we would ever be able to keep up with this man, after all Ed was a big spender and seemed to run on rocket fuel. We began working with Ed under the name Aristudio, a name that was soon changed to VMG Architects: Veenendaal Murphy de Graaf. Even before we had officially begun, Ed had shown himself to be an unpredictable factor. The promised initial capital, which had been set at 150,000 guilders (around 68,000 euros) during the first discussion, suddenly became 100,000 guilders. Moreover, it was no longer an investment but a guarantee.

Instinctively, I had the feeling that, besides Reinier and myself as architects and Ed as a silent partner — which is how we regarded him — VMG needed someone to manage the office. I knew Leon Teunissen from my time at De Cie. He had worked for Carel Weeber, and I invited him to drop in. Leon was very interested in our work but was cautious about quitting his job at De Cie. I remember that he was still not convinced after four separate conversations, and I had actually given up hope when he suddenly appeared in front of me. It was late in the evening and we had been working overtime when Leon came to tell us that he had decided to work for VMG. He had brought a bottle of wine to celebrate. He could begin in March 1995.

The first months of VMG were characterized by endless discussions. The same questions — on the co-operation with Ed, the level of ambition and the responsibilities — were repeated time and again without ever reaching a final conclusion. In these discussions, it became clear that Ed was pleased with me but that he had his doubts about Reinier. In retrospect, I always had the feeling that Ed wanted to have me as a partner and that he had taken Reinier as part of the deal. Reinier felt pressurized in this situation and this began to affect his mood after a while. After we had entered into the partnership with Ed in October 1994, and with Leon in March 1995, Reinier decided to end the co-operation with VMG in May.<sup>(17)</sup>

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<sup>(17)</sup> In exchange for the cancellation of the debts that had now arisen, Reinier renounced any claim to the winning European design.



How the change from VMG to VMX occurred. After Reinier de Graaf left, the G was crossed out.

## LEON TEUNISSEN: HEERLEN, 1965

After the disappointment with the Reichstag, Reinier's departure was my second great setback. It felt like a divorce and, looking back, I wonder whether I should have supported Reinier more against Ed. Ed made it look like he was distressed about Reinier's departure, but I have never been able to avoid the impression that he was happy that Reinier left so easily. I have often imagined a situation in which Ed might have displayed more patience and Reinier might have adopted a slightly different attitude. However, the reality was that I was extremely ambitious about being able to build and was convinced that I needed Ed — and particularly Ed's contacts — to reach this goal.

In the same period that Reinier left VMG, Ed's accountant also left Ed's office, which still existed in addition to VMG. The new accountant soon discovered that the VMG bookkeeping was a mess and that there was practically no more money. In a conversation that I had with him about this, he taught me a simple but crucial lesson: "If you want your company to survive, you have to ensure that you take in more money than you give out!" He was referring to the 'shopkeeper's mentality' which most architects tend not to employ. After all, as an architect you are seeking appreciation and you gain appreciation by realizing work and not by drawing in lots of money. Regardless of how large your business is, if you do not see it as an enterprise there is little chance that you will last long. To me, the most conspicuous lesson in that respect was that at the end of the first year of VMG, Leon was the only person who had made money. He had only 10% of the shares — and thus only 10% of the debts — whereas Ed and I each had 45%. Although I was working flat out, I had to accept severe losses. Even worse, the harder I worked, the greater the loss — because I owned the loss.



The people involved in VMX in 1995. This picture was used to conclude the book *VMX '95*.

## Delft

I began on my study of architecture in Delft in 1984. I soon became interested in Building Organization, which was a module of Building Economics. Although I have always found design fascinating as such, I was also extremely interested in the context in which this occurred. However, there was little emphasis on this context in the study programme. Nevertheless, by following supplementary subjects at other faculties and universities, I managed to improve my knowledge. When I had completed the compulsory modules in Delft, I took a year off from my studies. I then worked for six months at EGM Architecten in Dordrecht as an assistant to a project manager. I subsequently worked as a designer in Italy, in a small architectural office called dell'Acqua Bellavitis, for another six months. My learning towards the organization of the design process was confirmed that year. I saw that very good designers were often very poor in the organizational side of the profession because they had no affinity with it. Apparently my interest lay in working in this field, so I chose to devote my attention to this aspect of the profession.

In a chronicle, the architect Willem Jan Neutelings once aptly compared the Dutch architectural office to the proverbial tobacconist's shop run by a former footballer. He wrote: "One of the better-kept architectural secrets is the schizophrenic character of the architect, which vacillates between the entrepreneur and the artiste. Architecture is mainly explained on the basis of ideology and seldom by the deeds of the architect as a small businessman. (...) Like his fellow-sufferer, the former footballer, the architect remains an entrepreneur against his own wishes."<sup>(18)</sup> I believe Neutelings is right when he points out just how incompetently, in business terms, many Dutch architectural offices are run. When I studied in Delft, very little attention was devoted to this aspect of an architect's existence, whereas to me, it was actually the most interesting.

When I returned from Italy and wanted to take up my studies again for graduation, I coincidentally ran into Jo Soeter, a lec-

(18) Neutelings, Willem Jan. 'De sigarenwinkel van de architect.' *Archis* no. 5, pp. 79-80 (2000).

turer of Building Economics at Delft. He told me he had been given the assignment to set up the new main subject of Building Management and asked if I would help him in this project. Right from the outset, we jointly compiled the teaching programme and I was involved in the process of appointing the professors. Furthermore, as a student assistant, I supervised the first generation of students while also graduating myself.

As a result of my involvement in Building Management, I came into contact with my graduation supervisor Carel Weeber in another way. As a professor of architectonic design, Carel was one of the most renowned figures in the faculty at the time. He was the educational innovator incarnate, setting up an infinite number of committees and institutes only to abolish them again as soon as possible. But this is by the way. Carel held outspoken ideas about what an architect ought to be. His view differed greatly from the traditional image of an architect as the artistic counterpart of the doctor or the lawyer. In Carel's opinion, students ought to be educated to be much more pragmatic and business-like. Or, as fellow professor Leen van Duin describes it: "[Carel wants] the students to learn to articulate the preconditions of their work and to clear the way to the actual practice of building. Weeber wants to teach people who will be able to function anywhere in the building process of the future. (...) He regards students of architecture as hybrid professionals *in spe*, who will have to anticipate unpredictable changes in process and product in a commercial and realistic manner. They must be radical and analytical, but also be able to move flexibly and creatively with the flow of digitization, mobility, and globalization."<sup>(19)</sup> Based on this conviction, Carel was one of the few people in the Architecture section who set himself in for Building Management. He was even involved in the formulation of the teaching programme for this new main subject.

A week before my graduation, he called me up. He had always assumed that I wanted to work in a building management office but when he heard that I actually wanted to work in an architec-

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tural office, he asked me if I would be willing to work for him. On the Wednesday prior to my graduation on the Friday, I had a job interview with De Architecten Cie. and I was immediately taken on.

#### Weeber and De Cie.

I received many opportunities at De Cie. In fact, I could go my own way completely. I devoted my efforts mainly toward budgets and specifications because I wanted to gain experience in a number of extremely matter-of-fact aspects of the discipline. I became increasingly convinced that a good knowledge of these aspects is indispensable for a successful architectural practice. In this period, Carel asked me to draw up a budget for one of his sketches. It was for a block of student apartments in The Hague near the Hollands Spoor railway station. This was my first involvement in one of his projects and I subsequently assisted him in this project right from the outset.

Carel had a very specific way of working. He did everything at home on his own computer. This was fascinating because De Cie. was already a large office and this assignment was certainly not a minor one. Nevertheless, Carel elaborated his sketches at home. When he returned to the office he had worked out the project in his head and refined it on the computer with the aid of a number of basic drawings. The building had been adapted to the location to a certain extent, but it was actually simply the most optimum stacking of student rooms. Carel subsequently came to me with a floppy and said: "This contains the drawings, can you get someone to print them out and can you formulate a budget for me?" I did so, and Carel presented the plan to the client.

The client was enthusiastic and the project could be further elaborated. I involved a draughtsman in the project. Shortly afterwards, it turned out that the client wanted to begin on the construction immediately after the summer. Because everyone at De Cie. was going on holiday in this period or had other activ-

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De Struyck, Student housing designed by Carel Weeber, under construction. The Hague 1993-1996.

(19) Duin, Leen van, 'Hoogleraar architectonisch ontwerpen.' *Carel Weeber 'ex'architect*, pp. 100-109 Rotterdam, 010 Publishers (2003).

ities planned, I had said that I would be available to organize the project. I had only graduated a couple of months previously but I felt that I had to seize this opportunity with both hands. In conjunction with Carel, I compiled a team of around ten people by hiring in staff from other offices and we worked through the entire summer. By the end of the summer, the specifications were completed and the project could be contracted out. Once involved in the project, I also wanted to participate in its implementation.<sup>(20)</sup>

The next project I worked on was the head office of ABN AMRO. De Cie. was the project architect since the real architects were Pei Cobb Freed & Partners from New York. The co-operation with the Americans was poor. The staff of De Cie. who were involved were either not taken seriously by the Americans or were overambitious and thought that they were the true architects. I worked on the ABN AMRO for more than a year, but it was not really interesting in terms of the substance. We were only the 'translators' between the American architects and the Dutch client and the authorities. We had no real influence on the plan. However, an interesting aspect was the fact that the Americans with whom we worked were extremely professionally organized. When a delegation arrived in the Netherlands, they were very well prepared and always up to date with all developments. In addition, they were much more business-like than I was accustomed to. The Dutch architect was (and is) inclined to see his design as an intellectual product, as 'good advice' and also as his sacrosanct 'brainchild'. In contrast, the American architect is more interested in the process of building itself. He is not concerned with an idea but rather with a functional and aesthetically responsible product that may assume various shapes. As a result, Americans often have a pragmatic approach and are oriented toward 'effect'. Of course, the American architect runs the risk of not producing architecture but rather an accumulation of effects. However, he runs a much smaller risk than his Dutch colleagues of losing his way in an intellectual

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The view Leon had from his desk at De Cie. Don is visible on the left.

(20) Carel Weeber's student complex was poorly received. There was no international interest and Bernard Colenbrander savaged it in *Archis*: "At the beginning of the 1996-1997 a new student housing complex called De Struyck was opened on the Rijswijkseplein in The Hague, near the Hollands Spoor station. Many train passengers followed the erection of this colourful and exotically finished building with extraordinary interest. De Struyck is the most recent work of Carel Weeber. It might actually be his last work because his portfolio is almost empty. It could not be more clearly illustrated that Weeber has lost the link with the leading opinions in culture. My personal experience also points in the same direction. Literally everyone who passes by this building in the train, car, tram or on his bicycle thinks the same about it: 'this is an incredibly ugly building'." Source: Colenbrander, Bernard 'De guerrilla van een onproductief element' *Archis* no. 4, pp. 64-70, 1994.

labyrinth or of being able to hide behind vague ideas.

I think that I introduced elements of my American experience into VMG — later VMX. In our projects, we also attempt to anticipate all possible questions from the client in a business-like manner. Moreover, we always think in alternatives. We review the various options, of which we know exactly the advantages and disadvantages in advance.

After the ABN AMRO project, I worked within De Cie. for Pi de Bruijn, who had won a shared first prize in the competition for the Reichstag. Ultimately Foster won the competition but Pi managed to obtain an auxiliary assignment. He was asked to make a design for a quarter of all the new offices that were necessary for the Reichstag in Berlin. I did the project management for this. It was also an attractive project because I was again involved with a different kind of architect than one finds in the Netherlands. In Germany, an architect is responsible for many more aspects than in the Netherlands. As a result, a German architect can say: "It will be like this because I want it to be like this." In the Netherlands, it is the client who has the authority to make this kind of statement.

It was the intention that I should set up an office for De Cie. in Berlin. But during the project in Berlin, Don phoned me with the suggestion that it would be interesting to have a discussion some time. I contacted them. I was immediately enthusiastic about the work of Don and Reinier and I had always imagined that some day I would set up an office with a number of contemporaries.<sup>(21)</sup> A crucial criterion was that I wanted to function as a partner. I was (and am) convinced that if you wish to take running an office seriously, you must be able to exert influence at the highest decision-making level. My conditions did not make it easy to reach rapid agreement with Don. I was also hesitant with respect to Ed Veenendaal. I had no doubt at all about the intentions and capacities of Don and Reinier, but I had great doubts about Ed. It seemed as if this man had come from a dif-

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Model view of preliminary design for Jacob Kaiser Haus by Pi de Bruijn, Berlin 1993.

(21) During my study in Delft I had thought of starting up an office with Nathalie de Vries and Jacob van Rijs (they now form MVRDV along with Winy Maas), but Don made his request first.



ferent planet, so that I could hardly imagine what it would be like to share an office with him. I finally decided to give the experiment a chance and I posted my resignation to De Cie. on New Year's Eve 1994.

My position at VMX has gradually developed since my start in March 1995. After Reinier decided to stop that May because he couldn't face the stress of little money and little work, I worked with Don and with Ed Veenendaal for another year and a half. In actual practice, this meant that we did jobs for Ed and studies and competitions for ourselves. Ultimately, the main reason for the co-operation turned out to be the free year's rent that had been agreed upon. To me, when we finally left Veenendaal's office and had found a new location, that was the real start of VMX.

## ARCHITECTURE IN (WASTE) PAPER

### VMX '95

"In economically bad times, paper architecture flourishes," wrote Hilde Heynen. Andreas Papadakis supplements this by claiming that it was exactly in the economically poor period of the 1980s that a distinction between theory and architecture arose. He wrote: "Over the past couple of decades a curious situation has developed in architecture whereby it has virtually divided itself into two separate disciplines: one intellectual, its main field of activity being the universities and schools of architecture, and the other practical, operating on building sites controlled increasingly by commercial interests."<sup>(22)</sup> In other words, the urge to construct architectonic ideas in concrete and steel disappeared from the academic world in this period. In many cases, the paper version of an idea was regarded as being more valuable than built reality. In this era of the paper experimental garden, it became possible for architects to build up a position based solely on concepts.<sup>(23)</sup> When the economy began to pick up in the nineties and the emphasis shifted toward actual building once more, the attention devoted to paper architecture did not evaporate.

Architects and critics seemed to have (re-)discovered the power of the book. One of those directly involved — the critic Hans Ibelings — remarked: "Never have so many books by architects appeared as in the nineties. (...) After many architects began to develop an increasingly clear media strategy from the end of the eighties onward, and managed to gain a position in which they could exert far-reaching influence on how and in which context their work would be published, the total control of their own book was the logical next step."<sup>(24)</sup> With the introduction of the 'automonograph' genre — often office documentation elevated to book form — the hermetic character of paper architecture rapidly vanished.

We experienced these developments from close by, first as students and then as young architects. We regarded the new pos-

(22) Papadakis, Andreas, Theory and Experimentation — an intellectual extravaganza, London, Academy Editions (1993).

(23) Examples of the paper architects of the time include: Pieter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, and Bernard Tschumi. In his publication The Manhattan Transcripts the last-mentioned makes a firm plea that the architecture of the thin pen line and the text should be taken seriously. He writes: "Books of architecture, as opposed to books about architecture, develop their own existence and logic. They are not directed at illustrating buildings or cities, but at searching for the ideas that underlie them. Inevitably, their context is given rhythm by the turning of the pages, by the time and motion this suggests. This book may be read as sequences, but they do not necessarily imply narratives. They can be theoretical projects, abstract endeavours aimed at both exploring the limits of architectural knowledge and at giving readers access to particular forms of research." Tschumi, Bernard, The Manhattan Transcripts, p. 6, Architectural Design (1981) / Academy Editions (1994).

(24) Ibelings, Hans, The 'automonograph' Het kunstmatig landschap, p. 217, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2000).

sibilities of being able to publish on architecture in not solely intellectual terms as an opportunity to collect our own work — before we had even built up an oeuvre! — and to draw attention to it. At the beginning of 1995, we thus came to the conclusion that we needed a brochure to distribute our work. Because we were busy just keeping the office going from week to week in the initial period, there was absolutely no time to elaborate our plan seriously. It was only in September that we could finally begin gathering the material. We compiled our brochure with the same obsessive compulsion as we applied to our projects in the hope of creating something new and good. What began as a brochure ended as a book: *VMX '95*.

I remember going to Architectura & Natura and asking Guus Kempe if he might be prepared to sell ten copies — dummies — of our book in his shop.<sup>(25)</sup> It must have been around the end of October because Guus was just back from the Frankfurter Buchmesse. He said: “If you have this book printed I will take 400 copies and will also distribute them worldwide.” Having received this offer, we quickly approached various printers for quotations and we inventoried the printing costs. We settled on Spinhex, a small printing office in Amsterdam Noord run by Jos Hexspoor.

Because we would do all the layout, writing and drawing ourselves, we only had to think of a way of meeting the printing costs — 12,750 guilders (around 5500 euros). We knew that Veenendaal spent lots of money on Christmas presents for his friends and business relations every year. Normally he bought wine or champagne but once he went as far as having leather agendas made to give away. Knowing that it was almost impossible for Ed to refuse me, I approached him with the question as to whether he might be prepared to purchase a number of books from us. In view of the fact that *VMX* also contained the name Veenendaal, Ed could hardly decline and we agreed that he would buy 120 books. By selling books to Ed and Guus, we could cover our costs and the book could be published. It was

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Dummy of *VMX '95*.

(25) Architectura & Natura is a bookshop in Amsterdam specialized in architecture, landscape architecture and natural history, and is also a small-scale publisher.

printed just before Christmas, a terribly busy time for Spinhex. While the presses were rolling, we went there every few hours to enter last-minute alterations. In retrospect, I think the people at Spinhex were fantastic. We could check every page that rolled off the press and they did a lot of extra work for us. At the time though, we thought that this was quite normal, we were used to investing an enormous amount of work in projects and we assumed that others did that too.

Roemer van Toorn and Rafael Gómez-Moriana, whom I knew from the Berlage Institute, wrote contributions for the book. The staccato rhythm of introductory texts, the project descriptions, the extremely refined photographs by Jan Richard Kikkert, and our minimalist and schematic drawings resulted in a publication that would not have been out of place as a monograph for a successful Swiss office.<sup>(26)</sup> In reality, however, it was more a collection of ideas by a group of young people who were straining at the leash to get their ideas implemented.

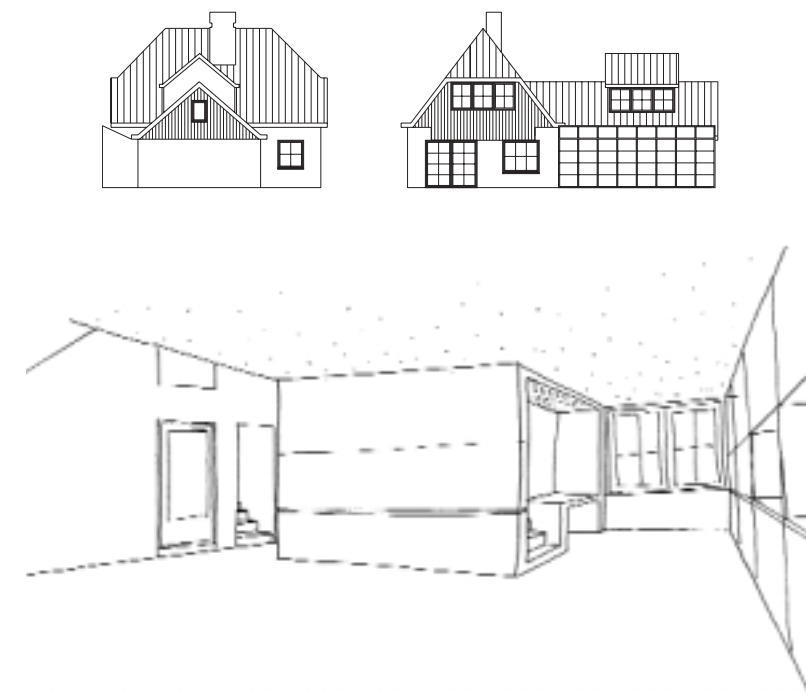
We invited the loose cannon and chairman of the BNA, Carel Weeber, to perform the official presentation of the book, but the effect of this stunt was limited to the defamation of Ed, with Carel referring to him as an ‘interior architect’ — which he actually was.

*VMX '95* was well received, the book was soon sold out. But it did not receive genuine attention in the form of reviews by critics. Tom Maas wrote about it in the magazine *Cobouw*. In a very short piece, he emphasized the severity of the work. He described it as being far from accessible but nevertheless unambiguous. Colleagues and friends found that the pages had rather a lot of white lines or that the hardcover was a bit ‘too established’ for a new office, but they had no content-related criticism.

When the first edition of *VMX '95* had been sold out, we wanted to print a second edition, this time in paperback to cut the costs. Because we thought that we would be able to use the plates from the first edition again, we imagined that this edition

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(26) The reference here is to Switzerland because the minimalist and precise layout of the book most resembles the idiom of Swiss designers.



Sketches for conversion of the Hexspoor house.

would cost much less, but that turned out to be a miscalculation. The plates turned out to have degenerated less than a year after the publication of the first edition, and everything had to be produced all over again. Ultimately the second book was just as expensive as the first. This time, the costs were largely covered by a 'work for work' arrangement: we designed an extension to Jos Hexspoor's house — although it has never been built.

#### Olympic Stadium

The fact that *VMX '95* was a success and that people apparently wanted to know about our plans gave us a good feeling. We also observed, in situations where we handed out our book as a kind of visiting card, that we were being taken seriously. That had occasionally been otherwise in the period prior to *VMX '95*. We also experienced ridicule for one plan in the book, a plan that was subsequently adopted behind our backs: our idea for the re-use of the Olympic Stadium.

With the completion of the Amsterdam Arena, the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam Zuid would lose its function, at least that was the assumption.<sup>(27)</sup> In anticipation of this development and the removal of the stadium from the register of protected historical buildings, the Municipality of Amsterdam had organized a closed architectural competition for the re-use of the area. The architectural office of Lafour & Wijk won the competition with a plan for more than 1200 houses.<sup>(28)</sup> Besides supporters, who regarded the demolition of the stadium as the solution to many problems, there were also opponents of this idea. They had joined forces under the name 'NV Olympisch Stadion' and were considering various scenarios for preservation.<sup>(29)</sup> They also compiled a brief for renovation. The programme consisted of two parts: the introduction of new functions that would give the stadium a new role, and the development of (more expensive) houses around the stadium so that the sale of these houses would meet the costs of renovation.

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Olympic Stadium, designed by Jan Wils for the 1928 Games. The concrete ring on top of the brick building that was also designed by Wils in 1937 is clearly visible.



Ed Veenendaal, Don Murphy and Reinier de Graaf (VMG) at the centre of the field while visiting the Olympic Stadium.

<sup>(27)</sup> The Olympic Stadium was built for the Olympics of 1928 and was designed by Jan Wils. The stadium is the only Olympic Stadium in the Netherlands.

<sup>(28)</sup> In 1992, Stadsdeel Zuid commissioned the architectural office of Lafour & Wijk to draw up an architectural plan for the stadium area and surroundings. They completed their plan in 1993.

<sup>(29)</sup> At the request of NV Olympisch Stadion, the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Culture allocated the stadium the status of state monument in 1992, which meant that it became practically impossible to demolish the building. Partly as a result of this, the Municipality asked the office of Kraaijvanger Urbis to perform a feasibility study on the restoration of the stadium and the realization of at least 800 houses on the stadium grounds. At our own initiative we — VMX — also submitted a plan for the conservation of the stadium.

Working in Ed's office in Amsterdam Zuid, we repeatedly passed the stadium on entering or leaving the city and we were intrigued by this colossal building. At the time the re-use of the stadium was not really an issue but Ed saw the potential and suggested to perform a study on our own initiative. Via Mr Kranenburg, a member of the Conservation Committee, Ed organized a visit to the stadium. On the inside it turned out to be a very impressive construction although largely rundown. The ground around the stadium functioned as the backyard of the city; it looked like the end of the world where the city's flotsam and jetsam had amassed.

Listening to the arguments in favour of demolition or conservation, we soon discovered that, besides the functional and financial issues, it was primarily the image of the building that played a major role in the discussion. At that time, the stadium had enormous concrete terraces so that the underlying splendid Amsterdam School brick stadium was largely hidden from the view.<sup>(30)</sup> According to many, the building was a monstrosity — impressive but not attractive. As architects, however, we recognized the new possibilities to equip this so-called 'superfluous artefact' with a new programme.<sup>(31)</sup>

We made a serious study of the building and proposed adapting the east side to a museum for Plan Zuid, with the 'marathon tower' as a looking post, converting the north part of the stadium into office space, living areas and studios, changing the south part into a hotel, and keeping the west part for sport functions. Under the field of the stadium — one of the few green areas in Amsterdam where trees were not desired — we proposed a car park. A harbour could be created on the water behind the stadium.

Ed invested a lot of energy in promoting our study. Thanks to his enthusiasm we were able to present our plan to the Municipality on various occasions, but they displayed limited interest. They found the idea of a car park under the field hilarious and did not take us seriously for a moment. It was only after Ed had man-

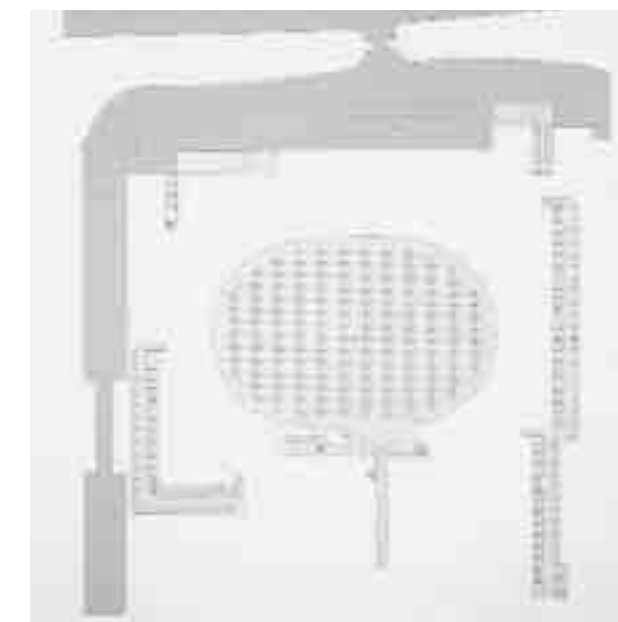
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<sup>(30)</sup> In 1937, on the basis of a design by Wils, the seating capacity of the stadium was doubled by adding extra concrete terraces.

<sup>(31)</sup> Because the Municipality realized that the stadium could not just be demolished, it gave an official assignment to Wagner to study the possibilities of conservation. Unfortunately, Wagner did not really examine the possibilities of the existing building; he simply erected four new towers next to it.



Detail of the 1937 extension of the stadium.



Plan for car park under the field of the stadium and transformation of a new urban block, adding a new programme adjacent to the stadium.

aged to get the press interested and an article on our plan had appeared in *De Telegraaf* (daily newspaper) that the discussion was rekindled, but again without VMX being officially involved. Eventually the Municipality commissioned Van Stigt to formulate a design for the renovation. We later discovered via a leaked letter that Van Stigt actually received the assignment to draw up a plan that was based on the study of VMX.<sup>(32)</sup> Many of the ideas that we had proposed were ultimately realized in this way, even the car park, which is a great success.

#### Warming-up

Early in '96 the idea arose to do another European. Vasa Perovic and Nicholas Dodd, fellow students from the Berlage with whom we worked, decided to participate as a team. I thus went to see the site and developed a scheme with two interns. It felt extremely lonely working on this European especially when Jan Richard Kikkert, who had always taken the photographs for us, didn't want to take pictures this time because he was also competing. He took beautiful photographs afterwards, but the project was submitted without them. Our entry got an honourable mention and we heard from a member of the jury at the prize ceremony that they actually liked the VMX plan the most, but because we had placed the elderly homes on the top floor our design was politically impossible in Switzerland. I still like the project, but it also marks the first break up of the team we had worked with the first year.

In all our projects until the end of '96 we retained the working method that we had presented in *VMX '95*, even so literally that we actually began on a follow-on: *VMX '96*. Fortunately, this book was never published. We had originally planned to collect all the architectural competition designs that we had drawn up that year and publish them. To outsiders, this kind of book would probably not have been particularly interesting, but to us, the architectural competition submissions were extremely important at that time. They were opportunities to sharpen our

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Model views, European 4 entry for location in Dietikon, Switzerland: Grosse Bauten. Photos by Jan Richard Kikkert. These photos were taken after the project was submitted, 1995.

(32) Source: VMX archives.

ideas and to earn a little money at the same time. The architectural competitions published in the *Wettbewerb Aktuelle magazine* were actually paying competitions for which you had to be selected. I remember a short anecdote concerning the first of a total of 5 German competitions that we entered.

We had been selected to participate in a competition in Bottrop, and we decided to go and have a look at the location. Ed had just bought a stunning Jaguar but would not be needing it for a few days. Generous as he was, he offered to lend me his car to go to Germany.

Along with Leon, my wife Sylvie and my son Oscar, I went in this absurdly expensive car to Bottrop, a grey and miserable small town in the Ruhr district. Of course, we drew lots of attention and probably everyone wondered who this apparently young and successful architect could be.

The competition location turned out to be extremely polluted and the brief was very vague, but it could be interpreted as a large warehouse-like building. We decided to design an enormous building with one floor and one roof with various functions in-between that would have minimum contact with the ground. In addition, in conjunction with DS Landscape Architects we developed a strategy to cope with the pollution.

We eventually received the fourth prize and at the prize-giving ceremony it turned out that the 80,000 m<sup>2</sup> of warehouse space that had been included in the brief had not been taken seriously by the local, winning architects. There was something suspiciously similar in all the following German competitions in which we participated. It seemed as if the local architects always had just that little bit more information at their disposal than we did. We had the feeling that we had only been selected as a kind of entertainment for the jury.

Although we never received any assignments as a result of these competitions, and none of the plans we included in *VMX '95* were ever realized, with the first two years of our existence as architects only producing paper architecture, we did not

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Model view, competition entry for Bottrop, Germany: Bottrop Boy. We were awarded fourth prize. Photo by Jan Richard Kikkert, 1996.

## ONE ARCHITECT IN TWO BODIES

regard our endeavour as wasted energy. Everything we did was a form of training. Our paper architecture was a warming-up.

## Fuzzy Logic

When we began, we only had a vague idea or feeling about how an architectural office should look. Our own experience had primarily given us a picture of what it should not be — it should not be a production machine with only specialists, as we had experienced at De Cie. We wanted a more horizontal, small-scale and open organization. We also had the idea of the position of the architect: someone who functioned as a kind of intermediary between the cultural and the commercial world rather than as a pure artist. Our ideas were vague, not only because we were inexperienced but also because having vague ideas was regarded an increasingly valid approach in the nineties. Although the term 'vague' perhaps has a negative charge these days, that was not the case then. On the contrary, the architectural debate was full of vague notions, it was *en-vogue* to publish increasingly abstract and dreamy ideas.<sup>(33)</sup> Stimulated by concepts originating in mathematics and quantum mechanics — a manner of thinking known as 'fuzzy logic' — parallels were drawn between complex reality and architectural practice.<sup>(34)</sup> The Italian architect Andrea Branzi articulated the new possibilities of the logic of vagueness in an interview: "The logic of indeterminacy, of fuzzy design, opens up great spaces of freedom, fluidification and knowledge, because it allows fabrics and types to overlap and to trespass on traditionally separate functional spheres: town and country, services and containers, architecture and objects, thus widening the circuits of our knowledge and bringing into play the profound tectonics of design in its widest sense."<sup>(35)</sup> This train of thought was not completely new. Elements of it had been heard in the September issue of *Forum* (1959) in which Aldo van Eyck expressed his renowned story of a different type of thinking.<sup>(36)</sup> In his discourse, Van Eyck discussed the end of the CIAM and sketched a new perspective for architecture and urban planning. Van Eyck rejected the strict distinction between both disciplines, which the CIAM had upheld, and he proposed instead the image of

(33) Karina van Herck explains this process: "Partly due to the mixing of disciplines (philosophy, semiotics, anthropology) discussions often only take place at a secondary, purely theoretical level. The growing hermetic character of the texts finds form in the creation of neologisms, the application of aphorisms and paradoxes, vague and distant articulations (in this way, humans are always the subject). This, too, is a form of elitism: due to the scientification of the discourse, there is an a-priori determination of who may write and who may read." 'Schrijfstijl: over de retorie van architecten', Heynen, Hilde et al. (eds.) *Dat is architectuur! Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers (2001).

(34) "Fuzzy Logic is a superset of Boolean logic dealing with the concept of partial truth. Whereas classic logic holds that everything can be expressed in binary terms (0 or 1, black or white, yes or no), fuzzy logic replaces Boolean truth values with degrees of truth which are very similar to probabilities, except they need not add up to 100%. This allows for values between 0 and 1,

shades of grey, and the concept of 'maybe'. Specifically it allows partial membership in a set. It is related to fuzzy sets and possibility theory." It was introduced in 1965 by Lotfi Zadeh of Berkeley. George Klir, Bo Yuan. *Fuzzy Sets and Fuzzy Logic* (1995). "Fuzzy often had negative connotations (...) suggesting something imprecise, causing people to equate 'fuzzy logic' with 'imprecise logic'. However fuzzy logic is not any less precise than any other form of logic: it is an organized and mathematical method of handling inherently imprecise concepts." George Klir, Tina Folger, *Fuzzy Sets, Uncertainty, and Information* (1988).

(35) Branzi, Andrea, 'The Arrival of Fuzzy Logic' in *Domus* no. 800, pp. 66-71 (1998).

(36) This was the first *Forum* issue under the editorship of Apon, Bakema, Van Eyck, Hertzberger and Schrofer.

*une casbah organisée* with the architect-urbanist at the helm. Due to the fact that much of the work of Van Eyck and his colleagues degenerated into a form of architecture that was later condescendingly referred to as 'new frumpishness', the accent of the seventies and eighties lay primarily on a rationalism that championed autonomous architecture.

At the end of the eighties, beginning of the nineties, the distinction became somewhat blurred again under the influence of a change in attitude, particularly in the exact sciences.<sup>(37)</sup> Even beyond science, in social life itself, the traditional antitheses seemed to disappear in this period. Under the influence of these new circumstances, we had vague ideas on new forms of co-operation, new alliances, and the possibility of architecture as "appealing to both the cultural and the commercial world".

#### Partnership

Right from the outset, there was a difference in the development of VMG — later VMX — in comparison to most other offices. Many new architects begin on their own, and work on projects for family and friends until larger assignments demand an expansion of the workforce. In terms of family assignments, this also applies to VMG, but the difference lies in the fact that I have never wanted or been able to work alone. The idea of being all alone in a studio has always been anathema to me.

Furthermore, the fact that in school I was considered to be excellent in technical hand drawing but never learned to draw on the computer means that I always need other people to produce the goods. Also in social terms, I function best within a group. Accordingly, right from the start I gathered a team of people around me with whom I could work.

In trade and industry, it is often said that employees — your 'people' as one refers to them — are a company's most important asset. However, it is different for an architectural office. To create architecture you need people who can produce things, besides having people with ideas. It is not that we are not inter-

ested in the people who work for us, but our office is primarily a means of creating architecture; it is not a goal as such. Because there was always the idea of a team — an office — right from the very beginning, there were always risks too. In other words, there was always the pressure of having to find work in order to keep the office ticking over, which gives a feeling of continually sitting in a rollercoaster. One moment, the tension is accumulating and you wonder if you will manage to obtain new work, the next moment you have to pray for a safe outcome and simply allow yourself to be carried along by the possibilities.

The first thing we did when we received a grant was to buy a computer. We hired someone to work on the computer and we employed a secretary. In terms of design work, we started less professionally. We tended to regard work as a prolongation of the student culture that we had experienced at the Berlage. In the assumption that we would soon make a 'breakthrough', we worked long and hard and felt guilty if we went home early.

That first year, we worked with friends, Vasa Perovic and Nicholas Dodd. We made financial agreements about every project, and if the work was more than expected they could print out things for themselves or we paid for a new computer, for example, as compensation. Besides the financial side, Leon found the working culture a problem. At the Berlage Institute, it had been normal to start late and finish late, but Leon found this an unproductive manner of working and he wanted to do other things in the evening as well — he had a social life, which most foreign students at the Berlage did not have. After the period with friends came the period with free-lance workers. This was a slightly more structured period in which we hired specific technical knowledge in the person of Salomon Witzenhausen. In the first year, Peter Stokkermans was our first employee. After his departure, we began to give people contracts and a regular job after they had been with us three years.

However, before getting this far, our own co-operation had to evolve. After the departure of Reinier, there was the issue of the

(37) Nobel prize winner and researcher at the Santa Fe Institute Murry Gellmann describes this style of thinking in reference to Nietzsche: "He [Nietzsche] introduced a distinction between 'Apollonian' thinkers, who gave precedence to logic, (...) and 'Dionysian' thinkers, who are more inclined to intuition, synthesis and passion. (...) But some of us would seem to belong to a separate category: the 'Odyssean' thinkers, who combine both preferences in their search for relationships between ideas." In *The Quark and the Jaguar: adventure in the simple and the complex*, p. XII, Owl Books (1994).

distribution of the shares. Leon only had 10% and Ed and I had the rest. I suggested that Leon should buy Reinier's shares, but Leon found that he had helped to build up VMG just as effectively as anyone else so that he ought to be given Reinier's share. In order to avoid friction, we decided to let our difference of opinion rest for the moment and we worked on in good faith. When we left Ed, the issue raised its head once more and we decided on a division of 70%-30%. A year later, we changed this to 60%-40% at my initiative.

We have also grown toward one another in terms of ideas on architectural substance. In retrospect, many people thought it was a brilliant idea to choose Leon as a partner, but my choice was not a rational one at the time. I simply had the feeling that I needed someone like him. In the meantime, we have realized that a co-operation of two completely different personalities provides important advantages. In an office where each partner has an ego of a similar magnitude and each wishes to be the 'front man', people eventually get in one another's way and an end to the co-operation is ultimately inevitable.<sup>(38)</sup> It generally occurs as follows: when you are a student, you enter an architectural competition in conjunction with another student. You win and before you know it, you are engaged in some kind of co-operation. You become partners but after a while you observe that you hold divergent opinions. However, the name of the office has become established. You decide to keep the co-operation going in name only, and a beneficial side effect is the fact that you can share office space and overheads.

However, because we have never entered into an internal competence struggle and because our interests and capacities lie at supplementary levels, Leon and I have had a different experience. We have actually grown toward one another and have developed a strong emotional bond, one which is so strong that it feels like 'one architect in two bodies'.

(38) For another description of the failure of co-operation between two large egos, see the brilliant text 'The Butterfly's Fate: In Praise of Oxymoron' by Luis Fernandez-Galliano. The failure of the co-operation between Rem Koolhaas and Jacques Herzog is explained not only in terms of the impossibility of working together but also from the point of view of the client. After all: 'Who was Ian Schrager (the client) supposed to call to discuss details?' in *Content*, pp. 208-214, Taschen (2004).

1996 — 1998/ ALL ABOUT SPACE

Our first projects were black and white. Buildings without materials. They were developed in a time when we were dealing with issues like how society was evolving, how community notions were changing, how communications technology was affecting structures, and how mobility introduced changes. In these first projects there is a tremendous spatial intelligence, but the designs are not spectacular in terms of materials.



## FAMILY PROJECTS

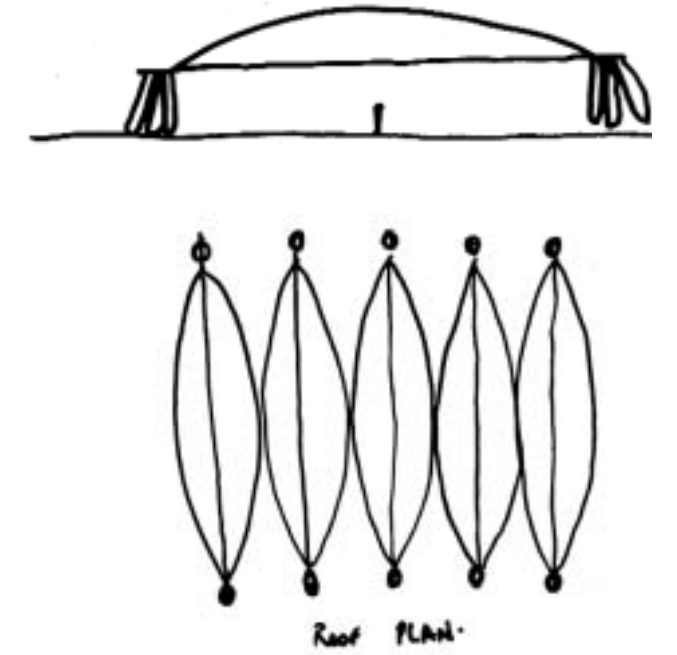
### Product design

It is no secret that projects in which family are involved are often complicated. It is equally well known that an architect's first assignments usually come from family or friends. That was also the case when we started out. Via Sylvie's father, Keith Stewart, we came into contact with Millfield, a private school in England.

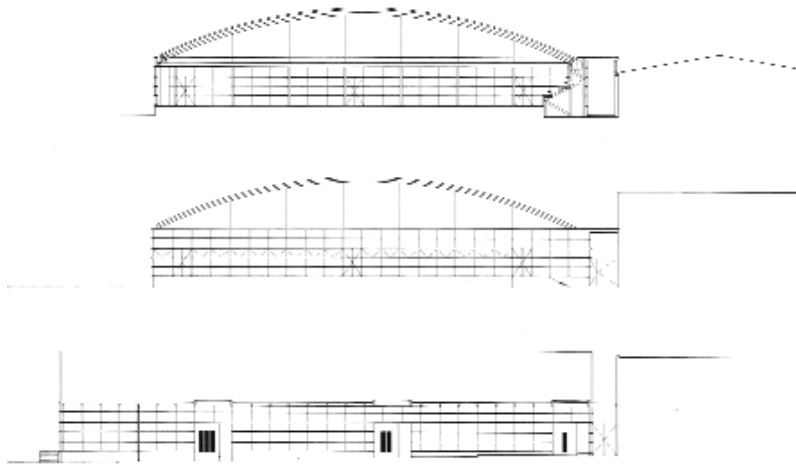
At this school, the emphasis of the teaching programme lies on sport — tennis — and Keith had been approached for his ideas on a new covered tennis court. Because he had a company that specialized in the development of inflatable constructions, he proposed designing an inflatable construction instead of the ugly 'boxes' in which tennis courts are usually encased. Keith asked us if we might be interested in this assignment.

Besides architectural competitions and studies, we had no other real assignments at that time, so Keith's invitation sounded attractive. In addition, this assignment was not really concerned with an architectonic design but rather a kind of product design. Keith had the idea that we could make a prototype for Millfield, one that could be applied elsewhere too. Without really considering whether or not it was a good idea to work with family, we subsequently began on the project.

Keith put us in touch with Ian Firth, an engineer from London. In conjunction with him, we developed a concept for a folding roof, comparable to the roof of a cabriolet. Besides the great advantage of being able to open the roof, our inflatable roof differed in another important manner from the conventional inflatable tennis halls. In the inflatable hall there is always a slightly higher air pressure, which has consequences for one's sporting performance. In our design for an inflatable roof, however, only the construction would have a higher air pressure, so that there would be normal air pressure in the hall. Keith was convinced that this type of construction would not necessarily be more expensive than a conventional solution, but unfortunately this eventually turned out not to be the case.



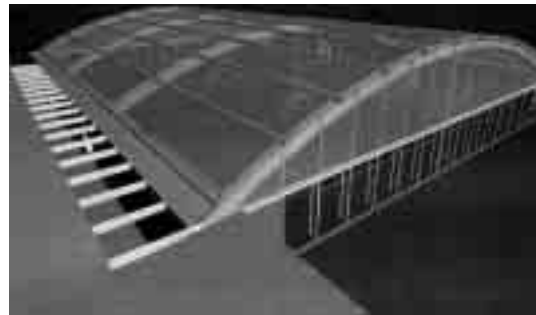
Sketched section and plan of inflatable tennis hall, Millfield, 1994.



Elevations of tennis hall, Millfield.



Model of tennis hall, Millfield.



Rendering of retractable roof, tennis hall, Millfield.

We presented our plans in England on a number of occasions. We created a design specifically for Millfield, with 'fixed' walls and a design for a prototype that consists of a double arch without vertical walls, but neither was financially feasible. There were also problems of a technological nature. Although we had performed a rigorous study of how the construction worked, we had neglected the more practical matters.

For example, I remember someone saying to me during one of the presentations: "When the roof has been rolled back, there is no net to prevent the tennis balls flying out." Moreover, it was not easy to work with family. Because you are working with people with whom you do not have a purely professional relationship, the responses from both sides to various situations was not always professional. But stopping was never an option until it turned out that the project was not financially feasible. We made more or less the same mistake with the T-House later. We were too enthusiastic, and ignored personal reservations believing that we could alter the situation to conform to our own wishes.

#### Suburban values

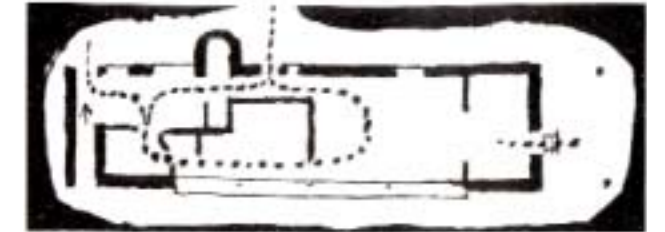
The dwelling is undoubtedly the most renowned architectural assignment. In architectural history, designing a house for the architect's family is also a consistently recurring event. At a very young age, Alvaro Aalto created a design for the conversion of his parents' summer house and Le Corbusier designed a modest house for his parents on Lake Geneva.<sup>(1)</sup>

But the most famous house for a parent is undoubtedly that by Robert Venturi: Vanna Venturi House (1960-63). In many cases, these 'family houses' fulfil a double role in the work of architects. They are often the first opportunity for architects to actually build something, and the opportunity to perform spatial experiments is often seized. In our case, our first genuine assignment was also a family house, a house for Leon's parents, the T-House.

(1) On Le Corbusier's house, Beth Dunlop notes: "It was a controversial house; Corbusier recounts that after it was completed, a neighbouring municipal council met and voted that such houses were crimes against nature and thus prohibited." Dunlop, Beth, *A House for my Mother: houses architects build for their families*, p. 14, New York, Princeton Architectural Press (1999).

In the early sixties, Leon's parents lived in the centre of Heerlen, in a normal terraced house. They had an enormous attic in which his father, who was a dental technician, began his own company. At a certain moment, ten members of staff were working there in circumstances far from ideal. There was little daylight and everyone and everything had to pass through their house. Eventually his parents went looking for a piece of ground where they could build a new house and establish a new practice. They found a farm on the edge of town. The farmhouse was demolished and his parents built their first own house. This house was more or less a standard house, but the workplace was a separate two-storey box in the back garden. The plot on which these two buildings stood was quite large and the zoning plan specified that another two houses could be built there. Leon's father's dream had always been to live in a bungalow when he reached pension age. In addition, because he ignored his wife's desire to go looking for an old house somewhere on a hill, Leon looked at the possibility of building on their own ground. In the meantime, it had become clear that only one house could be built, and that this house would have to be built conform to the architecture of the existing buildings — in brick with a pitched roof. As a result of Leon's advisory role, the 'assignment' implicitly went to VMX. Right from the start, there was no mention of an official assignment, Leon didn't think that we could ask his parents for money for that work. Ultimately we did receive a small fee, but that was because his parents insisted upon it.

Leon had indicated on a number of occasions that his parents wanted to have someone design a new house for them, but nothing seemed to come of it. I was very impatient in those days and could hardly wait to begin on the plans. When I finally visited Leon's parents to hear their ideas, it was immediately evident that they had a completely different taste than I had. There was a rather chilly ambience, it was an empty house with natu-



Plan of 'Petit Villa' that Le Corbusier designed for his parents on the shores of Lake Geneva, 1923.

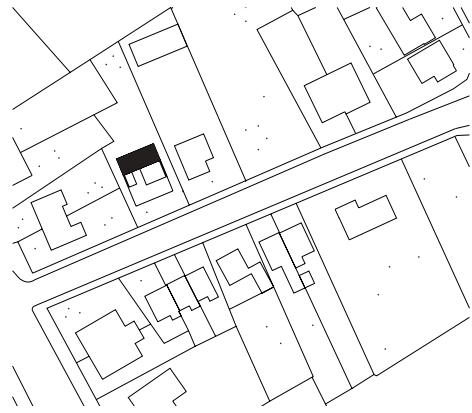


The house that Robert Venturi designed for his mother, 1963.

ral stone floors and leather furniture. It was a strange experience. As a young architect I lived in a totally architectonic world; all my friends were also architects, for example. In this world, there were only two types of interior: the architectonic abstract white interior, similar to what my friends and I had, or the domestic warm and cosy interior that I knew from my family. The interior of Leon's parents was something between these two, not old-fashioned but not modern. Because I was very eager to build, and the opportunity to do so seemed to be available, I simply suppressed the differences in taste. I convinced myself that I would be capable of persuading Leon's parents, I believed I could alter their taste.

However, the difference in approach became immediately clear when Leon's father described his plans. He wanted a bungalow right in the middle of the plot. What he described was the common view of many people. In a kind of veiled exhibitionism, it had become customary to exhibit detached houses in the Netherlands right in the middle of the plot, which played little part in the configuration. This view of the relationship between the house and the surroundings was completely alien to our way of spatial thinking. As architects we wanted to establish exactly this kind of link between the house and garden, between the object and the context. Accordingly, in all our previous (study) designs we had attempted to consider the building as well as the location and we had connected these elements in various ways. It is a strategy that was once described by Roemer van Toorn as follows: "Nearly all VMX Architects' projects display an urban planning volume which is orthogonal, minimal and rational. These formal volumes are not simply arbitrary; instead they are precisely placed in the topographical environment. 'Tabula Rasa' is out of the question. Every new building seeks to connect and make contact with the existing built environment and the landscape into which it has been installed."<sup>(2)</sup> In the case of Leon's parents, we wanted to design a volume that would occupy the plot and in which various relationships between inside

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Situation of the T-House.

(2) Toorn, Roemer van, 'Strong Forms' in *VMX '95*, p. 6, Architectura & Natura (1996).

and outside would be able to arise. Besides the ideas on the positioning of the house and the relationships with the outside world, we also had outspoken ideas on typology. First of all, we wanted to express the idea that children no longer continue to stay in the vicinity of their parents. Increasing mobility and internationalization have given rise to 'atomized families' who, in our opinion, demand a new kind of house. The observation that this process was already common came largely from our own experience. For example, Leon and his sisters no longer lived in the Province of Limburg and do not just pop round to their parents' house for a visit. When I go to visit my parents-in-law in London, I go with my wife and children and we stay a few days. In short, the house that we wanted to design had to have sufficient space to meet this new reality.

The issue of the pensioner-resident also played a role in the design. In *Heaven can Wait* we had considered this kind of resident in general terms, but in this particular case we wanted to create a house similar to Siza's Beires House, which Kenneth Frampton had described in his lectures at the Berlage Institute as follows: "As a reaction to the suburban values of prim 'casa maisons', the implied configuration of this house is shattered by a graphic analogy. (...) The character of the façades summarizes the destruction of the myth of completeness and self-sufficiency..."<sup>(3)</sup>

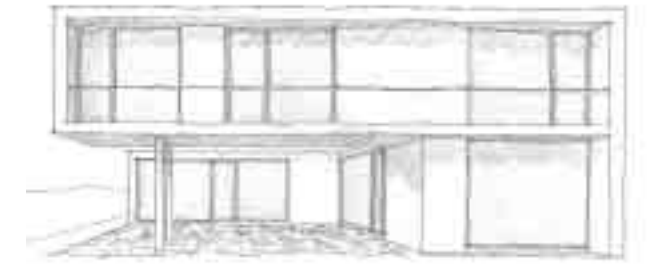
Furthermore, the analogy with Frampton not only applied to our design at a conceptual level. We, too, tried to generate a design that rejected its suburban context so that an own distinct universe could be created. For that reason, the manifestation of our design was completely different to that of Siza.<sup>(4)</sup>

For around a year, we struggled to express our social ideas in architectonic terms. We thought up countless options and Leon's parents began to worry about the progress of the project. Of course, they simply wanted a house and had no intention of solving all the social problems in the Netherlands by means of this building.

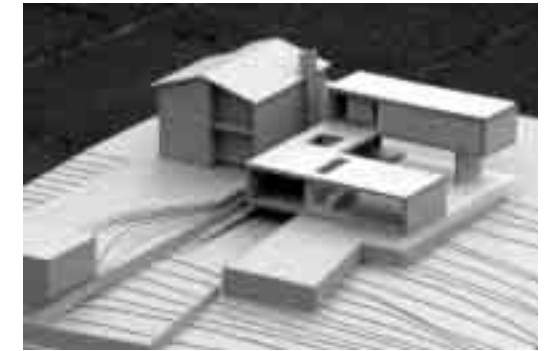
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(3) Siza's Beires House is described in *A+U* no. 6, extra edition, p. 56, 1989.

(4) Don Murphy: "I remember from my childhood that houses with walled gardens always fascinated me. I only wanted to sit upstairs on double-decker buses so that I could look into those gardens."



Sketch of elevation, U-shaped design for the T-House, 1996.



Model view of first U-shaped design for the T-House, 1996.



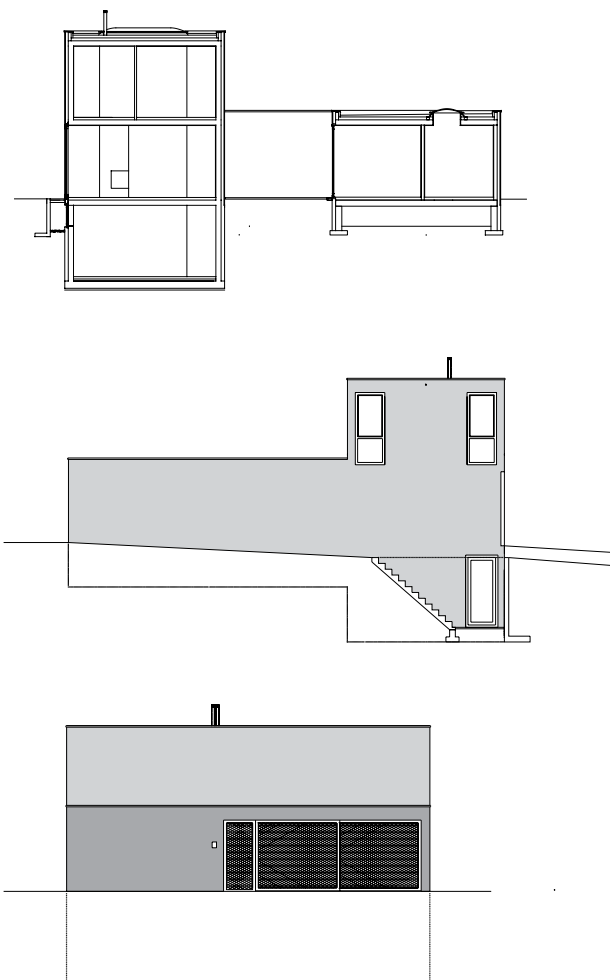
Development of the T-House in models: from a U-shaped plan to a T-shaped section.

The fact that we did not have a real assignment made it rather complicated for Leon's parents. In retrospect, I think we ought to have said to them: "You are doing a great service to us by having us design a house. We won't ask for money for the project, it is a service to you and we could use the design as a business card for us." However, we were never so straightforward. To Leon, there was a kind of dual loyalty. We had scarcely any money, received little money for the work we were doing, but it cost us a great deal of time. In addition, Leon became irritated after a while because he felt that his parents were not the kind of people who would appreciate many of our suggestions, but he couldn't convince me why this was the case.

We made many scale models, all of them with the same idea: a bungalow for the parents and a guesthouse and workplace at various levels. There was one great design in which the bungalow for the parents would be placed like a 'floating beam' on the street side, the guest accommodation would be in the basement, and working and parking space would occupy the ground floor. Leon was convinced that his parents would certainly not want this house, and unfortunately, he was right. The house that was finally realized is less extreme, but it is spatially interesting because we solved the problem of the new typology by stacking three houses. The basement serves as workspace with its own entrance, the house is a bungalow on the ground floor, and the first floor has accommodation for guests but can also be rented out as an apartment. When we eventually reached this compromise, the municipality had to be convinced that this kind of less traditional architecture would be acceptable. With a book full of references, we visited the city architect and when he saw the quality we were aiming at, he was quite willing to co-operate. The brick / peaked roof criteria suddenly turned out to be not so strict after all.

Because we were oriented toward the social and spatial implications of a new typology, we devoted little attention to the materials to be used in the T-House. The result is a house that

looks like a one-to-one model in cardboard. It has none of the subtlety that makes a really good house so attractive. Simple things like a porch above the front door are missing, unfortunately. The enormous glass façades turned out to be less comfortable than we had imagined, the cold just comes right through them in the winter. Because we were not sufficiently present during the actual implementation of the plans — we allowed ourselves to be pushed aside by contractors who arranged things themselves — the result is not as good as it should have been. When we saw a house that was designed by Jeroen Schippers in the same period, it became clear what the T-House could have been had we been more involved.<sup>(5)</sup> However, Leon's parents were enthusiastic about their house and mention that they still receive positive reactions about it.<sup>(6)</sup>



Section and elevation of the T-House as built, 1997.



T-House seen from the public road.



Garden side of the T-House, model.  
Garden side of the T-House as built.



The house Jeroen Schippers designed for his parents in Venray, 1996.

(5) Schippers, Jeroen 'Het huis als camera. Een woonhuis in Venray,' *Qase* no. 49/50, p. 40-43 (1998). Schippers articulated his idea on the context in which he realized this house, a context that seems to be very similar to that of the T-House, and he describes the situation that he reacts against as: "It's a pseudo-romanticism, built in brick, which reduces the house for living to a formal image exhibition on the site. The preoccupation of the dwelling makes a real relationship with the actual place impossible."

(6) After the T-House, we did not do any more assignments for family. But if a similar assignment should arise again in the near future, I think that we would ultimately be just as eager as we were then and would simply go for it.

## THE REAL THING

### 3UP2DOWN

The first assignment often plays a dubious role in the work of architects. Although this assignment is often decisive in economic and educational respects, it is often the case that this work is the first to disappear from the oeuvre. Architects are seldom proud of their first attempts and prefer to place the emphasis on their most recent work.<sup>(7)</sup> In our case, the first assignment played a different role. In retrospect, the approach to our first real assignment is characteristic of our attitude. In Den Bosch, we did not wait patiently but did everything we could to be able to build. In later projects, this desire to build and to express our ideas by means of buildings was more refined, of course, but the first real assignment had all the essential VMX elements in it.

Nowadays, participation in European seems to have become an almost routine matter for young architects, an indispensable entry in your CV, as Arnold Reijndorp describes it.<sup>(8)</sup> When Reinier and I participated in the competition, winning was regarded as a good reason for starting your own office, and when we won that was what we did — we founded the Murphy de Graaf partnership. Without giving it too much thought, we began our office on the basis of a fictive assignment. Due to various delays, the European assignment was not our first realized work. It was actually a completely different project that was designed without Reinier, because he had left the office. Nevertheless, the European assignment played a crucial role in VMX's initial development. As mentioned, we were already aware of all the aspects that became more explicit in later assignments. Inexperienced as we were, we allowed ourselves to be led by intuition, an approach that turned out to be effective, as we later realized. But we were also lucky and in our enthusiasm we managed to win people over, to convince the sceptics. After winning European 3 in Den Bosch, it remained uncertain for a long time whether or not Heaven can Wait would ever be implemented. The first problem was that the European

(7) Colomina, Beatrice, Privacy and Publicity: Architecture as Mass Media: MIT Press (1994). According to Colomina, Villa Schob, dating from 1916, disappeared completely from Le Corbusier's Oeuvre Complète, and Adolf Loos destroyed all his office archives in 1922, because it was only after this that he found his oeuvre mature enough to confide to history. More recently, the overview of architect Rem Koolhaas — SMLXL — also displays remarkable gaps: no IJplein, no police station in Almere, no office building on the Frederichstrasse, no bus station in Rotterdam, no Veerplein in Vlaardingen, no 'Houtwerf' housing apartments in Zaandam and no Kavel 25 housing in The Hague. However, this work has been included in the list of work which appeared in Architecture and Urbanism nr. 10, pp. 156-157 (1988).

(8) Reijndorp, Arnold, 'Grote vragen, bescheiden antwoorden,' Ontwerpen aan de Europese stad, 15 jaar European in Nederland, p. 215, Rotterdam (2003). On p. 11 of the same publication, the board of European Nederland emphasizes that 15 years later, European's raison d'être lies in the fact that this initiative plays a stimulating role in the relationship between young architects and the government and in the issue of urban production. This seems to give an implicit indication on the possibility for architects to set up their own practice.

jury had designated two winners: Murphy/De Graaf and Helena Njiric, so that the Municipality of Den Bosch was charged with the task of making a definitive choice between the two offices. Because the development of the competition location, Brabantbad, also took much longer than anticipated, the choice was postponed for a lengthy period. On 20 February 1994, the prize winners for the Dutch European were announced in the Groninger Museum — which had been designed by Mendini but was not yet quite finished — and it was only at the end of March 1996 that the Municipality of Den Bosch made its definitive choice. We had the general feeling that Den Bosch was rather distant from Amsterdam, but because this was the assignment for which we had founded our office I went there every six weeks. Then I spoke to Wouter Hogendoorn, the urban planner for Brabantbad, and learned from him that he had originally planned to have high-rise construction at the site. Not realizing just how important these conversations probably were, I discussed with Wouter the possibility of adjusting our competition design. He was prepared to listen and appeared interested in my ideas. At the same time he was very careful about committing himself.<sup>(9)</sup> I was not aware of lobbying for this project, it seemed no more than logical that we exchanged ideas and kept one another up to date with developments. The first official step to initiate discussions with the Municipality came from the European organization, which proposed that architect Bert Dirrix should function as the mentor for both prize-winners. The first meeting between the mentor, prize winners and urban planner took place at Dirrix's office in Eindhoven on Saturday morning 14 January 1995. In an attempt to solve the problem of having to choose, Wouter suggested that the prize winners should co-operate. After exchanging a short glance with Helena, we simultaneously answered Wouter's question with a resolute "No!"<sup>(10)</sup> In other words, the municipality of Den Bosch had no other option but to choose a project. The evening after the discussion in Eindhoven, I was invited to

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(9) The reason for Hogendoorn's reserve probably lay in the fact that the Municipality of Den Bosch had just lost a lawsuit on the pledges it had made to a developer, which had cost the municipality much money.

(10) Nowadays I would be pleased to engage in co-operation but then I was too cagey about working with Helena. Furthermore, I had never really understood why she had also won the first prize. Her design was very different from mine, very cliché with tulips on a dike. She seemed to have a completely different notion of architecture. Moreover, Helena herself did not want to co-operate on the project.

the birthday party of Kees Christiaanse's wife,<sup>(11)</sup> which Helena Njiric also attended. At that time, it was not clear who would receive the assignment in Den Bosch so it was a rather strange experience to meet her again in these circumstances. It became even stranger when I discovered that she had asked Kees to be her mentor in Den Bosch and that he had agreed. I regarded Kees as a friend and felt unpleasantly surprised by his association with Helena. Instead of the meeting with Dirrix bringing a solution closer, the competition between Helena and me seemed to have intensified.

An end to the uncertainty came in March 1996 when Wouter advanced a proposal. On 13 March, he wrote: "In August 1995 I wrote you that the project 'Brabantbad' has been delayed for several reasons. In consultation with Mr Bob Geerling (European, ed.) the Municipality of Den Bosch has decided that one of the winning teams should develop another site. (...) The Concordia site is a location where we are still free to choose an architect. (...) To come to a selection which team will develop this project, I ask you to present your works. (...) I invite you to attend at ten o'clock in the morning of Monday 25 March 1996."<sup>(12)</sup> With this invitation, it was clear that neither of the competition designs would be realized in the short term. The presentation took place in the Town Hall of Den Bosch. We were well prepared. In an almost obsessive urge to leave nothing to chance, I remember that we had taken an extra slide projector and even spare slide lamps just in case. Of course, nothing went wrong and the presentation — which was more of an interview about our design plans — went perfectly. Although Wouter himself was not involved in this selection, I think, in retrospect, that my contact with him had been of some importance. I had demonstrated that we were eager to work, that we were prepared to think about alternatives, and that we took our task as architects extremely seriously. The chairman of European — Bob Geerling — was not directly involved in the selection either, but I had the idea that he supported Helena Njiric more than myself.<sup>(13)</sup> The joy was

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(11) As an urban planner and former OMA member of staff, Kees Christiaanse enjoyed a great deal of respect in the Netherlands at that time. I had become friends with him via the Berlage Institute.

(12) Letter dated 13 March 1996 from Wouter Hogendoorn, VMX archives.

overwhelming when the Municipality opted for VMX. For the European organization, however, the book was not closed with this choice. After the selection on 9 May, Geerlings wrote to Bert Dirrix, the mentor: “In all confidentiality I inform you that I had personally hoped that Helena Njiric would receive the assignment for the new location because I found her approach better suited to the location. In addition, I had hoped that Don Murphy would be appropriate for the original location. It was not to be.”<sup>(14)</sup> Geerling wrote to the Municipality of Den Bosch the same day: “The result of the selection will be a disappointment to Ms Njiric, but I expect that this will be a temporary setback. I assume that you, in line with European, will feel the moral duty to help her obtain an assignment. In this sense, we have good experience with municipalities where, in the past, two prizes were allocated. In this context, I can think of Nijmegen and Zaanstad.”<sup>(15)</sup> Although we were very happy that we had been chosen, we were also sceptical about the entire procedure. Leon in particular had difficulty in seeing the assignment as a proxy assignment because the brief and the location were completely different — they were smaller and less attractive.<sup>(16)</sup> We immediately informed the Municipality of our viewpoint and we assumed that when the original competition location would be developed in the future, VMX would be involved. This turned out to be otherwise; I shall discuss this point later.

At the end of 1996, after a long period of waiting, persistent telephone calls, various discussions with Wouter, and an ultimate selection, we could finally become acquainted with our client: BrabantWonen housing association. The first meeting took place in our office in Amsterdam on 27 November. Normally we make very extensive presentations for this kind of appointment but for some inexplicable reason we hadn't done that this time. Now that we had begun on a real assignment, we were unprepared, probably paralyzed by the desire to do everything perfectly. Marion van de Mortel and Alex Jansen of BrabantWonen hardly noticed this. It was probably pleasant for them

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(13) Just as with Kees Christiaanse, I also had the feeling with Bob Geerling that our communal friendship with Elizabeth Vente would stimulate him to choose my side rather than Helena's. I was wrong here too.

(14) Fax dated 9 May 1996, to Prof. Ir. Bert Dirrix, sender Bob Geerling, chairman of European Nederland.

(15) Letter dated 9 May 1996, to Ir. J.G. Meester, head of the Department of Urban Planning and Economic Development, Den Bosch, sender Bob Geerling, chairman of European Nederland.

(16) The programme for European 4 consisted of 120 luxury houses for senior citizens, the programme for the substitute assignment that was ultimately realized consisted of 45 apartments for starters and 14 apartments for handicapped people. The original programme contained fewer apartments for handicapped people, with shopping space instead, which was changed to apartments during the project.

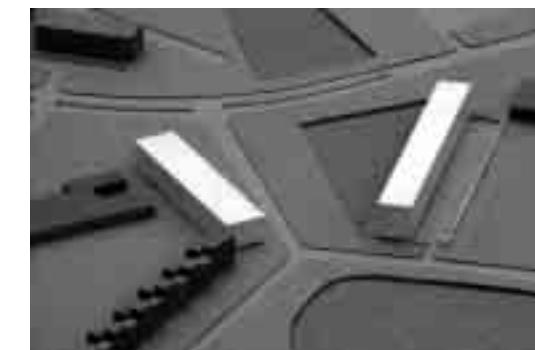
that we were not brimming over with ideas. They had planned this first interview to become acquainted with us and to discuss the assignment.<sup>(17)</sup> Shortly after the discussion with BrabantWonen we had our first consultation in Den Bosch with Rolf Tjerkstra, the urban planner for the new location. On his plan of the area, Rolf had made one area black to indicate our project. In the second discussion, it suddenly turned out that two blocks were designated for VMX; without any pressure from our side, our assignment had suddenly been doubled.<sup>(18)</sup> Rolf cannot remember this occurrence exactly but he does know what his ideas on the project were at the time. In a conversation that we later had, he formulated it as follows: “I cannot remember whether or not I gave VMX an extra block. In any case, the location would be a ‘hub’ with the Stevinweg, the main artery of the western district, being allocated a branch stretching toward the south. In addition, the Wolfsdonk Park had to melt into the Concordia Park. You ought to have the feeling that when you crossed the Stevinweg the park simply continued. Finally, the existing water course had to be maintained and we wanted to introduce more water into the area.” Thus, the aim of the plan was to use architectural interventions to give shape to all these transitional stages which, in the existing situation, involved all kind of clumps of trees and back alleys. In the positioning of the architecture I applied the theme of the hub to create a spatial triangle. As a result, everything is squeezed together on one side in a dramatic manner, but the entrance to the park is opened up at the same time. Furthermore, the area as a whole ought to form a bridge between the historical inner city of Den Bosch and a post-war residential quarter. We subsequently translated Rolf's demands into blocks that would come to lie in the landscape like land-art objects.

To us, the position in which we found ourselves in Den Bosch was completely new. One aspect to which we had difficulty in becoming accustomed was the restricting conditions. Up until that moment we were used to receiving a brief and a location (in

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(17) BrabantWonen is a housing corporation with a large market position in both Oss and Den Bosch. It has around 14,500 houses to let in these municipalities. In its operations, BrabantWonen attempts to realize neighbourhoods with different housing types, price classes and proportions of ownership, where people with higher and lower incomes can mingle.

(18) The discussion in question took place on 9 September 1996, the office agenda states: Den Bosch, both blocks with VMX.



View of urban model with two white blocks indicating the VMX project.

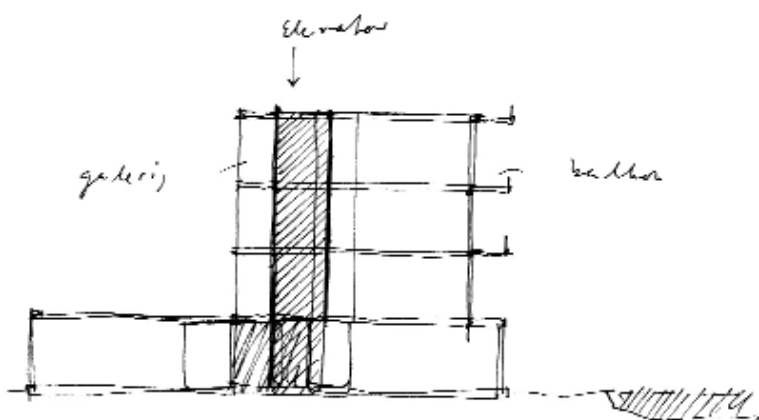
architectural competitions), after which we could determine how these elements could be mutually related. In Den Bosch, however, we received the measurements and the positioning of the two blocks and we had to develop our programme strictly within this envelop. There was no scope for experiment. These new circumstances were extremely disappointing, certainly in view of the interplay with public space and the location that we had developed in Heaven can Wait. We finally accepted the conditions because we wanted to start building after waiting two long years. In retrospect, this proxy European assignment was the true launch of VMX. The reality of a genuine assignment forced us to bundle together all our energy. Prior to Den Bosch we had tested our individual qualities in several (German) architectural competitions but there was as yet no mention of true collaboration as an office. Faced with the bluntness of a real assignment, we had to develop a method in which ideological, social, spatial and economic plans would form a productive entity. For the very first time, we began to formulate designs on the basis of aesthetics and economics. Looking back, it is a process that sounds simple, but in reality it meant that two personalities — Leon and myself — had to learn to work together.

It is useful to sketch the social context of that period in order to understand the background against which we were given an opportunity to design the project in Den Bosch. After the dreams of the sixties, a fragmented cultural landscape without clear landmarks arose in the late eighties, early nineties. "Larger connections, deeper layers, it was all exchanged for a light-footed identification with the ephemeral, coincidental, transient: Plato had been definitively defeated by the Sophists, philosophy and politics by the rapidly changing reality of trend-watchers, spin doctors, and marketers."<sup>(19)</sup> The result was a far-reaching process of individualization. During my study at the Berlage Institute, I had become convinced that architecture always had to be more than just a

building. Accordingly, we understood the assignment to design houses for starters as a request to furnish the above-mentioned process of individualization with a suitable typology. In our opinion, starters were not seeking a feeling of community, like the senior citizens for whom we had designed Heaven can Wait. They wanted privacy and we translated this longing into a new typology. From my student days in England I remembered the typical workers' houses that were called '2UP2DOWN'. This typology consisted of minimum houses with two rooms on the ground floor and two rooms on the first floor. With this typology in mind, we wondered whether it might be possible to make such houses suitable for our target group.

Initially, one block was going to be four storeys high and the other block three storeys with an extension at the rear. Inspired by a housing project by Herzog & de Meuron, we proposed galleries with columns.<sup>(20)</sup> A cost analysis indicated that there were two all-defining elements: the price of the façades and the price for the circulation area. In an attempt to make the design affordable we subsequently suggested making both blocks three storeys high so that no lift would be required. By making use of a 'shoe box' typology, the surface area of the exterior façade of each house could be minimized. We finally developed a structure in which two apartments on the first floor were combined with three apartments on the second floor: 3UP2DOWN.

With much patience and attention, we subsequently designed the floor plans for the apartments. We succeeded in creating clear and lucid access by means of a combination of 'loft houses' and gallery apartments with one gallery per apartment block. After Daniel Niggli, a VMX staff member, had seen a housing project by Peter Zumthor in Switzerland, he suggested omitting the columns completely.<sup>(21)</sup> I was not enthusiastic about Daniel's suggestion at first, but when it turned out that the columns would cause thermal problems, we tested the version without columns and that was promising. Eventually the project consisted of two monolithic blocks in which incisions

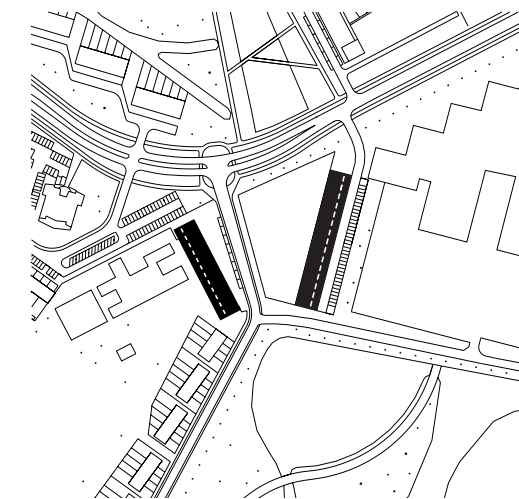


Sketched section of first design for 3UP2DOWN, with four levels, an elevator, and galleries with columns.



Model, showing two buildings with different heights and columns.

(19) Boomkens, René, 'Engagement na de vooruitgang', Reflect # 01, *Nieuw engagement. In architectuur, kunst en design*, p. 11-26, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2003).



Site plan for 3UP2DOWN.



Left: Our inspiration for the columns: Apartment building at Hebelstrasse, Basel, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, 1987-1988.  
Right: The cantilever designed by Peter Zumthor in Spittelhof Estate, Baselland, 1989-1996.

(20) Apartment building along a party wall, by Herzog & de Meuron, Basel (1984).

(21) Spittelhof Estate, Peter Zumthor, Baselland 1989-1996.





Rendering of first design for 3UP2DOWN.



Perspective of 3UP2DOWN, with commercial spaces at ground level.



Detail of model of first design of 3UP2DOWN, with commercial spaces at ground level.

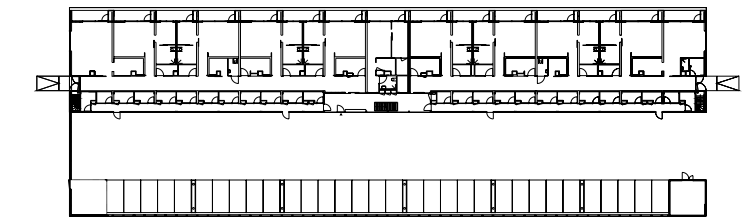
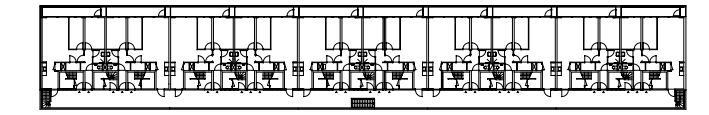
have been made for a gallery and loggias. The ground floor accommodates apartments for handicapped people, the starters' houses are on the first and second storeys. These apartments function as cocoons in which people can close themselves off from the surroundings. Contact with the neighbours is restricted to a minimum and the residents' view is oriented toward the reflecting surface of the pond.

Rolf Tjerkstra wanted the various architects who were involved in his urban plan to re-evaluate the entire area in a number of workshops. We were the only architects with an assignment to design social housing and although we were the youngest participants we were taken more seriously than the other architects. This was probably the consequence of the fact that we clearly invested more energy in our plan than the others. We came up with endless new variants and were always prepared to consider the remarks made by others. Our experience with the Welstand (Building Inspectorate) in this project was also a positive one. Nowadays, we do not immediately show our complete plans to the Welstand in some cases because experience has indicated that one can build up a relationship with them by explaining your design in steps. At the first meeting on 3UP2DOWN we did not yet possess this wisdom, but we instinctively only took diverse variants, volume studies and maps with us. I can remember how our fellow architects, whom we encountered in the corridor before the presentation, looked at us, probably thinking we were not quite right in the head. After all, as one of them said, you should only show Welstand what is absolutely necessary. However, we had prepared a comprehensive presentation — with panels, scale models, and drawings in perspective — which actually bore fruit. The committee reacted extremely enthusiastically.

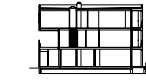
It was the first moment at which I made the comparison between architecture and fashion, or rather, between architecture and clothes. Just like Adolf Loos, I compared our design with

the design of a tailor-made suit — a garment that should not be conspicuous by means of its loudness but rather by means of its refinement. Or, as Mark Wigley describes it: "Although the well-dressed gentleman is he who does not stand out, a gentleman must, in the end, stand out. The best tailor offers a cut that satisfies the always double function of fashion — mask and marker — by which the surface layer at once bonds the individual to a group and detaches this group from others."<sup>(22)</sup> Wigley continues: "The modern architect, like the modern city dweller and the modern building that Loos describes, is not meant to stand out." He describes how the uniform but well-tailored suit is the choice of the modern architect who wishes to react against the 'female' clothes of the Arts and Crafts architects. In Den Bosch, the assignment was to design, with extremely limited resources, the suit for the starter. Using cheap materials, we wished to place the accent on the fit. The Welstand saw something in the allure of our blocks, which we described as an optimistic 60's, 70's architecture, unambiguous structures with horizontal lines and prefab façades.<sup>(23)</sup> However, our client had implicitly informed us on several occasions that they wanted a brick block. To solve this problem, we went looking for an alternative. Leon discovered an affordable stone-like plate material. The manufacturer of this material told us that Rudy Uytenga had used it in a project in Tilburg, and we went to look there along with Marion and Alex. The project convinced them and the brick façades were abandoned.<sup>(24)</sup>

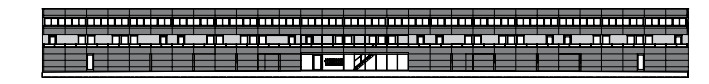
In previous projects, we had already become familiar with the various phases preceding the construction of 3UP2DOWN, but we were not prepared for the changes that occurred during the construction of the project. For example, the urban development situation was radically altered during the construction. Initially, the idea had been that one block would be surrounded by greenery and that it would be accessed from the back. The other block would lie on a kind of street with shops on the



Plans of 3UP2DOWN.



Sections of 3UP2DOWN.



Elevations of 3UP2DOWN.

(22) Wigley, Mark, 'White Walls' in *Designer Dresses: the fashioning of modern architecture*, p. 172, London, MIT Press (1995).

(23) We have always had a resistance to building with brick. For some reason, prefabrication always seemed more attractive and is more modern, in our opinion.

(24) The co-operation with our client went extremely well. Alex in particular played the role of a kind of uncle-figure to us. He knew the tricks of the trade and examined our plans with a healthy reserve. He ultimately turned out to be open to suggestion and was willing to give us the opportunity to create something other than brick buildings.



3UP2DOWN, seen from the street.  
3UP2DOWN, seen from the pond.



3UP2DOWN, interior.

ground floor. For reasons of expense, this idea was adjusted during the construction phase and both apartment blocks were allocated apartments for handicapped people on the ground floor; the street disappeared. When it became clear that the urban plans were beginning to shift, I remembered that, at the Berlage Institute, Kenneth Frampton described how architecture could be laid in the landscape. Using the words of Mario Botta, Frampton called it: "to build the site".<sup>(25)</sup> I subsequently devoted effort to generate a more radical layout of the site, in which the water would border on one of the blocks, for example. I found this was successful but I still have the idea that the water level should have been one metre higher.

The structural-work stages of the project were exciting. It was an exceptional feeling to see two concrete volumes from our imagination rise up in reality. The disappointment came with the finishing, which was rather mediocre. In retrospect, I believe that our expectations were too high. We had the idea that we were constructing an enormously important project, so that no one could have met our expectations. After completion, it turned out that all the ingenuity and inventiveness that we had inserted into the design remain invisible to most people.<sup>(26)</sup> Moreover, our project was not conspicuous in the context of a number of spectacular houses from the same period; 3UP2DOWN was not included in the architectural year book, for example. A number of writers reviewed it positively in the specialist journals. These publications mentioned particularly the simplicity, the modesty and the tranquillity that the houses exude. For example, Jaap Huisman wrote: "The sixties are back in a different guise: Murphy and his team have adopted the spatial feeling of that period — where can you find such spacious living rooms with such broad balconies? (...) With its regular pattern of loggias and frosted-glass balustrades, 3UP2DOWN radiates a tranquillity that is difficult to find in many Vinex suburbs. It is no more than that, but more is not needed."<sup>(27)</sup>

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(25) Frampton, Kenneth, 'Towards a critical regionalism,' in *Labour, Work and Architecture*, p. 68, London, Phaidon Press (2002).

(26) Examples of the substance and inventiveness of this project are the way in which the consoles are hidden by means of storage areas on the balconies and the almost invisible emergency exits, for example.

(27) Huisman, Jaap, 'Compromisloze architectuur', *Vrij Nederland*, 1 April 2000.

## BUILDING A REPUTATION

### Nine+One

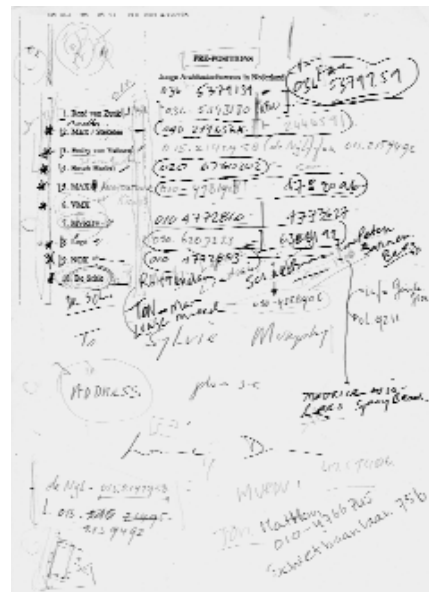
To survive as an architect you have to acquire assignments. Of course, this also applies to young architects, but they have the extra difficulty that they cannot rely on a reputation or network. Besides working on real assignments such as the T-House and 3UP2DOWN, it was clear to us right from the outset that we too would have to try to build up a reputation. The possibilities of doing so increased rapidly in the mid-nineties. After our start with VMX, the first person who spoke about stimulating young architects was Wytze Patijn, the government architect.<sup>(28)</sup> Patijn's statements were music to our ears and we decided to invite him to our office. He only responded six months later, with a very formal letter. He wrote: "Thank you for sending your brochure, which offers an insight into your studies and designs. (...) Unfortunately I do not have sufficient time at my disposal to visit architects; I hope you can understand this."<sup>(29)</sup> In other words, nothing happened.

In that same year, 1996, Hertzberger invited Kristin Feireiss to the Berlage Institute because she was to be the new director of the NAI. She too spoke of developing initiatives for young architects. In a new attempt to discover something about these initiatives I decided to contact her, by telephone this time, rather than by letter. I got Kristin on the line almost immediately and I asked her about her ideas. She told me she wanted to organize an exhibition in the upper hall of the NAI building in Rotterdam. Young architects would get the opportunity to display their work on a drawing table. Kristin's proposal sounded a bit old-fashioned. I knew, from my time at the Berlage Institute, that most young architects were often not very interested in group exhibitions and that drawing tables were certainly outmoded. Accordingly, I advanced another suggestion: "Wouldn't it be better if the NAI put the entrance of the building at the disposal of young architects. Each architect could lay out this area for a period of a month and we could have ten offices present themselves, for example." Kristin thought this a good idea and asked

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(28) The first person who was assigned the title of Government Architect was Willem Nicolaas Rose when he worked for the Landsgebouwendienst (State Building Department) from 1858 to 1867. The current Government Architect is Mels Crouwel; Jo Coenen (2000-2004), Wytze Patijn (1995-2000) and Kees Rijnboutt (1989-1995) preceded him (remaining within the span of this publication). The Ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and the Environment outlines the function as follows: "The Government Architect stimulates the quality of architecture in the broadest sense of the term, both within and outside governmental activities. In the performance of his function, he occupies an independent position. The Government Architect advises the Director General of the Ministry of Housing and Construction on the buildings, public works and grounds under the auspices of this Ministry. The Government Architect also advises the Cabinet on architectural policy."

(29) Letter from Wytze Patijn, dated 23 February 1996.



Fax from Kristin Feireiss, sent on 9 October 1996. List of pre-position architects with our notes on it.

if I could compile a list of architects we could invite. She also asked Winy Maas, Ole Bouman and Rients Dijkstra to compile lists and she made the definitive choice from these four lists. It was our task to phone the selected architects and gather information from them.

As an office, we subsequently performed much of the necessary organizational and content-related work for the exhibition. We created a book that presented the various architects along with photographs of their work. We decided that you had to be an independent architect<sup>(30)</sup> in order to be considered for the exhibition. As a working title, Kristin came up with the name 'prepositions' to express her plan of displaying work of architects who had not yet gained a position, a reputation. At the first general meeting in Kristin's office, tension was running high, especially between Winy Maas and Rients Dijkstra, whom we had not known up till then. They made no concessions to one another and both wanted to be regarded as the most prominent architect. Lucas Verweij, too, was pretty vociferous and had an opinion on absolutely everything. Lars Spuybroek kept more in the background, he didn't say much but what he said was extremely to the point. I believe that he was the person who came up with the eventual name. He said: "If nobody wants to co-operate and everybody wants to do his own thing, we could just as well call the project 'Nine+One'. Everybody can claim that he is the 'one'." <sup>(31)</sup>

The mutual rivalry that was already tangible during the preparations reached a climax in the actual exhibition. Max1 — Rients Dijkstra — was chosen to present the first exhibition. With splendid scale models and clear drawings, they presented a traditional exhibition. Then it was MVRDV's turn. Just as in their later architecture, they opted for a radical approach and only presented an impressive array of scale models. After MVRDV, it was our turn (17.04.97-06.05.97).

It was a great struggle to think up an idea, it felt as if we had to re-invent the exhibition on architecture. Eventually we reached

(30) This is the reason why Bjarne Mastenbroek and Dick van Gameren were not present, they were part of a larger office (de Architectengroep). It was odd that Endry van Velzen was allowed to participate, even although he was a part of De Nijl Architecten. We never quite realized what was actually going on here.

(31) As a young company, the One Architecture office (Mathijs Bouw was still working with Joost Meuwissen at the time) felt excluded by the choice of the makers of Nine+One. At the 'Dutch Style?' symposium, which was held on 20 September 1997, they seized the chance to express their views: "[They] claimed to be the real 'One' by organizing a separate exhibition in the gallery of the NAI, which was opened at the same time as the symposium."

the conclusion that it would be interesting if we tried to give our work a new interpretation instead of representing it once again. We therefore chose not to make new scale models or drawings but to display our existing work through the eyes of an artist. De Expeditie gallery put us in contact with the artist Albert van Westing, who made ordinary, everyday photographs of what he called "moments frozen in time". Using an ordinary camera, Albert took photos of our VMX '95 book while I held it open on the roof of our office. The black-and-white photos of photos were enlarged to the extent that from close by the viewer could only see pixels. The photos were subsequently printed on transparent sheets that would be suspended in a labyrinth-like arrangement in the entrance hall. In an attempt to link architecture and art, the images would form a new route in the existing space. However, during the construction of our exhibition, Albert had to attend a workshop in Austria so that he was not involved in the final result. We were extremely satisfied with the result, but when Albert later visited the exhibition, he was disappointed, he found that it had become too architectural, I believe. In retrospect, I think that it would have been more interesting if the whole had had more 'kick', but at that time we were more interested in a refined rather than a 'punchy' exhibition such as that of MVRDV. Friends mentioned that they found our exhibition attractive but 'sec' and difficult to understand. It was frustrating to see that the architects who made less effort to present something different often got more response and managed to reach the general public better with their traditional exhibition than we did with all our inventiveness. For the texts in the catalogue that would appear to accompany the exhibitions we suggested Christoph Grafe. Others proposed Crimson, but Crimson was not interested in the promotion of a group, despite our argument that it was not a new school of architecture. In a subsequent meeting, someone suggested Michael Speaks. Both Grafe and Speaks eventually made contributions. A striking aspect of Speaks's contribution was that



Image used for the Nine+One exhibition. Photo by Albert Westing, 1996.



Constructing the 'sheets' for the Nine+One exhibition. Spring 1997. Views of the Nine+One exhibition in the Architectural Institute (NAI).

he quietly conveyed a strong personal preference. He was mainly interested in MVRDV, Max1, NL Architects and Bosch Haslett, and emphasized the correspondences between these offices rather than discussing the diversity of the architects involved. As mentioned, our idea was that there was neither a particular style nor generation. The selected offices were all interesting for various reasons. In our opinion Michael Speaks clearly made a mistake by maintaining that there was such a thing as a Dutch school. Later, his approach — and thus the same mistake — was adopted by Bart Lootsma when he presented himself as the writer of his ‘Super-Dutch generation’.

The exhibition itself had the desired effect and attracted much attention. It was one of the first events by means of which Kristin, in contrast to previous directors, could put the NAI on the international map. Nine+One travelled halfway round the world and we still receive job applications from the strangest places as a consequence.

#### Hamburg and Rotterdam Bridge

After Nine+One Kristin asked if we would be willing to create an exhibition for her. She had been approached by the Municipality of Hamburg with the question as to whether she would be willing to co-operate on an exhibition on Rotterdam and Hamburg. Kristin suggested that we should compile the part on Rotterdam. The idea was that the exhibition would draw attention to the issue of what was being done with the harbour areas that were becoming available for re-development in both ports. The exhibition would go on display in Hamburg and then in Rotterdam. We were delighted with Kristin’s approach. It was a mark of recognition whilst also constituting an excellent opportunity to gain knowledge of Rotterdam.

We co-operated with the German architect Carsten Roth, who compiled the Hamburg part of the exhibition. For our part, we performed comprehensive research of the urban developments along the banks of the River Maas. Because we had little experi-

ence with performing research, we based our study primarily on our own curiosity. We did not attempt to carry out a scientific study but instead instinctively chose various locations along the river, in conjunction with dS+V. We subsequently documented these locations and visualized their history, current situation, and future possibilities in a slide show. With Kristin ensuring that a considerable budget was available for the Rotterdam contribution, we could design special consoles in which the slides were presented. These consoles were situated on a large map of the area to indicate the locations they depicted.

When we arrived in Hamburg, it was clear that they had been forced to make do with a much more restricted budget than we had. Everyone was extremely jealous when they saw what we had produced and an almost hostile atmosphere arose. In terms of presentation, the project became a little embarrassing to us but at least we had acquired a lot of knowledge on Rotterdam. We were up to date with almost all the urban developments along the Maas.

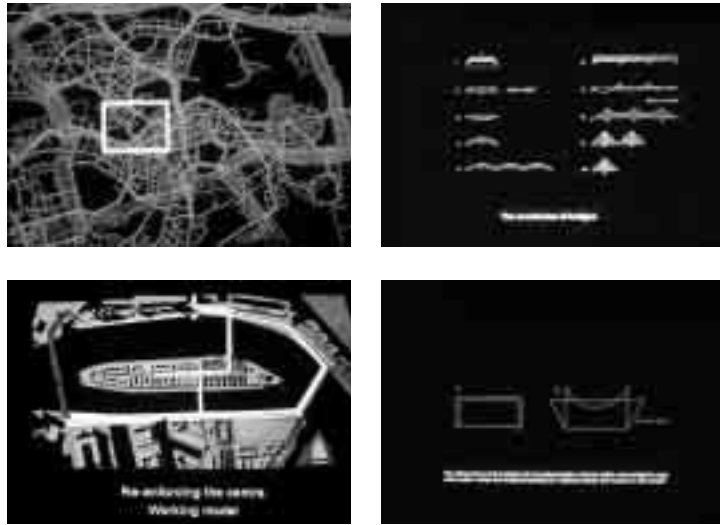
At the conclusion of the reception held to celebrate the opening of the exhibition in Rotterdam, Sabine Lebesque — one of Kristin’s staff — mentioned that her next project was to organize a study on a new bridge across the Maas in Rotterdam. After the Rotterdam / Hamburg exhibition, this sounded like an excellent opportunity and I approached Kristin immediately the next day. I asked her if we could also participate and she agreed.

Along with Max1, Alsop, Joan Busquets, Odile Decq & Benoit Cornette, DS Landschapsarchitecten, and Atelier Quadrat, we were invited to think about a cross-river connection.

According to Joost Schrijnen, the erstwhile deputy director of the Urban Planning and Social Housing Department, the aim of the study was not to draw up a ready-made design for a new bridge but rather to investigate what ought to be connected and in which way. With the completion of the Erasmus Bridge, Rotterdam Zuid had been drawn into the centre of Rotterdam. Following the same principle, the Municipality wished to find



View of the Hamburg-Rotterdam exhibition, on display in Hamburg, 1997.



Rotterdam Bridge, situation and analysis of the mechanics of bridges, 1998.



Model of Rotterdam Bridge. Photo by Jan Richard Kikkert, model by Douwe den Hertog.

out if and how the connection between Rotterdam-Oost and Rotterdam-Zuid could be improved.

Because we knew that the Municipality was interested in the considerations that might lead to a connection, we took a number of observations as the basis of our study. Moreover, the picture sketched by Rem Koolhaas in his 'Generic City' had made a great impression on us and we linked our design for a bridge to these.<sup>(32)</sup>

Our starting point was that tourism could become a major aspect of Rotterdam's future. Although Amsterdam seemed to benefit more from tourism due to the proximity of Schiphol airport, we suggested — along with Rem Koolhaas — that this city was saturated, it could only become more 'Amsterdam-like' but could offer nothing new. In our opinion, Rotterdam was capable of offering this new element. If this insight were to be combined with the fact that, according to the experts, the future of passenger traffic over distances up to 1000 km did not lie with aeroplanes but with high-speed trains, the prospects for Rotterdam changed dramatically. On the planned high-speed lines between the Netherlands and Germany and between the Netherlands, Belgium and France, Rotterdam would be the first stop, not Amsterdam. The mere idea that Rotterdam could equal Amsterdam in tourism meant an enormous construction assignment for the city on the Maas. With the bridge we proposed, a circular boulevard could be created between the Maas boulevard, the Erasmus Bridge and the Nassaukade, so that a new (tourist) centre could arise around the Maas: the river as the centre of the city!

By allocating the bridge a 'non-bridge' design in this circular route, by not making it a connection between A and B, not a landmark, but rather approaching it as a 'place', we generated the idea that the infrastructure could be seen as *topos*, as a market place, and as a playground.

In conclusion, we referred to the example of Singapore. In the past ten years, this city state had evolved into a strategic loca-

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(32) Koolhaas, Rem, 'Generic City' in *SMLXL*, pp. 1238-1267, Rotterdam, 010 Uitgevers (1995). The generic city can be defined as the city without differences. Due to movements of globalization, the export of urban identity, acceleration of construction rates, and increasing artificiality of urban space, metropolises will resemble one another to an increasing extent. Rem Koolhaas compares the atmosphere of the large air terminals — beige, bland, smooth, friction-free and interchangeable — with the new urban condition of the generic city.

tion for the management of international companies, which has stimulated an enormous flow of highly educated citizens. A similar tendency was noticeable in the Netherlands. Or, as we said then: "The intellectual workforce is one of the new currencies of power as companies will locate themselves according to their employees' needs: take, for example, Philips's decision to situate itself in Amsterdam. First-world countries have discovered the necessity of providing a level of cultural and personal infrastructure in order to attract and maintain the workforce sought by these companies. Rotterdam must pose itself as a magnet / attractor for the new high-tech industries and cultural activities." (33)

We designed a completely flat bridge without pylons or stays and with the dimensions of a boulevard — fifty metres wide. We also developed a programmatic parcelling in which, prior to the Wilde Wonen movement — Freestyle Living — far-reaching forms of deregulation were advocated.<sup>(34)</sup> As a part of the new circular boulevard we also suggested a beach.

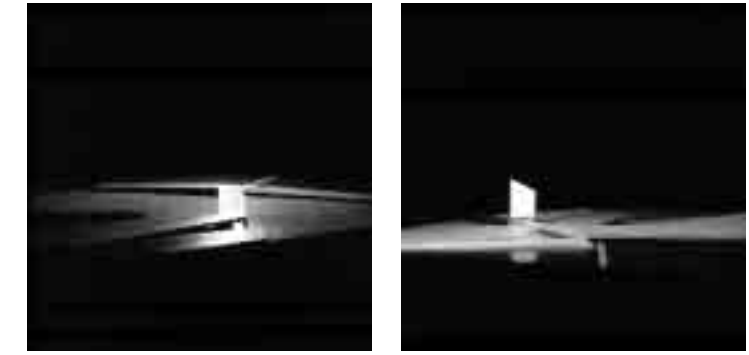
Just as with our study for the Olympic Stadium, later developments partially endorsed our plans, and various elements of our design have been realized by others, city beaches are now common in Paris, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. However, it was more important to us that we made a serious attempt to develop a new kind of public space rather than the fact that we were ultimately proven right. We investigated this theme of public space further in various subsequent projects, but never as extensively and radically as for the Rotterdam Bridge, which allowed us to bring together theoretical insight, economic prospects, cultural aspects, and architectonic ideas in one design and strategy.

In terms of content, we had a good plan but graphically it was a disaster due to the fact that this was the first time we had worked with Photoshop. The model of the bridge that we had made still fitted seamlessly into our *VMX '95* idiom, but the pictures and collages we produced looked like they had come from a completely different office.<sup>(35)</sup>

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(33) 'VMX Architects, Living the Next Lap' in *Exploring the River*, pp. 72-79, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1998).

(34) Carel Weeber's book *Wilde Wonen* (Freestyle Living) was published by 010 Publishers in 1998, but the discussion on this theme was older. The first time the term 'Wilde Wonen' appeared in the news was when Carel Weeber used it in *NRC Handelsblad* (daily newspaper) of 4 April 1997.



Opening section of the bridge. Photo by Jan Richard Kikkert, model by Douwe den Hertog.



Photoshop collages for Rotterdam Bridge, by VMX.

(35) During a symposium on 24 and 25 August 1998 where the results of the multiple study assignment were discussed, the reactions were rather tame. All the plans were presented here by Jaap van den Bout (of Palmboom & Van den Bout). Ton Schaap, an Amsterdam urban planner, was also present at the symposium and subsequently invited us to submit a design for temporary bicycle parking facilities at the Central Station in Amsterdam. Another result of the study was that we became interested in the possibilities of arriving at an architectonic design by means of the logic of constructions. This interest had a clear influence on our design for the bicycle parking facilities and, later, on the design for the school in Den Bosch.

## ON OUR OWN

### Moving out

Our dream of setting up a new kind of office, of realizing a fusion of cultural and commercial worlds, or combining young talent with 30 years of experience, soon turned out to be a nightmare. After having worked with Ed for less than six months, it had become increasingly evident that commercial clients are not really interested in architecture. They all want to have the same office block with the same marble and chrome entrance, a void, and a cherry-wood reception desk. It became ever-more obvious that that this was not what we were seeking and that we would have to go our own way, independently of Ed. VMX '95 had been a first step in that direction. The (German) architectural competitions had been warm-ups, but when the T-House and 3UP2DOWN began to get going, we had the feeling that we had genuinely started building. Besides our work, we still did freelance jobs for Ed, but we tried to shut ourselves off as much as possible in the attic floor of his office.

At the end of 1997, the separation became physical when we decided to move to our own office. At that time, many young offices were settling in Amsterdam Noord or West because these were inexpensive areas. Looking for affordable office space, we inspected various possibilities there but nothing matched our criteria. Although we had not realized it, we had become somewhat spoiled by the location of Ed's office, directly opposite the Concertgebouw. We secretly hoped for similar location and accommodation, but this hope was far-fetched, of course. And we continued our search.

On our route to and from the Concertgebouw square, we always passed by a fantastic modernist building on the Stadionplein: the Citroen garage designed by architect Jan Wils. We had viewed the building from the outside on several occasions and we noticed that the penthouse — the former canteen — had been empty for some time. We thought that this would be great office space. When driving past the building for the umpteenth time, I suggested to Leon that we ought to stop. We parked the



Exterior of Citroën building designed by Jan Wils, adjoining the Olympic Stadium designed by the same architect. The penthouses used to be the canteen of this building.

car and went to the reception desk. We asked to speak to the director, who turned out to be present and was willing to speak to us. We told him that we knew that the penthouse was vacant and asked whether he might be interested in letting it out to us. He replied that we ought to put a proposal in writing so that he could consult with his head office in Paris. In the letter to Citroen, we expressed our appreciation of their car designs and that we could imagine that they might be interested in accommodating an architectural office. We suggested renovating the space ourselves so that we could keep the rent down. We could pay a maximum of 2000 guilders a month, which amounted to 24,000 guilders annually (about 11,000 euros), an enormous sum for us at that time. We thought that we had made Citroen a reasonable proposal but we had not realized that a good family car also cost around 24,000 guilders at that time and that they probably sold two of them a day. Our proposal must have been ridiculous to them but after a few weeks we received good news from Paris — they agreed. We hired a few students to clean and paint the place, and we moved in, assisted by several friends, on Saturday 20 December.

The penthouse was an amazing spatial experience. It was simply great to be there every day. The light, the view and the dimensions were incredible. The experience was probably all the more intense because we had waited for almost a year before finally taking the step to go our own way. Ed had tried to impede our departure in various ways, but eventually he simply had to let us go. When Ed came to visit us for the first time, he was overwhelmed by the space and it was evident to him we would not be coming back.

After the physical separation came the most difficult step: the termination of the business relationship. Ed held the view that we owed him a few hundred thousand because he had invested in us and given us office space. Of course, we had nothing like this kind of money and we found his claim completely unreasonable. We thought that Ed had really profited from us, especially

in the past year when he had received important assignments due to our efforts. But Ed remained implacable and lawyers had to be brought in. Discussions with our lawyer indicated that we had two possibilities: we could contest Ed's claim or we could attempt to make a deal with him. Leon told me that the latter option was the most common in the Netherlands, but in view of the amount that was at stake it looked like we would have to pay Ed something. There was a lull in the proceedings when Ed asked us to examine all the standpoints at a meal together. During the meal, I managed to convince Ed that we did not owe one another anything. Ed realized that everything had come to an end and dropped his claim. When I informed our lawyer of this the next day, he didn't believe his ears, he had never experienced anything like it. To us it was also incredible. We could finally be ourselves.



Panorama of penthouse when we moved in.

## 1998 — 1999/ DISCOVERING MATERIALS

For a long time we didn't think about materials... We even tried to postpone talking about materials. The change came with projects like Sarphatistraat, B-House and the Study Villa. Here we discovered that there isn't always a clear hierarchy between form and function, between thinking and doing. We have discovered that sometimes materials themselves can be considered a way of thinking. Once we learned to think in both spatial and material terms we started to feel we really were architects.



## NEW ENERGY

### South-east Asia

At the beginning of the nineties, the process of globalization began to attract the interest of Dutch architects. As a consequence of this process, their field of activity suddenly stretched to the four corners of the earth and people were inquisitive about new and distant pastures. Having organized study trips to Japan, Los Angeles and Europe, the BKVB Foundation took the initiative, in conjunction with the NAI, to arrange a study trip to South-east Asia.<sup>(1)</sup> Just as in the previous trips, the aim was to stimulate architects by means of new experiences. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1997, a group of around twenty selected 'Dutch' architects and architectural historians embarked in the footsteps of Rem Koolhaas on a journey along the most important metropolises in the region.<sup>(2)</sup>

I saw the announcement of the journey and was immediately eager to join. Partly as a result of our project for the Rotterdam Bridge, I had become interested in Koolhaas's texts and his observations on South China. A study trip to the area offered a marvellous opportunity to personally experience the reality behind the texts. I applied and was selected to go on the trip.

We began in Singapore on 9 November, after which we visited Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi, Hong Kong, and the Pearl River Delta at intervals of four or five days. The idea was that new experiences would have a stimulating effect, although this assumed a different form than the organizers initially intended. The 'agreement' was that, on coming home, the participants would produce an extensive report of their experiences in the form of lectures, publications, and exhibitions, but only the critics and historians kept this part of the bargain. In his *Learning from Hanoi*, Arjen Oosterman — who also made the trip — gives a good and concise description of what enticed us to South-East Asia: "...fired by the enthusiasm of fellow countryman Rem Koolhaas, a group of architects, urban planners and critics visited South-East Asia last November (...). The group came, saw, and was impressed by the scale of things, the convergence in the developments,



Skyscrapers rising up all over South-east Asia, seen from a mini van during my study trip with the BKVB Foundation, 1997.

(1) "The aim of the journey is that the experiences will benefit the development of Dutch architecture and urban planning." From the appeal placed by the BKVB Foundation on [www.archined.nl](http://www.archined.nl), mid-1997.

(2) In the mid-nineties Koolhaas visited the region and his research produced a voluminous book: Koolhaas, Rem, *Great Leap Forward: Harvard Design School Project on the City*, Taschen (2002).

and the enormous differences between the cities.”<sup>(3)</sup> In my own case, the amazement was so great that it was only after I returned home that I had the feeling of being able to process all the impressions. In a fax to Jacqueline Tellinga (of the NAI) on 26 January 1998, I described my feelings as follows: “Though not typically a person who has difficulty expressing himself, I returned from South-East Asia at a loss for words. For three weeks we ‘consumed’ vast quantities of information, not only factual from officials, experts, and intellectuals but also the impressions made by day trips, walks and dinners all gathered through a one-on-one unmediated experience. Added to this was the ensuing hype to see even more and more which gathered momentum with the passing of days. Ultimately, I returned home with what could only be referred to as a colossal mental indigestion (intellectual hangover?).”

Although I used the word ‘hangover’, there was no paralysing effect on my motivation whatsoever. I returned hyper-motivated, as it were, from the trip. What fascinated me was not so much the quality of the architecture I had seen but rather the speed at which it was produced. I was hypnotized by the momentum and yearned for a situation in which the process of assignment, design and completion could occur without friction, as I had seen in Singapore. In this city, the marriage between commerce and architecture — the model we imagined realizing with VMG in a sense — drove production to unknown heights. Not fully understanding what the consequences of this situation were, I had a strong feeling that the architectural profession was changing.<sup>(4)</sup> Having seen so many economic tigers, the urge to build at such a rapid rate also took hold of me.

I wanted to attract new assignments, discuss with new clients, experience speed, and go looking for new possibilities for architecture.



Contrast between new and old in South-East Asia.

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(3) Oosterman, Arjen, ‘Learning from Hanoi’, in *Archis* no. 6, p. 20, 1998.

(4) Koolhaas reflected on his study in a lecture at the Harvard Design School in 2002. He mentioned as the most important insight that he had gained after writing ‘Pearl River Delta’ the changing working circumstances for architects as a consequence of globalization. He says: “I think that the largest effect of the market economy is that it shifts the initiative and the values from the public to the private, and I think that in doing so it simply undermines, in a radical way, our own status (as an architect), because we have always thought of ourselves as serving the public good. This shift away from the public, this dominance of private initiative in shaping our world, simply has taken away or eroded the pedestal on which we always used to glorify ourselves.”

## NEW WORK

### Social expectations

At the end of May 1997, we received a telephone call from Roel ten Bras, a member of staff of the Architecten Cie. He told us that Pi de Bruijn had drawn up a blueprint for the new layout of the grounds of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) on the Sarphatistraat and asked if we might be interested in designing a project within Pi’s plan. At that time we were rather short of work so the offer seemed to be heaven-sent. We didn’t hesitate and said that we were very interested. Something like this had never happened to us — exactly when we needed new work someone came and asked if we might be interested in an assignment. VMX suddenly seemed to become a real architectural office. People came to us instead of us forcing ourselves upon them.

After our enthusiastic reaction, Werner Reijers, of Johan Matser — the project developer — asked if we would send him some documentation of our work. We had little material. The T-House and 3UP2DOWN were not yet completed. However, on the basis of what we could show of these projects, they were eager to interview us. At that time we still occupied Ed’s office, a very representative space for a young office. Besides the office function, we had also laid out a permanent exhibition there of all our work. Although many of these projects would never be realized — architectural competitions that we hadn’t won and studies that had not been further followed — it nevertheless looked quite convincing.

The first interview with Werner went very well. We showed him our exhibition and we visited the KNPBT building.<sup>(5)</sup> We had the feeling that he thought we were suitable for the project but we didn’t dare to ask him directly. In the meantime, we had gathered from De Cie. that the project concerned an apartment complex for visiting lecturers at the university. After the interview with Werner it remained quiet for a number of weeks and we wondered, somewhat uneasily, whether this was a good or a bad sign. Had we gotten the assignment or not?

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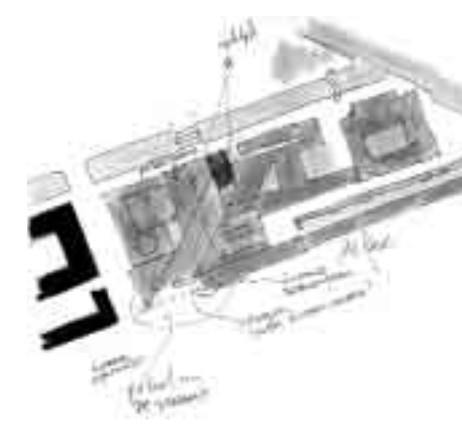
(5) KNPBT building is the reconstruction of the Boerhave clinic, a project that VMX did in conjunction with Ed Veenendaal. The project is near the museum square in Amsterdam.



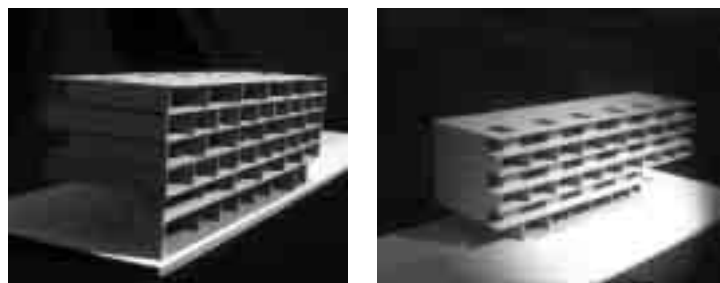
Sarphatistraat before Pi de Bruijn’s blueprint changed it.



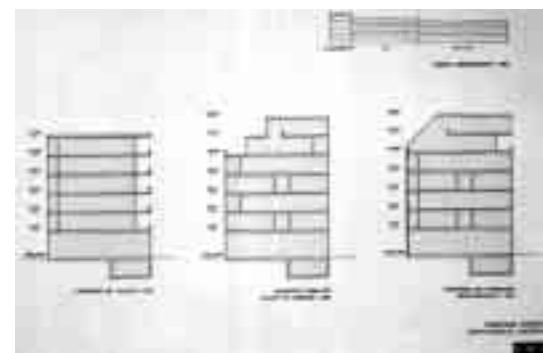
Perspective of new situation, image produced by Pi de Bruijn’s team.



Urban plan of university complex by Pi de Bruijn.



Early models with interlocking houses, street side, Sarphatistraat.



Early model with interlocking houses, rear, Sarphatistraat. Development of the sections of the interlocking houses, Sarphatistraat.

It was only at the end of August that things became clearer when a meeting was arranged at the office of De Cie. During this meeting we were first given an explanation of the plans and we heard that, besides VMX, Claus & Kaan and Pi himself would also elaborate parts of the location. We slowly began to believe that we had really received an assignment, but there was still no official confirmation.

Work on the project did not begin immediately after the meeting in August. It was only at the beginning of November that we received detailed drawings from De Cie. on which our building was shown. Thus, the project only really started for us in the last two months of 1997. At the beginning of 1998, the plan suddenly encountered opposition from the Municipality. Another few months passed before the plan was adjusted. Because we had enough work with the T-House and 3UP2DOWN in the same period, this delay meant a comfortable spread of the workload rather than a real setback.

When the project really got going, Werner made it clear what he wanted: shops on the ground floor and 3-room apartments on the upper floors. The apartments would be accessed by means of galleries at the rear of the block. What he wanted was so standard that we could have drawn the block blindfolded, as a manner of speaking. But that was not our approach. Thanks to 3UP2DOWN we had gained experience with gallery apartments and we were convinced that this was not the type of house that would be appropriate in the given situation. Convinced of our standpoint, we started working on a design of connected houses with in-house corridors.

Of the three offices involved, we were without doubt the office that could spend the most time on the project in the early stages. Both Claus & Kaan and Pi had various important projects in their portfolios at that time and these demanded much attention. In contrast, we only had this one project and we spent all our time on it. Accordingly, at the monthly building meetings,

we would turn up with consistently new designs and new options for our project. A ritual developed in which, after covering ongoing matters, we were always asked to show how far we had got with our plans. At the magic words “and what do the young architects think about things?” we then produced a comprehensive explanation of our plans. It felt as if we were back at school, and we became extremely motivated to reflect upon all the various options.

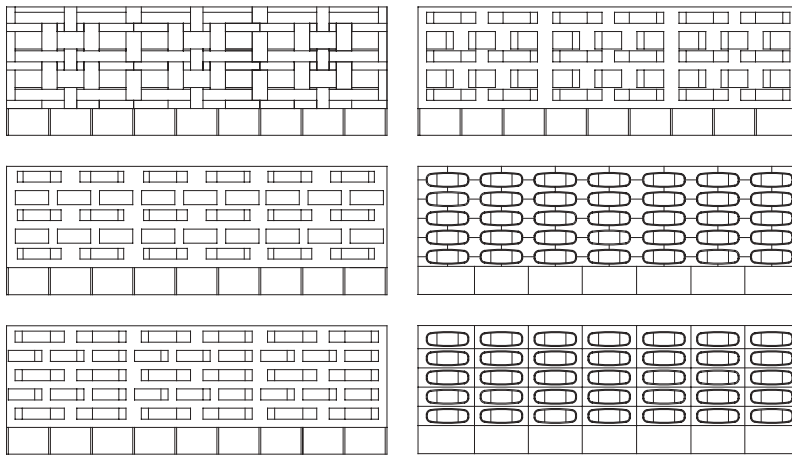
Our studies were only partly necessary for the project itself, but because there was little pressure and because Pi and the others were interested in our experiments, we received the leeway to work out various ideas. Our commitment and enthusiasm became obvious to other parties, such as Louis Meijer, for example. Because they were developing Pi's office building, he was present as a developer for Burgfonds at various meetings. Our thorough working method and the enthusiasm with which we generated new concepts must have given him the idea that we were interesting candidates for future co-operation. Early in 1998, he approached us for a project in Zaltbommel; which we will cover later.

Just as in our first projects — T-House and 3UP2DOWN — the accent in the Sarphatistraat also lay on typology in the early stages. Although our commissioner had outspoken ideas on the typology he wanted, we were convinced that we could offer him a better alternative than the standard apartments he had in mind. Without being asked, we went looking for this alternative. It turned out to be quite difficult to design qualitatively good houses within the limited dimensions of the given block, but in the first preliminary design that we created at the beginning of April 1998 we proposed a combination of two types of house.

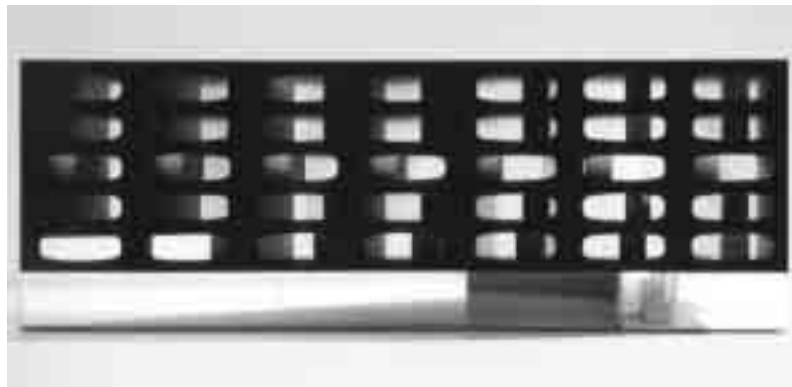
In the project description, we literally stated: “In view of the inner-city situation and the brief with rented houses for the free market, it is not an obvious choice to realize gallery apartments. In this plan, 35 apartments, divided into two types, have been



Early plans of interlocking houses, Sarphatistraat.



Façade studies, Sarphatistraat.



Early model with oval windows on street side, Sarphatistraat.

designed. Broad shallow apartments, completely oriented toward the south, are accessed from a sheltered inner passage on the north side of the volume. Porches lead from the same inner passage to a higher storey with long narrow apartments that have façades and windows on either side of the block.”<sup>(6)</sup>

We subsequently worked for more than a year on refining our proposal. It was only at the end of May 1999 that it became obvious that, regardless of whichever scenario we thought up, a series of staggered apartments was not financially feasible. In addition, we were given new design restrictions when it turned out that our building had to be built partially over an existing car park.

While I tried to be inventive with the new restrictions, Leon lost his self-control. He was the only one who recognized that there was no budget for experiments and pressed me into choosing the gallery option. In the rather tense period that followed, I realized that several of my friends who had bought houses on Borneo Sporenburg had removed almost all the interior walls to create a larger living area.<sup>(7)</sup> With this fact in mind, I suggested approaching the assignment from a totally different point of view. If we were to forget the idea of staggered apartments and approach each apartment as simply one large space, new possibilities would be available. The one-room apartment — the ‘big hotel suite’ as I called it — suited our target group of visiting lecturers perfectly. They needed a type of accommodation that was a combination of an apartment and a hotel room. Moreover, with this change in direction, the restrictions imposed by the zoning plan — that no bedrooms ought to be situated on the Sarphatistraat due to the noise nuisance — could be bypassed.

The sheer simplicity of this solution was even more important than the formal and typological aspects of the single-room option. Right from the start of the project, we had been deliberating on how we could fill in the gap between what architects find interesting and what appeals to the lay person. After

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(6) Woningbouw Sarphatistraat, preliminary design 09.04.1998, VMX Architects.

(7) Borneo Sporenburg is one of the most recent housing projects in a former harbour area near the centre of Amsterdam. The urban development design was drawn up by West 8, 1995-2000.

extremely abstract shoebox-like projects such as 3UP2DOWN and the T-House, we now wanted to create something different, something optimistic, something that would conform to the tastes of the user. The idea of the elementary home — the one-room apartment — harmonized perfectly with this objective; the concept now only needed to be translated into an attractive image. We found the translation in the form of a window. Instead of designing a window for each particular function, which was an established Dutch tradition, we proposed equipping the one-room apartment with one gigantic oval panorama window. Moving through the apartment like a pupil in an eye socket, the occupier would be able to view the city from anywhere in the big hotel suite.

We enthusiastically presented the new starting points of our plan to Monique Schuitema, who had now replaced Werner. We demonstrated how you could apply two shafts per storey to create various clusters of kitchens and bathrooms, thus generating different types of apartments. Monique also became enthusiastic, but wondered whether or not it might be possible to make rooms in the ‘empty’ apartments later. We said that partitioning would be impossible on the street side, but that it might be possible at the back. Having spoken with Monique, we presented our plan to Pi. I explained the proportions of our windows by referring to the proportions of the windows in historical canal-side houses. In many cases, the length-breadth relationship of the windows in these houses in Amsterdam is 2:1. Our building also adhered to this ratio, with the difference that the ratio in our case was not vertical but horizontal. Moreover, to have the project repeat the large scale of the various barracks buildings in the Sarphatistraat, we proposed that the façade of each apartment should consist of a single panel.

Pi was very pleased with our building. He understood that we were trying to create a design that was simultaneously vernacular — thus attractive to many — and hip — thus interesting to architects and suchlike. We finally designed a concrete building

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Definitive model for Sarphatistraat.



Collage of the interior of one-room apartment at Sarphatistraat. After this image was used to illustrate a short text in the spring edition of *Baby magazine* (2000), we received lots of calls from photographers who wanted to do fashion shoots in the apartments, for instance. The Japanese magazine *Brutus* published the image again in 2002, but then nothing happened.

that has a black exterior as a consequence of the basalt pebbles and large reflecting surface areas due to the glued oval windows. Claus & Kaan opted for a white building with a complex pattern of windows, while Pi designed a red brick façade for his own building.

The Welstandscommissie (Building Inspectorate Committee) was enthusiastic about our plan, but was less positive about Pi's design. In a letter, the Committee outlined why our design was so well received, while articulating its objection to Pi's plan: "VMX Architects has opted for a regular façade with an adventurous structure in which the grandeur is translated particularly in the window openings. (...) The Committee sees a discrepancy between the austere and sober longitudinal blocks and the very outspoken corner building (Pi's building). At the same time, the Committee wonders how the link to this latter building at the rear ought to be realized since there is certainly mention of a schism in style." The Committee continued by describing VMX's translation of 19th-century window surfaces with "These (windows) form a pool of glass/water in a basalt concrete façade."<sup>(8)</sup> We also had to present our design to local residents in the town hall — the Stopera. The presentation was well-attended and the local residents were critical of our plans. They thought it, as someone articulated it well, "a splendid design but not suitable for their neighbourhood!" Pi reacted as if stung by a wasp. He said that residents couldn't decide what was beautiful or ugly; that decision was the domain of the architect, he had at least studied the matter for seven years!

During the planning process for the Sarphatistraat it became clear that a supermarket would be realized partly under and partly behind our building and that of Claus & Kaan. It was not evident who would design the supermarket but because I am always inclined to try to get the most out of an assignment — by making the assignment larger a project usually becomes more interesting in terms of content and finance — I asked during one

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Sample of the material that was used for the façade of Sarphatistraat. In contrast to traditional façades that are made up of a number of layers applied consecutively, we designed a façade consisting of one prefabricated panel that is fitted at once.

<sup>(8)</sup> Minutes of the Welstand meeting, 23 June 1999, source: VMX archives.



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Sarphatistraat, street side.



Sarphatistraat, interior.

of the building meetings if we could design the supermarket. We could. I subsequently became fascinated by the idea that the residents of our block would be able to roll their shopping trolley from the supermarket into their own apartment. To make this possible, we decided to place the entrances to the supermarket and to the apartments next to one another, only separated by a glass wall. Because two worlds converged here — that of the residents and the shoppers — we thought it would be interesting to ask an artist to design the partition. At the initiative of the Amsterdam Foundation for the Arts, we selected Wineke Gartz to conceive the artwork. She conceived a work in which various worlds were projected on top of one another by means of projectors so that the stratification of the double entrance was made visible. In her explanation, she wrote: "The final decision is to make one large projection with 3 projectors in combination with a mural, which will operate for around five hours a day. In addition, it ought to be visible from the supermarket by means of a specially designed panorama window that is situated opposite the projections. In this way, the reality of the multi-layered projection is reinforced by the reality of 2 'material' worlds that co-exist. In addition, shoppers at a distance can enjoy a section of the projection through the panorama window as if it were a painting. (...) On moving through the entrance, the residents acquire a more active role by walking through the image or are 'in the picture' as they stand waiting for the lift."<sup>(9)</sup>

The project on the Sarphatistraat was subject to an extremely lengthy design process. At the start, we oriented our efforts primarily to residential typologies and the issue of how new, upcoming social groups, such as single-person households, required a different kind of house. By the time we devoted interest to the façade, from the summer of 1999 onward, we had developed interest in material itself, in addition to the fascination with typologies. To forge a link with the large scale construction of the adjoining buildings, we had proposed making the street façade out of panels that would have the same height

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<sup>(9)</sup> Outline of her design by Wineke Gartz, sent to VMX Architects on 1 May 2000.



The making and fitting the Sarphatistraat panels.



Sarphatistraat, 4 types of floor plans.

and width as one apartment. We discovered that it was possible to prefabricate concrete elements in which the insulation was already built in and which could be finished on the exterior in a number of ways. We opted for an anthracite-black finishing by coating the outside of the panels with a kind of basalt gravel. Our imagination was fired by the idea of a black concrete façade that could be mass produced and only needed to be assembled at the site, while the oval panorama windows could be glued in, apparently without a frame. In the 3UP2DOWN project, we had already resisted using a brick façade, and we again thought that brick would be too archaic for the Sarphatistraat. We wanted to create a modern building with contemporary materials and technology. It was a great surprise to us when we visited the factory during the panel production process. Arriving at the factory, we were directed to a shed elsewhere on the yard. It was winter and I pulled my coat on before entering the shed. Inside, a warm blanket of hot air enveloped us. The hall was at normal room temperature and the staff were all walking around in T-shirts. Instead of a large machine churning out ready-made panels, we saw workers manually assembling the panels. The final step in the process was the application of the basalt to the panels. One worker spread out a layer of gravel evenly on a wet panel, after which the unit was put aside to dry. When everything had dried out, the next worker came and manually removed the loose stones with great precision. The entire process was far from modern but it was great to see how much attention was devoted to the panels.

When the design was finally translated into building specifications after some four years, Piet Scholten of the UvA Holding invited us to visit him. He told us that the plans had been changed and that the apartments we had designed for the visiting lecturers would now be sold. In order to enable this sale, a couple of minor details in our design would have to be adjusted. First of all, the storey-high glass façades to the rear of the

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apartments had to be replaced by a traditional façade with windows and a spandrel. Also forty per cent of the houses would be partitioned into three-room apartments. But the most drastic modification demanded by Scholten was that the entrance to the apartments should not be in the centre of the block and thus not adjoining the entrance of the supermarket. As a consequence of this last-minute alteration, all the rationality was removed from our entranceway and we had to introduce a second emergency exit.<sup>(10)</sup> *En passant* there was no dividing wall between the supermarket and the entrances to the apartments, so that Wineke's artwork lost all significance and disappeared from the plan.

Ultimately, many more minor adjustments were implemented — these were just the more visible examples illustrating that the supervision of the project was exceptionally poor. Furthermore, Johan Matser and J.P. van Eesteren — the developer and the building contractor of our project — formed a construction team, which led to an absurd 'you don't steal from your sister' situation since they are both part of the same company. As a result, their joint interest became predominant in the implementation of the project. In conclusion, we can also recognize that our own expectations were too high. We were extremely happy that a project developer had been willing to enter into the social experiment of creating a house with a single room, an apartment in which the free choice of the consumer was the prime mover. However, in real-life practice, it turned out that we had overestimated the capacity of the end user to grasp and apply new ideas. Consumers seem to have a preference for a house with several rooms.

After the application for building permission, we were asked to submit the project for the Zuiderkerkprijs, an architectural award that we had never heard of. We later heard that the project was one of the three nominations for the award, but we ultimately did not win the prize.<sup>(11)</sup>

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(10) The composition of this rear façade is completely disrupted with this second emergency exit.

(11) Christiaan Rapp, Duinker & Van der Torre, and VMX were nominated. Duinker & Van der Torre won.

Sarphatistraat, seen from the rear.  
Sarphatistraat, façade.

Sarphatistraat, interior.

#### The developer's world

Some assignments are organized very professionally. After extensive selection, an architect is chosen and given a contract to design a building. In many cases, however, it is much less formally arranged, and this was the case with our project in Zaltbommel. For a long time, we did not know whether or not we had gotten the assignment. In retrospect, due to the vagueness and the many anecdotes surrounding the project, Zaltbommel was our most mythical project — a description that alas cannot be allocated to the architecture we attempted to realize there. To us, Zaltbommel was not primarily about architecture but rather about speed and the development of a relationship with a client, a very extreme client: a project developer whose only concern at that time seemed to be profit.

During the meetings for the project on the Sarphatistraat, we had met Louis Meijer of the Burgfonds project developing company on a number of occasions. He developed the office building for Pi, and, from the discussions that we had had with him, we had obtained the image of a yuppie — an English city gent. Clad in an immaculate suit with ditto tie, never carrying a case, with only his mobile phone and cigarettes in his pockets, he had a certain unmistakable flair. At meetings where we, as overzealous architects, made lots of hasty notes, Louis was conspicuous by the fact that he never wrote down anything.

We took — and take — our work as architects extremely seriously. This led to the situation that, during the extremely lethargic process of the Sarphatistraat, we eventually had the feeling that we had only been invited to participate in order to entertain the others. We allowed ourselves to be induced into producing consistently new work, whereas other architects brought along the same drawings week in week out. There was plenty of discussion about our proposals but it seldom came to a decision. Although it is great to produce so much work, we gradually became suspicious and we wondered if anything at all would

ever be realized. In Louis we initially saw a parallel with Ed — he was just as commercial — and we had a rather reserved approach to him. When he asked us to come and meet his business partner Jelle Brouwer, we were not directly enthusiastic. Leon in particular was rather cautious. In principle I am always prepared to trust in the good intentions of people, perhaps somewhat naively, in the hope that every new assignment will further our career as architects. Another factor here was that I had returned from my trip to Asia in an exceptionally enthusiastic state of mind. I was overwhelmed by the speed at which buildings were realized there and by the possibilities available. I was brimming with new energy and was determined to seize with both hands each and every chance to create architecture. Leon was less eager about acquiring an assignment from Louis. He thought that any co-operation with Burgfonds offered only a slight chance of creating architecture; he even believed that co-operation could have a negative effect on our image. However, curiosity eventually triumphed over doubt and we made an appointment to have lunch with Louis and Jelle in Antwerp — where Jelle had an apartment — on 10 February 1998. During the lunch, the partners told us that they wished to build a number of offices and that they were interested in a site near Zaltbommel. Here, in the centre of the Netherlands, near the intersection of the most important North-South (A2) and East-West (A50) motorways, Burgfonds saw an ideal opportunity to realize an office block and a hotel — each amounting to 3500 m<sup>2</sup>. Jelle and Louis spoke of brick buildings that would rise on a plot clearly visible from the A2. During the lunch, it became clear that Burgfonds was looking for an architect to design the buildings, but it remained unclear who would receive the assignment and perhaps they had only invited us to comment upon their plans. On our way back to Amsterdam, it was difficult for us to assess how things would evolve; just to be sure, we began to analyse the office buildings along the motorway.



Site for HZMMC. The image shows that, at the time, the location was almost completely vacant. If one visits the site today, one can see that it is filled with offices.



We had followed the debate on mobility in the Netherlands (and Europe) since the time of our study for a new bridge in Rotterdam — Rotterdam Bridge. This new question posed by Burgfonds shifted our attention to office development, a development that was closely related to the issue of mobility. Even during our first analysis, on our way home from Antwerp, it was clear to us that offices were moving away from the city at a very rapid rate. In the days following the lunch in Antwerp, it became increasingly clear to us that the Netherlands was on the brink of a new era: the era of the consultant.

Unnoticed, the consultant had become the new worker in the Netherlands and this new worker demanded new working conditions — such as a suit, a company car, accessibility, and flexible working times. The office market responded to these demands by no longer focusing attention on historical inner cities but by preferring locations that were optimally accessible near the major road networks. In line with these developments, Burgfonds saw the opportunity to be one of the first to develop a location in Zaltbommel.

The conditions in Zaltbommel were ideal. In contrast to nearby Den Bosch — where our 3UP2DOWN project was then being built — it was possible to build offices right next to the motorway in Zaltbommel. The result was that project developers began to build anonymous buildings here without any form of coherence, surrounded by infinite parking lots. We had the opinion that architects ought to react to this situation. We believed that the prevailing architectural style of individual blocks should be given a public dimension. As mentioned, Leon had serious doubts about the architectonic intentions of Louis and Jelle. I believed, just as in earlier projects, that I would be able to convince them of our plans. Since the lunch with Jelle and Louis, I had not been able to prevent myself from thinking about how we ought to react to the demands of the consultant society.

Two weeks after the rather confusing discussion in Antwerp,

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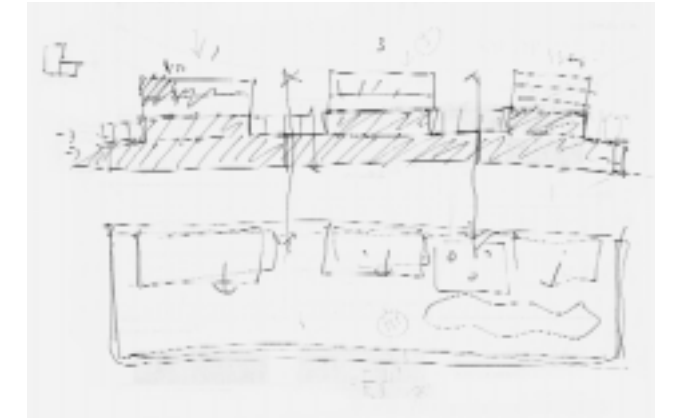
Louis phoned me to say that he was coming to visit us to see how the project was looking. We were used to working hard and to producing quick results, but we had not received a formal assignment from Burgfonds so we had not worked seriously on the project. While Louis was on his way to our office, I tried to capture my thoughts in a sketch. I wondered what would happen if the buildings that Burgfonds wanted were to be merged, as I had seen in Malaysia. In Europe, the concept of 'public space' is generally regarded as 'square' but a square would be completely meaningless at this kind of location. Nevertheless, there was an acute need for a public dimension to breach the threatened anonymity of the location. In my view, the issue was to develop a new typology that would have this function.

I quickly sketched a long strip that would link the various buildings at ground level. When Louis came, I explained that we were thinking of a plinth with communal functions that would connect the various buildings, similar to a shopping mall.

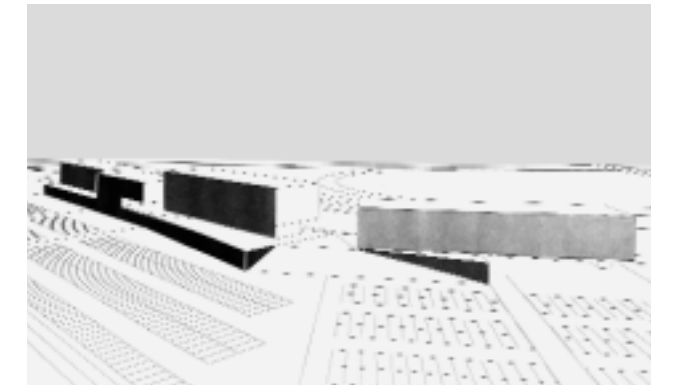
I told him about the multi-media corridors that I had seen in Asia and said that we had the opportunity to create our own version of these in Zaltbommel: Hotel Zaltbommel Multimedia Corridor (HZMMC).<sup>(12)</sup> "Wow", responded Louis, "that's a great idea, a mall is a splendid concept," and he got out his phone to tell Jelle of the news. Before we knew it, Louis had stormed out of the office and was on his way to Jelle who apparently had reacted extremely positively to his phone call. It was a bizarre moment, and again we were thrown into confusion. Did Louis's action mean that we had really gotten the assignment or not?

While I began to elaborate my sketch, Leon opened the formal negotiations about a contract. Burgfonds turned out to have a budget for the project and Leon was positive about the possibility of getting a contract. After the meeting with Louis on 9 March, a follow-up meeting was organized in our office. At this meeting, we were to outline our plans to a delegation from Burgfonds. I remember how Jelle arrived with his secretary and driver in his BMW 7 series. The entire delegation gathered on

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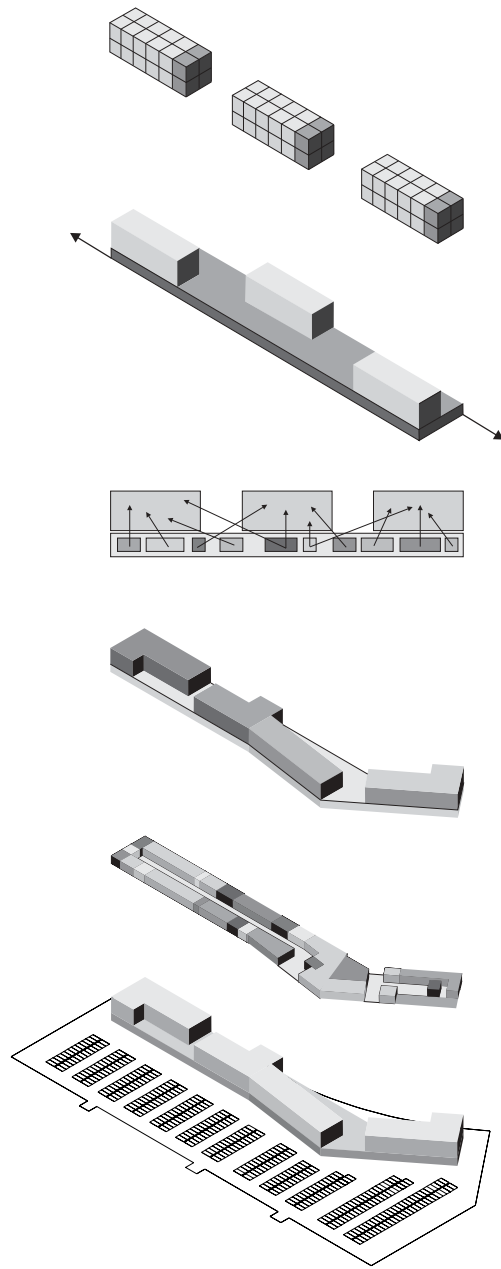


First sketch indicating a link between three office buildings.



Perspective of first design in which the connecting ground floor is disguised as a dike with a tunnel running through it.

(12) The fact that our observation was correct but that our response was not unique was indicated by the article 'Netwerkomgeving' (Network Environment) by Harm Tilman, in *De Architect* of May 2000. In this article, Tilman describes not only how the interior of offices has changed from a desk landscape to 'flex-work places' since the sixties, but also how offices themselves have moved to the periphery of towns and cities. In these peripheries, true environments are created by the addition of new functions.



Diagrams for division of the programme.

the pavement in front of our office and when they were complete they all bustled in, smoking and talking loudly. "Where's the plans?" they cried.

Asked whether she would prefer tea or coffee, the secretary replied that she wanted cola. We didn't have any cola but we asked someone to go and get in and they returned with Pepsi. When I placed the bottle in front of the secretary, she said "I don't drink Pepsi, I only drink Coca Cola Light." And then she poured herself some tea! We had the bottle of Pepsi in the fridge for weeks. The meeting was extremely chaotic. During the meeting, only a few people from Burgfonds sat at the table listening, while the others got up continually to make all kinds of phone calls. It resembled a scene from a Peter Greenaway film rather than a serious meeting. Later we gathered that this was the way that Jelle and Louis always worked: not from an office, without structured meetings, and without minutes so that they could always fall back on oral agreements — the role of the secretary in this remained vague.

Working with Jelle and Louis felt like playing with the devil — exciting and thrilling but also dangerous. We were completely devoted and serious, always dressed in black and full of good intentions. In contrast, Jelle and Louis were flamboyant, direct, and brazen. Their aim in life was to make money and have fun. As to the issue of making money, they will certainly have succeeded, because we agreed to a very low fee, although it seemed a lot of money at the time.

The success of our concept — our 'nothing' really: it was actually office boxes on a plinth — overwhelmed Leon and myself. Nevertheless, Jelle and Louis were resolute, and they asked us to present our design to a potential tenant. This was a very unusual request, all the more so because we had the idea that there was actually nothing to present. However, I agreed. I subsequently went with Jelle and Louis to the potential tenant. This turned out to be a company called ISIS, which was located in





Pool in HZMMC.

such awful accommodation that they probably would have welcomed every plan for new office space. They were positive about our plan. After ISIS had shown interest, Jelle and Louis were even more enthusiastic about the project and within two weeks they had found another potential tenant: Bouman.<sup>(13)</sup> Louis described Bouman as a more refined and outspoken 'client' than the people from ISIS. On the way to the presentation for Bouman, Jelle and Louis mentioned that Bouman's office should be detached from the others for that reason. Our reaction was that this was impossible, which gave rise to the first conflict with Jelle and Louis. We managed to reach a compromise just before the meeting: the link between Bouman's office and the other offices would be designed as a dike with a tunnel in it.

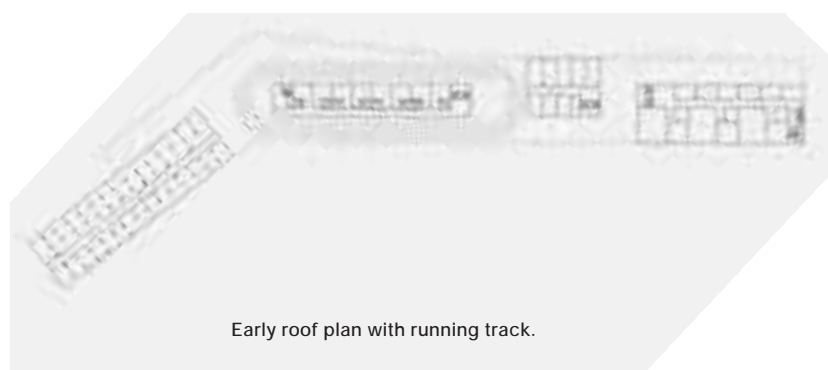
At the meeting, however, it became clear that Bouman recognized the advantages that a combined building would bring. When I described how visitors to one of my favourite buildings — the Willis Faber & Dumas building, by Norman Foster — entered the building and immediately saw the communal swimming pool, which evoked an exceptional spatial experience, Bouman was all agog. Jelle and Louis also realized that Bouman had no need of a dike. At the conclusion of the presentation, I too was pretty enthusiastic. It started to look like we would be able to include facilities such as a gym and a swimming pool in the building as well as the necessary offices. This was the first time that I had the feeling that we, as architects, could influence the brief of an assignment. In retrospect, this turned out to be an exceptional situation; I do not think we have ever been in such a position again.

When it was evident that our concept was agreeable to the potential tenants, we took up our role as 'programmers' for the communal functions. By adding semi-public functions, we attempted to create a public dimension in a non-public programme. In view of the idea that consultants might remain in the office complex for days on end, it was our aim to offer the new

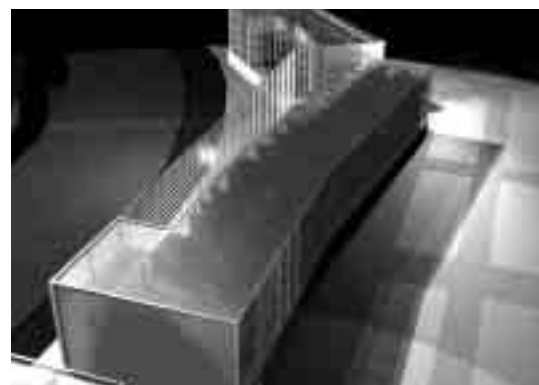
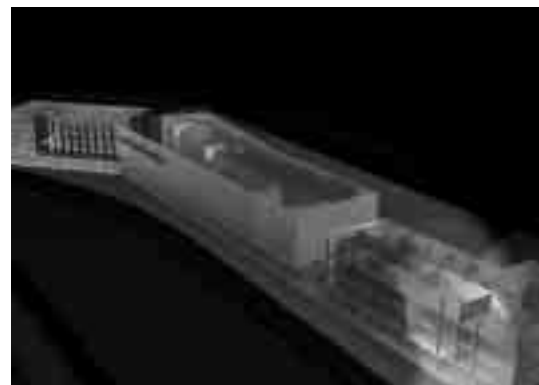


Willis Faber &amp; Dumas building, designed by Norman Foster, 1975.

(13) Henk Bouman had an organization consultancy office: Bouman & Van Spaendonck.



Early roof plan with running track.



Early renderings showing an extended façade that would work as a wind and sound barrier, creating a comfortable roof terrace on top of the connecting ground floor.

worker more than only a desk and a hotel room. We believed that there was enormous potential there, although the location in Zaltbommel was completely desolate at that moment. By means of a form of mini-urban planning at office-complex scale, a situation could be created in which work was linked to the possibility for relaxation. After work, there would be the opportunity to go to the cinema or the swimming pool, or to make use of the sauna or the gym. Our building would also provide a bar and a choice of several restaurants.<sup>(14)</sup> By adding communal facilities and bundling them in the form of a multimedia corridor, the design evolved into a building with a length of almost 200 metres. Suddenly there came an end to the expansion.

ISIS and Bouman turned out to be so enthusiastic that even before the building was realized they were prepared to conclude a ten-year rent contract with Burgfonds. The risks for Jelle and Louis were largely covered by this move. On paper, they had rented out the majority of the building (60%), it was only a question of raising the finance for the project.

The financing took place as follows. When a substantial part of the project had been rented out, Jelle and Louis went to a large investor — a pension fund or a bank, in Hamburg, Germany, in this particular case. They presented drawings there, explained the project, and mentioned that they already had two major tenants. On the basis of this information, they were given approval for the requested development costs. In actual fact, a (German) investor had bought a project that only existed on drawings and in images, and placed it in a share portfolio (Zaltbommel was in 'Holland Fund 17'). Jelle and Louis returned from Hamburg in a euphoric mood. Even before they were required to transfer money to the Municipality for the ground, they already had the guarantee that the building had been bought by investors for tens of millions. From that moment onward, their aim was no longer to realize a project that was innovative and attractive to tenants, but rather to keep the costs of the project as low as

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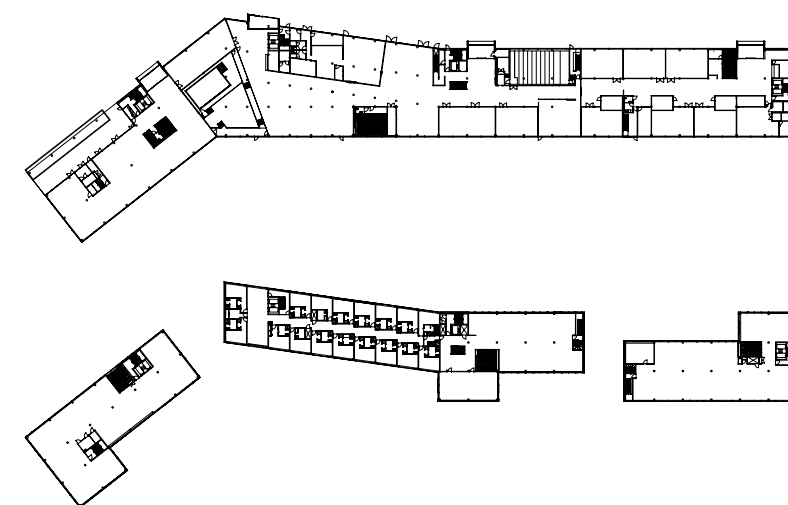
(14) Because we had linked the hotel to the rest of the complex in our design, it was even possible to create more office space than had been requested. According to the Building Regulations, an office had to have a storey height of 3 metres, whereas a hotel only has to be 2.40 metres high. Thus, in three office storeys it was possible to accommodate four hotel storeys. As a result, the hotel could be more compact and extra space remained for offices.

possible. The difference between the building costs and the sum for which the project was sold was their profit. What began as a process of spectacular growth suddenly turned into a process of shrinkage, or at least of drastic restriction.

After the Hamburg session, Burgfonds wanted to abandon all the fantastic ideas that we had developed. At meetings they tried to economize on everything. I remember how the swimming pool suddenly would only be included in the project if the tenants paid for it themselves. The differences in height that we had designed so that the swimming pool would be visible from the gym and the sauna also had to be scrapped. The new demands that Jelle posed from one day to the next seemed absurd to us. When Burgfonds demanded that the sloping floor of the auditorium should be replaced by a horizontal floor so that the area could be hired out as flexible space, that was the limit. Irritated, I quoted the example of the NAI auditorium, which was an auditorium with grandstand-like benches, and I assured Jelle and Louis that Kristin Feireiss, the erstwhile director of the NAI, rented out the auditorium almost every evening. If they didn't believe me, they could phone her themselves! As soon as they had departed, I phoned Kristin. I got her secretary on the line who told me that Kristin was on the other phone. "Oh no, they're really calling her," I thought. My remark about the NAI had been pure bluff and I had wanted to warn Kristin. That turned out not to be necessary; she had told Jelle and Louis that the auditorium was indeed always rented out. Without knowing it, Kristin was responsible for the fact that the sloping floor was not scrapped from the plan.

While we worked on the design, we analysed the façades of buildings along the A2 motorway. The conclusion was that the car driver does not perceive separate buildings — he or she only sees a blur. As a result of this conclusion, we wanted to design a glass façade so that our building would appear as a volume with various forms of translucence. We wanted to create a type of architecture that would harmonize with the blurring

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Plans for HZMMC.



Elevation of HZMMC.



Panel showing façade study: the blurring of the façades along the highway.



Mock up of the façade, showing the different transparencies and façade of HZMMC.

effect of the motorway. Because we only had a low budget for the façade — which was originally planned to be brick — we attempted to rediscover the membrane façade for ourselves. We wanted to try to blur the distinction between a window for the incidence of light and a window offering a view in such a way that the building would have a different appearance during the day than it did at night.<sup>(15)</sup> We spoke about a non-façade, but we had no idea how we could make it. We tested many different types of glass, but it was difficult to convince our client. Burgfonds was particularly reticent due to the fact that we wanted to apply a type of glass with a certain transparency so that the insulation material behind the glass would occasionally be visible. We eventually designed a 'home-made' curtain wall with relatively simple resources.

We had minor difficulties with the Welstand (Building Inspectorate) in Zaltbommel. They had little experience with large (office) buildings, which was to our advantage. However, the Committee did demand that the various identities of the offices united in the building ought to be translated in the façade. We were not in favour of this initially, because it did not conform to our idea of 'blurring', but because we detected a longing for a distinct identity among the tenants, we designed a façade with subtle differences between the offices. The Building Inspectorate agreed to this design almost immediately.<sup>(16)</sup>

Due to the conflicts and cutbacks, I gradually lost interest in the project. In a discussion at our office, I mentioned to Jelle that he ought to look for another architect if he didn't like our work. Jelle reacted fiercely and said that I should not speak to him in such a tone! He departed and we were left in doubt about the assignment for the umpteenth time.

Fortunately, a few days later it turned out that Jelle did want to continue our co-operation and I remember how one of Jelle's staff thanked me for being so friendly to 'him' (Jelle) this time. An interesting feature of working with Burgfonds was that Jelle

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(15) At that time, the theme of the changing exterior was a hot item among Dutch architects. Wiel Arets's interest in this topic is clear in the book *An Alabaster Skin*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam (1996), in which Greg Lynn writes about the 'alabaster sensibility and reflectability' of Arets's work. The milky white skin plays the game of reflection, transparency and refraction in the Law Court building in Groningen, the theatre in Delft, and the head office of AZL-beheer in Heerleen. Day and night, with or without sunlight, and while moving past the buildings, the appearance of the facade changes. See also: Melet (ed.), 'De dubbele bodem van Wiel Arets' (The double layer of Wiel Arets), *De Architect* no.11, pp. 51-55 (1995).

(16) In *De Architect* of October 1999, Klazien van Brummel presents a more general explanation for the flexible Inspectorate norms on the periphery. Under the title 'Integrale aanpak van landschap, verkeer en praktijk. A2 corridor en Flight Forum in Eindhoven van MVRDV' (Integral Approach to Landscape, Traffic and Practice. A2 corridor and MVRDV's Flight Forum in Eindhoven), she writes: "(...) little is done for architecture or advanced town planning in the periphery. In the interplay of supply and demand, which rests purely on economic principles, companies can make severe demands with regard to the amount of square metres. Because cities like to nurture a favourable settlement climate, companies are not restricted by all kinds of Inspectorate norms."

and Louis operated on the basis of an extended network. There was always an atmosphere of you-know-who and they had interests over the entire world.<sup>(17)</sup>

In terms of content, the project was certainly worthwhile because we had the opportunity to influence the programme of a building. In addition, it concerned a very large project, certainly for such a young office as VMX. HZMMC had given us the feeling that we were capable of designing more than houses, although we had not even built any of these as yet. I remember a meeting in Burgfonds in which I mentioned that HZMMC was our first building. Everybody looked at me in astonishment: "Your first building?!" I quickly corrected myself by saying that it was our first *hotel* building.

What we learned from HZMMC was that, with commercial developers such as Burgfonds, you have to be continuously aware of the fact that alterations can be made without the architects being informed. The most painful example is the partition between the corridor of the auditorium and the swimming pool, which we had planned to be glass. However, when we came to view the construction, this partition had become a solid wall. I had to plead with Jelle to introduce a window in the wall, but a window in a wall 25 metres in length is little more than a spy-hole. The effect of the swimming pool, as I had described in Foster's example, was completely neutralized. The whole interior of HZMMC is rather disappointing. Although Jelle had said right at the outset that he had someone for the interior and that he wanted to lay out the building in English-Scottish style, I had always secretly hoped that we would be given the assignment. To us, HZMMC became synonymous with a missed opportunity. If we had been capable of convincing Burgfonds of our ideas, it would have been a great project. The project could have meant a fantastic breakthrough for us. All the necessary ingredients were available: a large building, a new programme, and enthusiastic architects and clients. We hoped that Burgfonds, just like us, wanted to create architecture, but eventually they were

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(17) During the project, Burgfonds even once displayed interest in buying shares in VMX.



Interior office space.



HZMMC seen from the highway, the exit of the highway and the car park.

unable to recognize what the added value of this aim would be. Jelle and Louis had sold their project and that was their goal. Nevertheless, in retrospect, they will probably take pride in the project. The HZMMC brought them much appreciation from their colleagues. When he passed the building in his car, Van Veghel, the director of Multivastgoed — a guru in the Dutch world of real estate — even phoned them up to congratulate them on the building. The building was also well received in the press. Hans Ibelings wrote in the *Volkskrant*: “VMX has demonstrated that even with a short planning and construction time and a tight budget, something exceptional can still be made, with more allure and ‘urbanity’ than all those office villas and blocks along the motorway. In addition, Teunissen and Murphy have shown that reticence seems to have a stronger effect than the interchangeable loudness and constructional doggedness that prevails along the motorway.”<sup>(18)</sup> A modest success for us was that the building was included in the yearbook, not as a project description but in an essay in which Anne Hoogewoning observed new trends. The office had a follow-on in the sense that we thus became acquainted with Bouman. We would later design the B-House for him.

#### Lobbying for a project

The Municipality of Den Bosch had the ambitious plan to redevelop the industrial zone to the north of the central station. Under the weighty name of ‘Het Paleiskwartier’ (The Palace/Court Quarter), an urban quarter with apartments, offices and commercial space was planned around the new Court of Law. The image of the district was to be determined by massive blocks, broad lanes, green, and water features. The Municipality envisaged architecture in mainly neo-classical style for the substantiation filling-in of the plan.

We had met the architect Anton Becker during the workshops around 3UP2DOWN, our project for starters on the housing market. In addition to designing houses in the vicinity of our project,

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<sup>(18)</sup> Ibelings, Hans, ‘Strak complex strijdt tegen visuele ruis’ (Austere complex fights against visual noise), in the *Volkskrant*, Saturday 11 March, 2000.

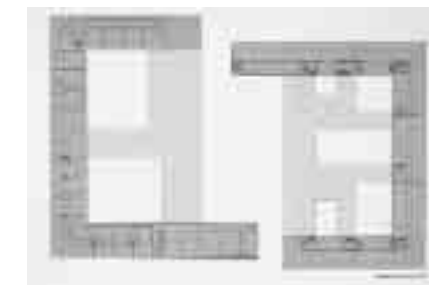
he also had the responsibility of designing an office block in the Paleiskwartier for the DEVCO project developer. However, Becker encountered great problems with the Welstand (Building Inspectorate), which found that his design was not in accordance with the starting points for that area. The supervisor of the Paleiskwartier, Mr Khandekar, was not convinced by Becker’s design either and insisted that he should design a closed block in line with the urban development directions. In an attempt to breach the impasse, Rolf Tjerkstra, the urban planner with whom we had had contact during 3UP2DOWN, suggested that perhaps VMX could help Becker in adjusting his plans. We then examined Becker’s design, but because he was not prepared to adapt his plan, we thought that any co-operative venture would not be successful. We subsequently received the assignment to design the DEVCO office block.

Various office units would have to be merged within the DEVCO block. As a consequence, there was anxiety that this would result in an anonymous and generic office block. Becker had neutralized this problem by dividing the programme into more or less identical small office blocks and to allocate them individually by means of different finishing. Thus every office unit would have its own image. In order to remain within the framework specified by Khandekar and his colleagues and to solve the issue of identity, we proposed a completely different strategy. We suggested a closed office block in which various patios would generate external areas. In this way, each office unit would create its own relationship with the outside world via its patio. All the patios would have their own shape, while the exterior façade of the block would guarantee the uniformity of the block at urban development level. In contrast to Becker, we proposed that identity could arise as a consequence of a spatial configuration instead of material or finishing.

The design in which we had elaborated our ‘alternative’ vision was greeted with enthusiasm by the Welstand, but the project stalled in the negotiations with DEVCO about our fee.<sup>(19)</sup>

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<sup>(19)</sup> The proposal we made to DEVCO concerning our fee was very realistic, we believed, but it was swept from the negotiating table with the remark that Becker was willing to do the work for 30% of the usual price. Because we always devoted much attention to our assignments, it was impossible for use to work for this kind of discount, and so we had to turn down the project.



Plan for the DEVCO block.



Model of DEVCO office block (to the right), showing the different courtyards.

With much delay, the project was eventually designed by Vera Yanovshchinsky instead of us. In contrast to most people in his position, Van Vianen, the director of DEVCO, felt a moral obligation to VMX after our design had been so brusquely rejected. He hinted that he would attempt to work with VMX in the future. This was the motivation for our assignment for the Study Villa — the grammar school in Den Bosch — although there were also other factors that played a role.

So-called 'black schools' have been a hot item in the Netherlands since the eighties.<sup>(20)</sup> The issue is whether or not the average learning achievements are influenced by a high percentage of children of ethnic origin. Research results produced by various experts indeed indicate that there are negative effects of a high percentage of children of immigrant descent, but the conclusions are not unambiguous. Some experts claim that 'black schools' have positive influences.<sup>(21)</sup> The nuances of academic debate are largely lost on laypeople — such as parents — and the issue is reduced to a question of image. 'Black schools' were also an issue in Den Bosch. Some 20 years previously, the *gymnasium* (grammar school) had combined with a comprehensive school but the co-operation had run into problems. There was the threat that the *gymnasium*, as a component of a larger unit, would acquire the image of a 'black school' and the school management found that an unwelcome proposition. On the basis of his involvement in the Paleiskwartier, the urban planner Rolf Tjerkstra describes the consequence of this situation as follows: "The miserable existence of the *gymnasium* attracted attention as part of the west district. This was in the period when grammar schools were again becoming popular and people believed they could avoid the stigma of the 'black schools' by moving into the centre of town. To us, it seemed a good idea that the *gymnasium* should be allocated a new building in the Paleiskwartier instead of a building in the inner city. As a counterpart to the new Court House, where the public inner

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(20) Definition of a 'black school' borrowed from Marjan Agerbeek, as published in *Trouw* (daily newspaper), 23 May 2002. People often refer to the number of so-called '1.9 pupils' at a school, nowadays called 'point nine pupils'. These are pupils for whom the school receives extra funding from the Ministry of Education because they do not have a Dutch cultural background and they have poorly educated parents. (...) A complicated definition lurks behind this 'pupils with a non-Dutch cultural background'. They are pupils who have at least one parent who does not come from an English-speaking country outside of Europe (with the exception of Indonesia), or from Greece, Italy, Spain, or Portugal, or from Surinam, the Netherlands Antilles or Aruba, plus pupils with at least one parent who is recognized as a refugee or belongs to the Moluccan population group. Whether or not a school is called 'black' depends on the percentage of pupils with an ethnic background. To an increasing extent, percentages of 70 or 75 are taken as the defining factor instead of 50 per cent, based on the idea that more than 50 per cent of pupils in the big cities are of ethnic origins anyway.

(21) Research at the University of Amsterdam by the educationalists M. Overmaat and G. Ledoux indicated that, in general, black schools devote more attention to their educational climate. They criticized the figures of Statistics Netherlands because this office bases its figures on absolute numbers instead of progress in terms of percentages. For example, pupils of ethnic origins at primary school make more progress in the subjects of arithmetic and language than their Dutch counterparts. Source: Kreulen, Edwin, 'Zwarte basisscholen niet zo slecht' (Black primary schools not so bad), *Trouw*, 5 January 2002.

courtyard serves as access to the courtroom, a school in the inner courtyard of the adjoining office and residential block would be a good reason to make this area public. The Municipality managed to convince the *gymnasium* and a brief was compiled. A selection procedure for the architect was then organized. As the developer of the project, DEVCO was allowed to propose an architect, Khandekar could propose someone, and the school itself could propose someone."<sup>(22)</sup>

Van Vianen immediately seized the opportunity to give us a second chance and advanced our names for the plan. In the first selection round, two architects were chosen from six candidates. A definitive choice would be made between these two in the next round. The presentations for the first round took place on 30 March 1998, in a classroom of the old *gymnasium* accommodation. We were requested to give a presentation on the activities of our office and to prepare a vision on the assignment. Because we wished to present a slide show, we had opted for certainty and had taken with us all the material necessary to darken the classroom. We arrived in Den Bosch laden with metres of curtains and rolls of tape. We then excluded every scrap of daylight and showed our slides. During the presentation, I evoked the example of the *Odyssey* to articulate our vision on the assignment. This seemed to me to be an appropriate description of the design process to a company of grammar school people.

I described how we, as architects without predisposed standpoints, listening and responding to the school management, wished to make a conceptual journey past all the various possibilities in order to arrive at the appropriate solution. In my opinion, my presentation contained all the necessary clues. I discussed how we would tackle the issue all together and I had the idea that I had presented a very convincing story. Unfortunately, the school management thought differently. They thought that our presentation was chaotic and did not see why we had taken so much trouble to black out the classroom.

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(22) Tjerkstra, Rolf, in an interview with Olv Klijn, VMX archives.

The story of Odysseus seemed to frighten them off rather than stimulate them. They simply wanted a new building as quickly as possible, away from their current accommodation. They did not want a long journey past all the various options. The fact that both Rolf and DEVCO had had positive experiences with us in previous projects and wanted to continue with us was the main reason that we were nevertheless selected for the second round. The result of the poorly received presentation was that on 31 March — the day after the presentation — we received a letter asking us to give a second presentation on 8 April. We were still in the race. In the second round, the choice was between us and another architectural office from Amsterdam: Wagner.<sup>(23)</sup> Both offices had been given the assignment to make sketches for the media library, a mandatory component of secondary schools which was the most conspicuous spatial change resulting from the new 'study house' concept.<sup>(24)</sup> Since we had received the opportunity to create a design we gained confidence and the idea grew that we had a real chance to dispel the school management's doubts and gain the assignment. In terms of designing, we believed that we had developed a successful working method in which social-cultural concepts were linked to a pragmatic and business-like attitude.

The design that we created for the second round was based on the idea that it would be interesting to take the media library and the associated 'study landscape' as the backbone of the school. Again referring to the classics, but this time to the typology of a Roman villa with its system of patios, we spoke of a Study Villa as a name for the typology we had created. When the school management saw what we had designed and recognized the enthusiasm with which we discussed our design, they changed their minds about our candidature. When Leon arrived home after the presentation he was called with the announcement that the choice had fallen upon us!

We had created a design in the same way as we always do: with dedication and by devoting a great deal of energy to it. In fact,

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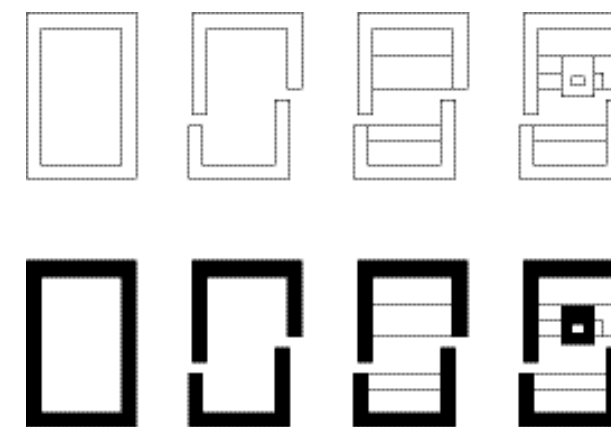
(23) We knew Wagner because he was involved in a study of the Olympic Stadium. The school management had selected him because he had built a combination of a school and houses at Borneo Sporenburg.

(24) The term 'study house' is used to describe an educational institution that focuses on the acquisition of knowledge (learning or studying) instead of the conveyance of knowledge (teaching). See [www.minocw.nl/tweedefase/factsheet.html](http://www.minocw.nl/tweedefase/factsheet.html): "The study house is concerned with the design and organization of learning in senior secondary school. Working and studying on an independent basis demand a different way of thinking and organizing." The study house is a metaphor for the place or organizational form within which pupils learn to cope with large amounts of information and its application. The teacher is a coach, a supervisor of the process.

we had designed much more than the media library, we had thought out a concept for the entire school. In this design, the media library was both the binding element and the 'organizer' of all the other spaces. This train of thought and working method was only really recognized by the school management during the second presentation, leading to our eventual selection. The preliminary work, 'lobbying' if you prefer, which was the basis of this assignment began with the DEVCO block and perhaps even with the 3UP2DOWN project. These projects had given us a very good reputation in Den Bosch and this reputation carried us through the crucial first round of the selection procedure. We were subsequently able to complete the task under our own steam, doing what we are best in: creating a realistic design. When it became evident after the second presentation that we had been given the assignment, we were extremely delighted. The *gymnasium* would be our second building in Den Bosch and designing a school would be a new challenge to us. In retrospect however, this moment was also the beginning of five years of designing without any form of steering from our client.

In the past ten years, the role of architects in building schools in the Netherlands has changed radically. Previously, designing schools — just like designing hospitals and prisons — was so restricted by rules and regulations that architects seldom succeeded in creating anything exceptional. The few architects who did succeed are almost without exception known as 'school builders' and have a great many schools to their credit. Since the beginning of 1997, the accommodation costs for education have no longer been the responsibility of the national government but of the municipalities. As a consequence, municipalities and school boards have had the loudest voice in the design of buildings. Although the intention of the government was to generate tailor-made solutions with the direct involvement of the school managements, real-life practice turned out

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Plans for the DEVCO office block.  
Development of urban block, creating a public area by introducing a school.



to be completely different. First of all, there is the problem that the school management must function as the client whereas its organizational form is not suited to this task. Moreover, rapidly changing insights regarding educational methods, spatial requirements, and shrinking budgets ensure that designing schools remains a specialist job. "(...) building schools has remained primarily a technical issue in which consultants, educators, and educationalists have more say than architects. As a result of the increasingly tight straitjacket of ministerial guidelines and the absolute minimum budgets, the assignment has become less and less attractive to architects." (25)

In our design for the *gymnasium* in Den Bosch, we experienced how the architect has to convince the school management of the necessity to opt for high-quality accommodation, while the same management can opt to spend less money on a building and more on educational resources.

It was an extremely democratic process in which everyone, including the caretaker, the teachers and the auxiliary staff could articulate their wishes — or rather, demands. Besides these wishes, there was also an extremely detailed brief that gradually became increasingly important to the various representatives within the school management. Faced with such a complex programme, we assumed that the various teachers within the school management would display solidarity and that the complicated spatial requirements that they formulated would lead to useable compromises in line with the well-known Dutch culture of mutual consultation. However, this was not the case. During the process, the brief turned out to be sacrosanct, so that every alteration in the design entailed much discussion and resistance.

On 26 May, we presented our preliminary design for the Study Villa. We described the design as a 'glass cube' on a pedestal. The cube would form the middle point of a built-up strip that



Sketch for media library as the backbone of the building, a cruciform space in the centre of the Study Villa.

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(25) Tjihuis, Annet, 'Aap – Noot – Londo – norm', from: *De Architect* no. 7-8, pp. 40-45, July-Aug (1999).

intersected the inner area of the surrounding construction block. Encompassed by two lower volumes — the gym hall and the bicycle parking facilities with a playground — the glass cube would contain the auditorium and all the teaching areas. By means of stairs and voids, the media library would stretch from the auditorium in the pedestal to the large skylight in the top storey of the cube. To ensure that the gym hall would indeed be a 'low' volume, the entire strip including the auditorium and the bicycle parking facilities would have to be sunken. A broad stairway led from the semi-public inner yard to the school entrance that lay 1.20 metres below ground level. The auditorium on the sunken ground floor allowed access to the adjoining volumes. The 'inner court' on the first floor would be accessed via a broad stairway from the auditorium. (26) The most important area of the media library was situated on the second floor: the library with individual and group workstations. The upper floor of the media library contained isolated individual workspaces. The different disciplines — sections such as language, natural sciences, biology — were organized vertically in the preliminary design so that the various groups comprised two, three or four floors. We described the façades of the Villa as 'as transparent as possible' so that much light could enter the building and an animated and intriguing volume would be generated on the square.

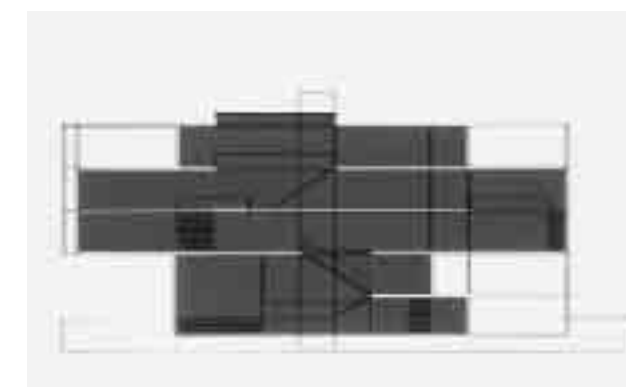
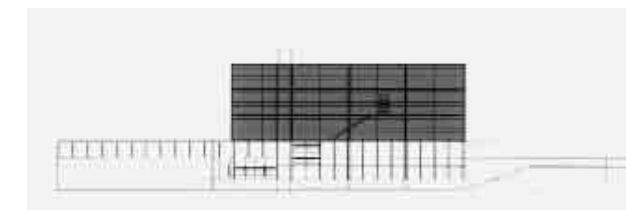
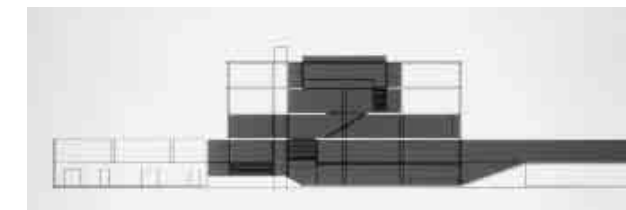
After the presentation of the preliminary design, the discussion on the costs of the project broke loose. It became increasingly difficult to keep the building within the budget. At a certain moment I even said to Leon: "You would think that a complex programme as contained in this assignment would automatically lead to architecture, but it looks like that isn't the case. In this project we're only busy with solving problems instead of creating interesting architecture." (27)

In an attempt to sway the discussions on the costs, we altered our design so that the gym hall was included in the cube, which meant a substantial reduction in façade surface, in other words,

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(26) We regarded this inner court as the first layer of the media library with several individual workstations.

(27) Based on various projects and texts, the topic of complexity increased in importance in the early nineties. The theme was comprehensively dealt with in Rem Koolhaas's Euralille project. With the increase in attention for a complex programme, the idea that a complex programme would automatically lead to interesting architecture also gained ground. Like many of his colleagues, Harm Tilman praised Koolhaas's hypercomplexity, as he writes on Euralille in *De Architect* of December 1994: "In this situation of great complexity, Koolhaas believed that OMA was forced to take a 'Freudian leap forwards'." For a more extensive review of the promise of a complex programme, see the description covering the Bicycle hotel.



Diagrams indicating the media library and its capacity to connect all spaces.



Impression of the media library as the central connecting space in the school.



Model of Study Villa as a glass cube with the media library at its heart.

in the costs. It was extremely difficult to appease everyone and we noticed that we ourselves began to think in terms of restrictions rather than of possibilities. For example, since our original proposal of making the media library a vertical binding element, — the metaphorical backbone — we had not really tried to re-search other proposals. And although I myself was still secretly charmed by the idea of the media library as one large open space, the school management continued to maintain that this was impossible, which our project architect in turn started to believe. After we had suggested adopting the gym hall into the main building in order to make the building more compact, one of our internees Angela van der Zee luckily took the initiative to study the possibilities with the media library. She then proved that it was possible to place everything on one floor! This was a major turning point in our thinking. The media library would be the heart rather than the backbone. It was amazing to see that an internee could make such a contribution to a project by simply doing what we had gradually come to think of as being impossible.

When the media library became one large space, the project became interesting again as an architectonic object: a thousand square metres of open space in the middle of a building. Aided by several clever design interventions, we managed to give the media library a façade made completely of glass and to keep the emergency exits inside the building.

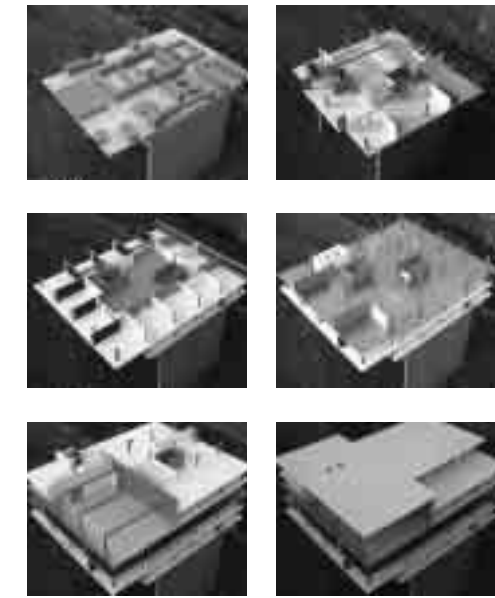
When we presented the definitive design on 21 July 1999 — more than a year after our first preliminary design — with the media library on one floor and the gym hall in the main volume, we had the idea that everyone would be contented. But after the presentation, we had the feeling that we had perhaps missed something.

I had always felt some doubt, partly with regard to the gym hall of the roof of the building, but the doubt had never been articulated and I was not sure exactly where the problem lay. At a cer-

tain moment, the school management hired in a consultant from an organization called School van de Toekomst (School of the Future). Although this person had been hired to set up the data system, he also involved himself in the design. In agreement with the school management, he found, after our presentation, that the gym hall could better be accommodated in the basement at the back of the school. We had already experienced how little power of conviction the headmistress of the *gymnasium* had over the school management. Partly due to the involvement of the School van de Toekomst consultant, the entire discussion again flared up and we again landed in a complex decision-making process.

As an architect, you have to be convinced of your own idea and have the nerve to hold on to it, even if you annoy people. The same applies to clients, they too have to display determination. With my Irish background, I was used to the fact that teachers and certainly school management occupied a certain social position. Just like the clergyman and the doctor — and the architect — they were regarded as prominent figures in a community. However, the headmistress of the *gymnasium* in Den Bosch fulfilled a completely different role. It was not her intention to exercise her authority; she tried to listen to all the different opinions that were articulated within the school management team. The other teachers in the school management were not of the same type as I had known in Ireland. Without exception, they were all people with an academic background, exponents of the '68-generation', individuals who had abandoned formalities and expressed their own opinions even if they frustrated the decision-making process.

It was only after many discussions with this motley crew that it became clear where the management's greatest problem lay. With the increased height of the building, as a result of our attempt to create a compact volume, the teachers were afraid that the pupils would have to climb too many stairs with heavy schoolbags. When we heard this, we suggested that the top



Development of the floor plans, with the media library on one level.

floor should only contain teacher areas, and all problems turned out to be solved.

Since the design sketch, we had avoided questions about the façade by talking about transparent façades, but when the programmatic and spatial problems were solved, the issue of the façades was revived and we had to become pragmatic. It was clear to us that the Study Villa ought to contrast with the surrounding brick fronts, but there was scarcely any budget for anything except brick. In our quest for an alternative, we visited a company called Polyproducts. This company manufactures various polyester products and we wished to take a look at the possibilities. Without having any real idea of material, I found a sample of gold-coloured material there. At first sight, it was an awful kitsch-like material, but what intrigued me was the fact that it had a 'presence'. All the other polyesters that we found were little more than coloured plate material but this gold had genuine depth and marking due to a coarse powder being used in the manufacture. It turned out that this material was used for the roofs of mosques. Rather ironically, I thought it would be a great idea to use this material in a school that was afraid of becoming a 'black'. However, not only irony played a role in my conviction. The fact that the material refers to science fiction — Star Trek was extremely popular at the time — gave me the idea that it would appeal to the pupils. Another final aspect was the fact that it was a hand-made product. In other words, each panel was 'painted' manually so that irregularities are always visible and each panel is thus unique. I have always been fond of prefabricated building elements, not because I am interested in serially produced elements or material but because I like the idea of things being hand made, almost home made.<sup>(28)</sup>

My interest is primarily stimulated by the small scale of the production and the direct relationship between the maker and his product. I have previously drawn the analogy between fashion and architecture. In our project 3UP2DOWN I spoke about the cut of a building. Another parallel can be drawn between



Images of the finished project.

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(28) Perhaps my Irish/British background can be recognized in this preference. For example, British cuisine is not as exalted or elitist as French cuisine. British cuisine is practical, based on one's own ingredients, there is a traditional pursuit of a form of autarky, expressed in the 'kitchen garden'.



Study Villa.



The media library of Study Villa.



clothes and the façade. By making use of a hand-made product, there arose the possibility of designing a building that would have a spacey image but would not be sterile because it had a measure of individuality. Just as in the fashion world, it is a contest between the anonymity of mass clothing production and the hand of the *couturier*. However, this was not the *couturier* who only manufactures creations for the catwalk, but rather a person who looks for material and procedures that turn normal clothes into something special.

When I showed the material at the office, and said that I wanted to create the façade with it, everyone was shocked. It took some time before people began to appreciate it. The school management needed less time. When I showed the material to them and described the Study Villa as a diamond in a box, they were remarkably unanimous and, even more important, extremely enthusiastic! I explained the façade partition to them by again referring to the correspondence with the classical villa: here, the media library is the central space, the gold is the shell and the sky-blue staff room was the culmination of the building against the sky. The Welstand and Khandekar were also enthusiastic.<sup>(29)</sup> The only people who offered any real opposition were the civil servants of the Municipality of Den Bosch. In an attempt to make the application of the gold impossible, they demanded all kinds of guarantees. But due to the fact that they were alone and all the other parties did want the gold façade, it eventually became possible to build a golden school.<sup>(30)</sup>

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(29) Their enthusiasm went as far as insisting during one of the later presentations that the vertical media library should be returned to the design. We no longer wanted that, however, and we were able to convince them of the merits of a horizontal media library.

(30) With regard to the construction of the Study Villa, we were simply unfortunate. First of all, the process was poorly organized. The project developer, DEVCO, also owned the ground, and a subsidiary of DEVCO did the construction and was also supervisor. In short, there were too many interests in the hands of only a few people. The result of all this can be seen in the mediocre implementation of the building. The 'gamble' that we took by choosing the hand-made façade panels was not completely successful. We thought the panels would display small differences but in reality the colour differences are so great that they border on irritation.



Images of the finished project.

### Bicycle hotel

The results of the Rotterdam Bridge study were presented at a symposium in Rotterdam. Strangely enough, the proposals were not presented by the designers themselves but by Jaap van den Bout of Palmboom & Van den Bout. I no longer remember the reason for this construction but, in retrospect, I regret complying with this idea. I believe it is important for an architect to explain his or her own work. In my opinion, a design cannot be fully conveyed by means of pictures or text, it also depends on the way in which it is outlined, it relies on personal concepts and conviction. During the preparation for the presentation van den Bout asked us to send him a generous selection of slides. From these, he selected a few with which he could concisely explain our plan.<sup>(31)</sup> The response from the audience, and later from people who viewed the publication containing all the plans, was very subdued. Although interesting proposals were made by various architects, the designs were acknowledged and put aside; at least, that was the impression given.

Ton Schaap — an urban planner who worked for the Spatial Planning department of the Municipality of Amsterdam — attended the presentation and expressed some critical remarks about our plan. A week after the symposium, he called us to ask if we might be interested in designing temporary bicycle parking facilities.

The square in front of the Central Station in Amsterdam would have to be cleared of bicycles for the construction of a new underground line there and this was only possible if alternative storage facilities were provided. However, the alternatives were restricted because space around the station — which lies on an island — is very scarce. In addition, the design for this alternative had to be ready within six weeks and there was only a limited budget.<sup>(32)</sup> Surprised but excited that our bridge design for Rotterdam had gained a follow-on in Amsterdam, we responded positively to Ton's request.<sup>(33)</sup>

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Location as it was.

(31) Jaap van den Bout applied this method to all plans so that there was no mention of person preference, which was absolutely correct. The disadvantage of this approach was that the intensity, emotion and the inspiration of the designers behind the plans disappeared.

(32) All this made the assignment difficult, but what made the assignment really unattractive to many architects was the fact that it involved a temporary construction. 'A Bicycle Shed is a Building' in *Archis* no. 2, 2001. Arjen Oosterman articulated how a temporary construction is still disdained, even in a time when nothing is regarded as permanent. He wrote: "There used to be a time in which temporary things were regarded as being worth serious effort — the cheerful procession, town festivities — they were architectonic assignments in which the best minds and talents were deployed. But in a time in which the concept of permanence has lost much of its significance and almost everything is regarded as being temporary, the short-term assignment is no longer seen as being satisfactory."

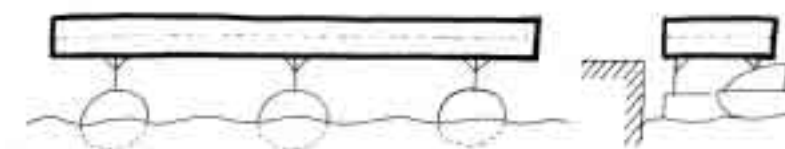
(33) Ton Schaap himself seemed relieved by our agreement as he had already asked several offices before coming to VMX. But they had all refused.

The assignment was to design bicycle parking facilities for 2500 bikes. The obvious location was the piece of water alongside the only free quay on the station island, to the west of the station entrance. Parking facilities more than 100 metres long and a maximum of 14 metres wide could be constructed here on the condition that the construction was a stand-alone construction. Furthermore, the construction had to allow sufficient space for the sight-seeing boats — which moor at a jetty opposite — to turn around. Finally, the bicycle parking facilities also had to provide the opportunity to park bicycles under cover, but it should not become a hangout for junkies.

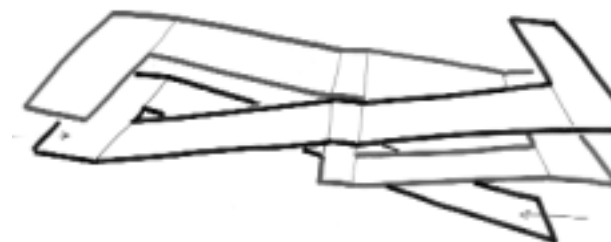
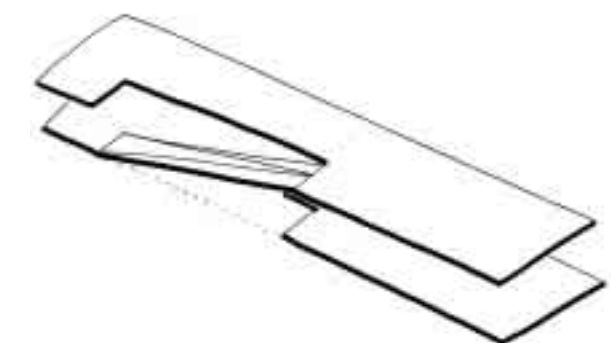
We began to analyse various sorts of bicycle parking facilities and the 'parking behaviour' of cyclists around the station. It soon became clear that cyclists, certainly in Amsterdam and absolutely at the Central Station, are very lazy. They are always rushed and prefer to spend as little time as possible finding a decent spot to park their bikes. Despite all the good intentions inherent in specially designed railings, brackets or racks, cyclists will use a pole, wall or drainpipe to lean their bikes against as long as it is near the station entrance. In other words, generating a design where cyclists are asked to lift up their bikes and place them in stacked racks, or to wheel them to other levels via staircases, was simply asking for trouble. However, in view of the required capacity and the limited space, it was evident that the parking facilities that we had been asked to design would have to comprise several storeys. We formulated the assignment as follows: Design parking facilities with several storeys where the user does not regard it as a chore to go to a higher level. In short, think up a way in which the idea of storeys is radically erased.

Our design was later linked by several people to the idea of a folded floor area. The critic Bernard Hulsman wrote: "(...) Koolhaas's library [the design in which a building was presented as a configuration of sloping floors for the first time] (has now) materialized in the form of bicycle parking facilities in the water

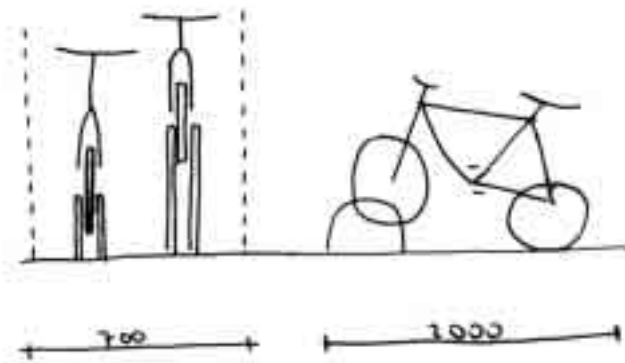
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Sketches for floating storage facility.



Sketches for systems of ramps.



Space needed for storing a bike.



Model of the preliminary design. In this model, the parking facility has a closed façade that could work like a gigantic screen, indicating the amount of free spaces left.



Model of the definitive design, an open system of ramps.

adjoining the Central Station in Amsterdam." He later modified his statement when he discussed the differences with Koolhaas's design. "The greatest difference (...) is that the slopes in a bicycle parking construction are extremely practical."<sup>(34)</sup> With this remark, Hulsman comes closer to the reference that we actually used for the bicycle parking facilities: the car park structure. I knew from my own experience that in certain types of parking garages there was no mention of distinctive storeys. A good example could be found not far from the Central Station: the Bijenkorf car park. In contrast to most car park structures, this garage does not consist of horizontal floors and sloping ramps between them, but the entire garage is actually one continuous slope. This is not always convenient for car parking because the lack of references such as floor numbers makes it difficult and time-consuming to relocate your car. However, for our bicycle parking facilities, this style seemed extremely useful.

In our plans for the Rotterdam Bridge we had co-operated with Anne van der Sluis, a constructor who worked with Van Rossum. The project had not only opened our eyes to the idea of infrastructure as habitable and usable space, but also to the possibility of realizing architecture out of constructive principles. The idea of designing a bridge not as an object but rather as a 'place' became feasible to us because Van der Sluis came up with the idea of regarding the bridge as a 'tube' construction early in the design process. As a consequence, it was possible to regard a bridge as an extension of the boulevard that could span the river. Besides the fact that most offices had more than enough interesting assignments in their portfolio, the simplicity of the programme and the marginal budget also played a role in the acceptance or non-acceptance of the bicycle facilities assignment. When we started on the design, an important theme within the architectonic debate was the concept of complexity.

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(34) Hulsman, Bernard, 'De grootste fietsenstalling ter wereld', *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 April 2001.

As a result, attention was devoted to assignments with a complex brief rather than those with a simple brief, even to the extent that various architects evolved into genuine experts in the field of complexity and spoke of a new set of tools with which to create architecture.<sup>(35)</sup>

Many critics were enthusiastic about the new themes and read into the newly rising 'multiplexes' a metaphor for reality which itself had become more complex. Thus encouraged and defended, a belief in the promise of a complex programme was generated among architects. An implicit element was the assumption that a complex brief would lead to complex architecture and thus to interesting constructions.

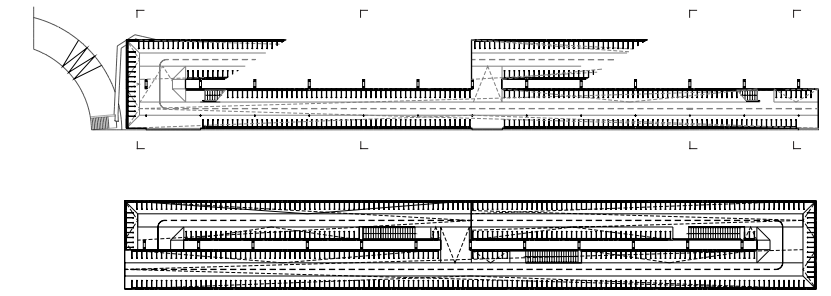
However, our experience with the complex programme for the Study Villa in Den Bosch was quite different. In that project we experienced how a complex programme does not automatically lead to interesting architecture in real-life practice. On the contrary, it even looked like the Study Villa would have no architecture at all for a time. To us, the simplicity of the programme for the bicycle parking facilities was thus a breath of fresh air, and right from the outset I had the idea that this assignment could lead to a very interesting building.

With our knowledge of the behaviour of (Amsterdam) cyclists and the logic of parking garages, we subsequently inspected the location for the bicycle parking facilities. We discovered that the section of quay that the Municipality had allocated had a height difference of more than one-and-a-half metres. Making use of this 'natural' slope gave rise to the idea of constructing the parking facilities as a series of slopes. It would be a construction that could be entered on the bicycle and which would not offer sleeping space to vagrants, which people feared, because of the continuous slope.

In the negotiations with the Municipality of Amsterdam concerning the bicycle parking facilities, we had insisted on working

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(35) The most prominent architect who spoke about complexity was Rem Koolhaas, but Bernard Tschumi also produced vital ideas on complexity with his designs and writings. In his realized design for Parc de la Vilette, Tschumi talks about all of juxtaposition, superposition and permutation, while the concept of 'crossprogramming' also originated from him. In his publication *Architecture and Disjunction*, Tschumi equips his design tools with a theoretical basis.



Floor plans.

with Anne van der Sluis once again. He was just as important in this project as he was in the bridge for Rotterdam. Anne proposed positioning the supporting construction in the middle, along the longitudinal axis of the building. The elegant construction that was thus formed, with overhangs on either side, gives the impression that the inclines are floating. In order to keep the entire construction in equilibrium, the ground floor is the only storey made of concrete. Besides the sculptural effect, the overhanging slopes under the construction leave sufficient space for the round-trip boats.

The parking construction was actually designed and finished in accordance with the principles used to make simple boats. The steel segments were even produced at a shipyard in the Province of Friesland and transported by boat to Amsterdam, where they were assembled on the supporting construction within a few days. Just as elsewhere in the city, red asphalt covers the bicycle paths in the parking construction. And although all the levels of the parking facilities can be reached without having to dismount from the bicycle, there are also wide stairways with so-called 'bicycle gutters' (to wheel the bicycles up and down the stairs) offering short cuts to the upper levels. When choosing a route to the exit, most cyclists prefer the sensation of freewheeling down the inclines.

Because it was necessary to have temporary parking facilities during the construction of the North-South metro line, this object was not subject to the aesthetic stipulations of the Welstand (Building Inspectorate). However, we did have to present our design to Michael van Gessel and Tjeerd Dijkstra — the supervisors of this area — but the discussions with them took place in a very co-operative manner. The only aspect of the project that was time-consuming was the legal procedure for the placement of the construction. Particularly the Ibis Hotel opposite the envisaged location raised serious objections because the construction robbed the hotel of its view of the canal. In conjunction with Ton Schaap, we eventually had to

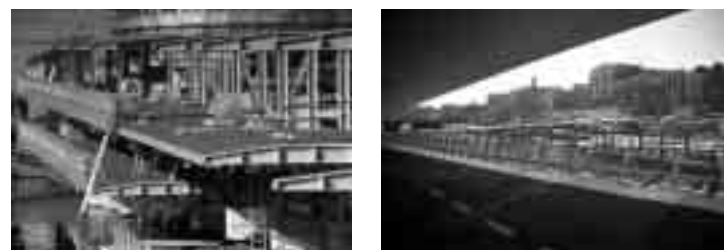
undertake legal procedures right up to the highest legal authority — the Provincial Council — in order to realize the construction, which meant a delay of around nine months. Ultimately, the courts sided with the Municipality of Amsterdam because it was a temporary construction and was absolutely necessary in the current situation.

Since the completion of the bicycle parking facilities, it has been one of the most photographed buildings in Amsterdam, and has appeared in countless newspapers and magazines throughout the world. The construction not only turned out to be useful for parking bicycles, but skaters and stunt cyclists also make full use of the possibilities. Recently, performances have been organized that use the facilities as a stage/background. In one of these performances, the construction was described as a Bicycle hotel, a nickname that I think is much more attractive than the Bicycle flat, as it is often called in popular speech.

#### Killing a house with a concept

At the time, Jelle Brouwer and Louis Meijer (of Burgfonds) were enthusiastic about our idea of linking 'separate' offices by means of a joint plinth, but because they wished to test our concept, they asked us to present our design to potential tenants. One of those potential tenants was Henk Bouman, who was head of Bouman & Van Spaendonck, an organization consultancy office. Bouman was immediately enthusiastic about our concept and, not long after our first presentation, he asked us to design the interior of his office.

I remember the first discussion on Bouman's new office, a discussion that took place in his old office just outside Den Bosch. I had already become acquainted with Bouman as a man with ambition during the presentation of our concept for the total building. He was well dressed with an eye for detail. This impression was confirmed in the discussion about his own office. Bouman tried to convey the idea that he would rapidly evolve into one of the most important consultancy offices in his



The making of the Bicycle hotel.



Bicycle hotel.



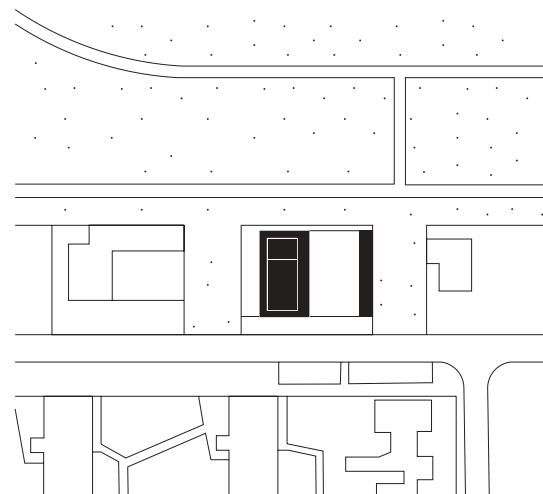
The Bicycle hotel is probably the most photographed building in Amsterdam, most tourist can't resist taking a picture.

sector, if he didn't already occupy that position. With his claims, Bouman implicitly showed himself to be a 'control freak', but this was not overtly clear to me as yet. I was somewhat blinded by the features that seemed to make Bouman the perfect client: ambition, interest in (our) concepts, and prepared to invest in architecture. As a young architect, one can only dream of this type of client and I had the feeling that I was finally dealing with the right person. It seemed to click with Bouman on a personal level, too. We were both ambitious and I had a strong urge to realize his plans. The design for his office eventually came to nothing, we only provided some advice. However, when he asked us to consider his house, that was when it became really interesting to us.

Since our experience with Bouman, I have come to understand why architects so often regard the design of a private residence as an extremely intense and emotional assignment. After all, one becomes involved in aspects of someone's life that normally remain concealed. Because we had not previously had a formal architect-client relationship in designing a house, we had not previously experienced this emotional involvement. In the case of the T-House for Leon's parents, there was no mention of a formal relationship and there was almost no emotional layer. However, we experienced all the emotions available with the Boumans in creating their house: the B-House.

At the conclusion of one of the discussions about the design of his office, Bouman told me that he had a problem with his house and asked me to have a look at it. It turned out that Bouman had commuted between an apartment in Antwerp and a house in the northern part of Den Bosch for years.

I never saw the apartment, but the house — built in the seventies — was spatially interesting. In Bouman's view, however, it was in the wrong neighbourhood. Furthermore, with the promise of a new office, the Boumans wanted to concentrate their lives in one location. So they had decided to sell their house and



B-House situation.







B-House, existing garden and kitchen.



B-House interior.

apartment and to buy a new house that would satisfy all their expectations. The house that they envisaged was a villa built in the sixties, near the centre of Den Bosch, situated in a park-like environment. It was the period when house prices were beginning to take off. And I remember that he bought the house for slightly more than one million guilders.<sup>(36)</sup>

Before the Boumans could occupy the house of their dreams, it had to be comprehensively renovated. To decide who would receive this assignment, Bouman organized a selection round among a number of local architects. Kuin & Kuin, two promising young architects from Den Bosch, won this competition with an extravagant design.<sup>(37)</sup> They proposed a complete transformation — a metamorphosis, as they referred to it themselves — in which the existing house would be restructured into a prestigious object. It soon became obvious that it would be cheaper to demolish the existing house and construct a new one from scratch. However, this approach was completely against Bouman's nature. Demolishing a house to build a new one in its place seemed to Bouman to be a waste of money, he abhorred the idea. It then turned out that the neighbours had serious objections to the reconstruction plans and the Municipality did not issue the required permission. The project stagnated.

At that moment — September 1998 — Bouman turned to me and asked if we could come up with a solution for his house. I went with Bouman to look at the house and I saw a horrible building. It had been poorly maintained and was partitioned into various poky little rooms. However, the location was absolutely beautiful. It was surrounded by a park on three sides, it was at a stone's throw from the city centre, and you had the feeling that you were living in the middle of the woods. Bouman asked me what I thought of the house and which changes would I make?

I said: "As the house is now, it has its back to the park. I would turn it around, open it to the park, and create a closed façade on the street side." "Wow, that's conceptual!" replied Bouman and continued: "I knew you would have a good suggestion.

<sup>(36)</sup> Around 450,000 euros.

<sup>(37)</sup> When they received the assignment to rebuild the Bouman house, the architectural office of Kuin & Kuin had just realized a fire station in Den Bosch. It was well received by the general public. They were also building some interesting houses near our 3UP2DOWN location.



Bouman's list of requirements.

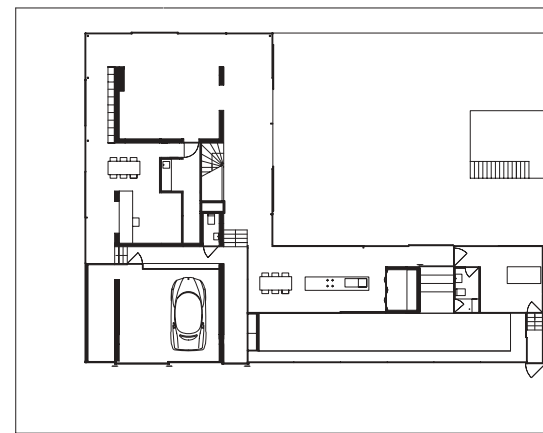
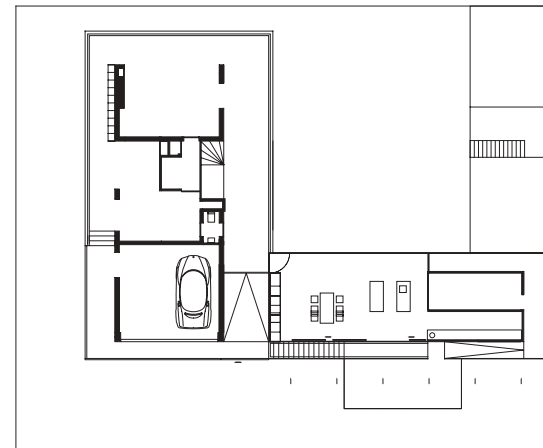
You're somebody who can think in concepts and that's exactly what I need. Would you like to rebuild the house, please give me a house with a concept." Bouman was prepared to invest a million guilders in the project and provided a quick sketch of how he wanted to entertain his business friends in his house.

He wanted to be able to amuse the directors of banks and international companies with his own swimming pool, gym, and meditation chamber. Bouman did not have a planning schedule, the only hard deadline was his fiftieth birthday which he wished to celebrate in his new house.<sup>(38)</sup> I could not resist so many architectonic temptations and I agreed. When I returned to the office and told Leon about my impulsive agreement, he was not immediately enthusiastic.

I always found Bouman to be a distinctive personality, his study was full of extraordinary gadgets. For example, he had a plastic hardcover to transport his bicycle in the aeroplane. He was someone who had to have the newest inventions, and was obsessed by buying and collecting. When we had reached a reasonably advanced stage of our design, he also said that we had to design a special garage for his Harley Davidson and his Porsche, but I never saw either of these. During the design stages of Zaltbommel, Bouman did buy a Landrover in order to "enjoy riding through the fields", as he himself put it.

Bouman produced a brief containing a number of personal wishes in addition to the usual requirements. For example, he wanted the house to have an 'extrovert countenance' and explicitly asked for an open kitchen with a view of the street so that Marjolijn — his wife, whom we only met much later — would be able to see some life. The list also contained yearnings that were difficult to reconcile, such as a garage for the Porsche and the Harley as well as a drive for loading and unloading his caravan. To me, the incompatibility of such wishes lay primarily in the fact that I could not imagine that someone who owned a Porsche and a Harley would go on holiday with a caravan.

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U-shaped extensions to the B-House.

(38) As the first point on the brief — the 'wish list', as Bouman called it — dated 12 October 1998, was: "We would like to move into the house around the end of May. H. Bouman will turn 50 at the beginning of June and we want to hold a big celebration in our new house."

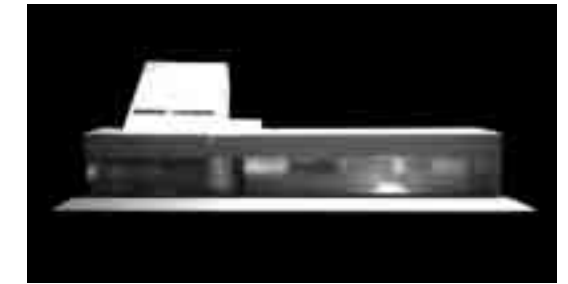
As a last item on the wish list, and apparently added at the last minute because it was the only point that was hand-written, Bouman wanted a covered swimming pool. The principles of Feng Shui had to be applied throughout the house. After studying Bouman's wishes, I was seized by a sense of doubt but the desire to please Bouman and the opportunity to design a fantastic house overruled my misgivings. I assured Bouman that I would create a marvellous house for him.

At the end of January 1999, we presented our design. We proposed extending the existing conservatory on the park side of the house so that it would embrace the whole ground floor level. By reducing the number of rooms in the whole house, we could create larger and simpler spaces. A new wing would be built on to the east side of the house. This wing (later referred to as stage 2 of the design) would contain a new kitchen, guest accommodation, a swimming pool, and a gym. This extension would transform the existing house into a hybrid U-shaped patio villa that was fully oriented toward the park: it was very Feng Shui.

Bouman was extremely enthusiastic and he promised to consider the details during a skiing holiday in Austria. But when he returned he was rather unsettled and insisted I come to meet him.<sup>(39)</sup> I stepped into the car straight away, but an unprecedented winter storm burst loose at that very moment. I remember how I drove to Den Bosch, slipping and sliding through the snow. A journey that normally takes less than one hour cost me three hours. Having arrived in Den Bosch, Bouman told me that after his experiences during the winter sport, he wanted a 'safe room' in his new house and I could leave again. Although people from the south of the Netherlands are known for their hospitality, Bouman proved to be the exception to the rule. In later meetings, too, he displayed very self-oriented behaviour in his dealings with other people.

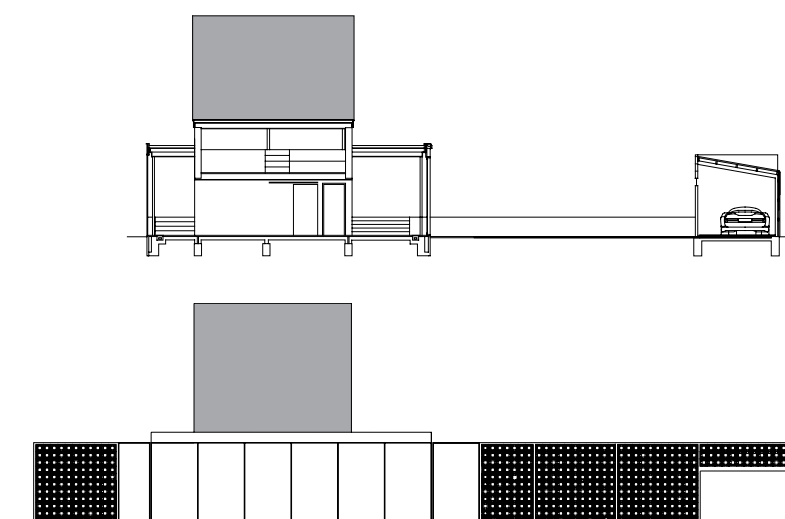
I remember that he asked me to come and visit him for discussions at the most impossible hours — early in the morning or

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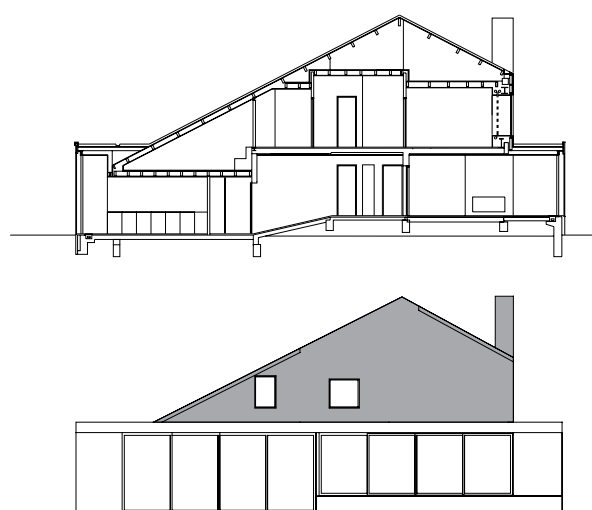


Model of U-shaped extension.

(39) Bouman was snowed in during the holiday. The most serious and fatal avalanche in Austria since 1689 hit the village of Galtuer which was subsequently cut off from the outside world for days. The official press announcement of 26 February 1999 was as follows: "Austria Avalanche Kills at Least 8 INNSBRUCK, Austria (AP) — Tons of snow tumbled down upon a small village in the Austrian Alps on Tuesday, killing at least eight people and leaving up to 30 others missing. It was one of dozens of avalanches to strike Central Europe as the region endured its worst snowfall in 50 years. Tens of thousands of travellers were stranded in train stations, traffic jams and isolated resort towns across France, Italy, Switzerland and Austria as the avalanches buried homes, roads and railways. (...) Some 20,000 tourists were stranded in Tyrol province, and thousands of others in Vorarlberg." To Bouman, this experience was so traumatic that he changed his ideas for his house drastically. From that moment onward, everything in his life revolved around a safe house with a panic room and extensive alarm system.



B-House, cross-section.  
B-House, elevation, street side.



B-House, longitudinal section.  
B-House, elevation.

late in the evening — but he never offered a cup of coffee or anything like that.<sup>(40)</sup>

The relationship between Bouman and his wife was remarkable. It was only quite later in the design process that we met Marjolijn for the first time. In view of Bouman's personality, I expected a real 'bombshell' of a woman, but she turned out to be the most average and unpretentious woman that one could imagine. When I first saw her, I thought she was the cleaning lady instead of his wife. It was inconceivable that these two people were married to one another, they had completely different tastes. When his furniture arrived from Antwerp and hers from Den Bosch, an internal cacophony arose that helped destroy the house; but more about this topic later.

In the meantime, we have gained more experience as architects and we are more capable of dealing with the character traits of clients. However, something with which we still have difficulty is the haste that every client displays. In Bouman's case, I believe that his impatience was his greatest mistake. He had decided that the house had to be completed before his fiftieth birthday. He would not accept any delay and was not prepared to wait for the building permission procedure for the new construction. Bouman wanted to begin immediately, at least with the first stage of the project that did not require building permission: the reconstruction of the existing house.<sup>(41)</sup> Without informing us, he arranged a contractor and while we were still busy with producing the drawings — sketches actually — this contractor ruthlessly stripped the house. Within a very short time, the house looked like a bomb had hit it. In retrospect, it would probably have been cheaper to demolish everything at this time, but I had promised Bouman to create a design for the existing house. Our idea had always been to approach things with caution, to renovate the house carefully, and to extend it at a later stage. However, the work that Bouman's contractor executed meant that we were no longer thinking about renovation but

(40) We never received a response to the letter we sent to Kuin & Kuin to inform them that we would continue Bouman's assignment. In retrospect, I suspect that they were secretly happy to have been rid of Bouman.

(41) This was yet another example of the strange relationship that Bouman had with others. He refused to enter into contact with the neighbours to discuss his reconstruction plans and thus prevent them objecting to the issue of building permission. At the same time, Bouman regarded it as important and interesting to live next to a public prosecutor and a surgeon.

rather about rebuilding. As a consequence of Bouman's drive to get the work done, we were now confronted with a race against the clock. Everything that we conceived and drew was built almost immediately. It was as if we were making a large scale model, and we had the greatest difficulty in keeping ahead of the contractor. It occasionally happened that the contractor did not wait for our definitive drawings and, as a result, some things had to be rebuilt two or three times. As a result, Bouman's demand that the project remain within the budget soon became practically unfeasible.

After the 'safe room', Bouman produced new demands almost every week. He wanted a lift in the house, a bedroom that could be completely darkened, wanted to hear nothing as he walked through the house, wanted a Jacuzzi, and above all, optimum safety. Despite the new demands and the extra costs for restoration, the budget was sacred. At the end of April 1999, we had to suggest abandoning the new construction and trying to complete the existing house within the budget. Bouman reacted furiously and accused us of making an unrealistic representation of the situation. In his fax of 25 April 1999, he wrote: "I have a strong feeling that you, as VMX, are often out of touch with reality. You constantly present fine suggestions and it then turns out that they are not possible within the agreed budget." This is only a warming-up. After a summary of everything that went wrong, Bouman continued: "Taking everything into account, I consistently have the idea that you have held out a large carrot in front of me and have exchanged it for a small carrot at the last moment. (...) I have already referred to it as a kind of teasing that ends in refusal."

In retrospect, I think that if Bouman had been more patient he would have obtained the house that we had designed for him, but the pressure of time and the unforeseen costs of rebuilding made this impossible. His claim that he had no money to realize the original design can also be questioned. Again without



B-House, stripped of almost everything.



B-House, finished, seen from the street.



B-House, views of the park. We did not design the fence, we preferred an unobstructed view but unfortunately Bouman did not feel safe without a fence.

informing us, Bouman had hired specialists to design the kitchen, interior and the garden. All these people cost lots of money, but the house did not benefit from this expenditure. Initially, Bouman had given us the idea that he understood and respected architecture, but in professional practice, we realized that this was not the case. The most shocking example of Bouman's superficial notion of architecture was the problem that we encountered concerning the staircase of the house.

We had designed a staircase that had to be tailor-made at the location, but the contractor maintained that it was not possible to make this kind of staircase. Anyway, he had no time to do so. I asked Bouman for his opinion and I told him that our planned staircase would make an enormous difference. To my dismay, however, Bouman said that our staircase would take up too much time. Furthermore, the staircase had no priority, he had only asked us to design a house with a concept and the staircase was an unimportant feature. What Bouman actually wanted was that the house would receive an entry in the Yearbook, and fortunately for him, that also happened.<sup>(42)</sup>

In retrospect, the B-House project was not an accumulation of disappointments but rather an enormous learning process. In my recollection, it was a marvellous summer and it was fantastic to see the house appear out of the ruins of the old one. We actually turned the house inside out by adding the splendid glass passage all around. The glued glass fronts of this passage — made of plates measuring 3 by 6 metres — ensured that the ground floor of the house benefited from the location in an optimum manner. We always presented the design as an open house, without curtains and without a fence around it, so that you genuinely have the feeling of living in the countryside yet being in the city. However, at the moment the Boumans occupied the house, they installed a fence around the plot and heavy curtains were hung everywhere. In my opinion, they also spoiled the house with their awful furniture.

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I doubt if Bouman was ever happy with his house; he never mentioned it. We did not have much contact after that period, but not so long ago Bouman phoned me to say that he and his wife were divorced and they were going to sell the house.



B-House, glued glass façade.

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(42) Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2000-'01, pp. 80-81, Rotterdam, NAI Uitgevers (2001).

## CANNON FODDER AND POLITICS

### Best plans don't win!

At the beginning of 1998, shortly after we moved to our new office, we received a letter from Fred Kaaij, an urban planner working for the Municipality of Haarlemmermeer. He wrote that the Municipality had decided to give shape to the intended expansion of the village of Vijfhuizen in a completely new way. As a result of the VINEX construction assignment, Vijfhuizen, which consisted of 1000 houses, would be extended with a further 700 houses before 2005.<sup>(43)</sup> In an attempt not to attract the "architectural circus that manipulated the rest of the Netherlands," as Kaaij put it, a search had been initiated for new and promising architects for the Vijfhuizen VINEX location.<sup>(44)</sup> In conjunction with the Stichting Springplank (Stepping Stone Foundation) of Architectuur Lokaal, the Municipality had selected twelve prize-winners or participants in Archiprix and European and asked them to submit a proposal. We were one of the twelve offices.<sup>(45)</sup>

Since the completion of the first buildings in the mid-nineties, the VINEX assignment had been a source of passionate discussion. An important point of criticism was the fact that the entire operation had been announced as an innovative design assignment but in real-life practice, the results suspiciously resembled 'normal housing estates'. A first inventory, organized by the Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur (Foundation for the Stimulation of Architecture) in 1994, produced the conclusion that: "Almost everywhere there was a movement toward mono-functional residential areas with a one-track assortment of houses and a corresponding population structure."<sup>(46)</sup>

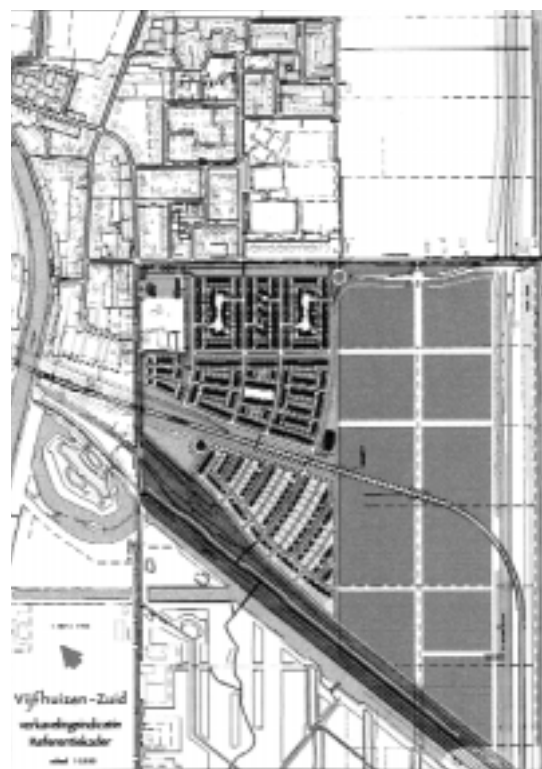
A second inventory in 1998 led to a similar conclusion that few of the original intentions of the VINEX concept could be found in real-life practice. The landscape architect Lodewijk Baljon summarized the shortcomings in three points: "There is a great lack of space for future developments, the connection of the new neighbourhoods to the identity of the existing city is problematic, and there is a collective inability to create contrasts. All

(43) In the *Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra, VINEX* (Fourth Memo on Physical Planning Extra) dating from 1990, the Ministry of Housing, Regional Development and the Environment was allocated new urban expansion areas on the edges of cities, where 750,000 houses would be realized between 1995 and 2005. The VINEX memo followed the *Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening*, and the difference was that the development of urban nuclei should be more oriented to economic developments as a result of the regionalization of spatial policy. The Extra feature of the memo was that it contained the locations for these developments. The starting point was that the locations should be chosen in such a way that no monotonous sea of houses but rather promising residential areas would be created in an ever fuller Netherlands. A picture was drawn of compact urban expansions that would not be fully self-oriented but could benefit from the character and history of the existing city. An additional advantage of the choice of location was that car traffic would be moderate, which harmonized with environmental policy. Besides spatial and economic goals, there were also cultural ambitions. "The two major design assign-

ments from the previous decade seemed to be united in the VINEX expansion of the city edges and urban renewal from within," as Adri Duivesteijn described it in the *Jaarboek Architectuur 1998-'99*. Shortly prior to the VINEX was the Heerma memo dating from 1989, which introduced the idea of free-market effects within social housing. In doing so, the government distanced itself, after a period of almost 100 years, from its role in realizing social housing. In the future the market should assume this role; eventually 70% of the houses built at VINEX locations will be realized as owner-occupied houses.

(44) The concept of the VINEX location in the new memo referred to the regionally distributed locations where at least 2000 houses would be built in or adjoining the existing city to stimulate economic development.

(45) The others were: Pierre and Marjolijn Boudry, S333, Joost Hoveniers, Alie ten Kate, Arons en Gelauff Architecten, Koers, Zeinstra, Van Gelderen Architecten, Marieke Blanken, Wilbert Swinkels, Ivo Bastiaansen, Emiel Lamers, and Maaskant and Van Velzen Architects.



Municipality plan for 5 Huizen.

designs dull down to a kind of average.”<sup>(47)</sup> Another point of criticism increasingly voiced toward the end of the nineties was the fact that although VINEX had been intended as a form of spatial organization — on the basis of economic potential — the operation seemed to be increasingly oriented toward the optimization of the housing accretion. As a consequence of retreating government involvement, the short term thinking of the property developers gained predominance in the VINEX quarters. Instead of being varied new additions to existing towns, most VINEX neighbourhoods turned out to be mind-deadening ghettos with average lower middle-class houses. In the mid-nineties, the critic Hans van Dijk sounded the alarm in *Archis*: “If we don’t watch out, the Netherlands will be filled with terraced houses or semi-detached houses, each with a front and back garden and a spot to park the car. After all — environmental policy or not — the car must be used every day to convey the breadwinner of the family with purchasing power — for whom the houses have to be built — back and forward to the workplace. The dream of one’s own house with one’s own garden, multiplied millions of times, can only lead to the collective nightmare that Le Corbusier predicted.”<sup>(48)</sup> In conclusion, the architectonic quality of the neighbourhoods turned out to be disappointingly poor. “Architecture is increasingly becoming what Neerlands Hoop [a Dutch cabaret duo] once described as ‘the façade of glitter and gold’. With this, the concept of quality in architectural policy, with its integrity and depth, is ridiculed. The architect is marginalized to a façade decorator and, unfortunately, many architects seem to accept passively this state of affairs.”<sup>(49)</sup>

The exceptional feature of the situation in Vijfhuizen was the fact that the Municipality of Haarlemmermeer was the owner of the ground meant for urban expansion. In an attempt to parry the criticism of the VINEX, the Municipality felt obliged to provide a new approach. Instead of giving architects the assignment to design an X number of houses, the Municipality gave

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(46) Taken from the *BUITEN-gewone steden: parade van 20 VINEX-locaties* study that was performed by Marc Visser and Lodewijk Baljon as an assignment for the Netherlands Architecture Fund.

(47) The research results were published by NAI Publishers in the 2001 publication *De Stad in uitersten: Verkenningstocht naar VINEX-land*. The quote here comes from: Duivesteijn, Adri, ‘Vinex, architectuur van het aanbod’ in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1998-’99*, p.28, NAI Publishers (1999).

(48) Dijk, Hans van, ‘Over het woningvraagstuk’, *Archis* no. 6, pp. 36-49, 1994.

(49) Duivesteijn, Adri, ‘Vinex, architectuur van het aanbod’ in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 1998-’99*, p.29, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1999).

them the choice of considering an architectural block or a plan for the entire expansion. In all cases, the central issue would be: “How can architecture be rustic and contemporary, small scale but not fussy, and, above all, how can the character of the village be translated to the new location?”<sup>(50)</sup> The architectural offices were asked to elaborate a sketch on one panel, and to furnish a spatial impression in the form of a show-box. Each office would receive 1000 guilders (450 euros) for this preliminary work.

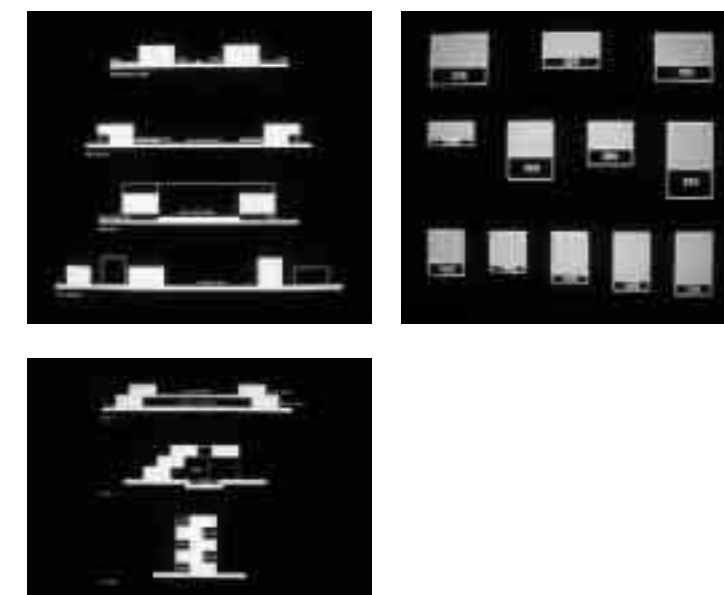
The starting points of the Municipality seemed ambitious to us and we were enthusiastic about deliberating on new solutions to the VINEX issue. However, when we saw the masterplan that had been formulated for the urban expansion, our enthusiasm ebbed away. The development plan was extremely standard, typically VINEX, consisting of twelve low-rise quarters with towers at the corners which seemed to have come from the developers standard toolkit. The corresponding description also outlined a typical VINEX neighbourhood: green and convivial, with few cars and, of course, ecologically correct. The reference pictures radiated the spirit of an almost nostalgic architecture, with much wood, brick and tiled roofs. Because we had always been interested in the workings of communities, we accepted the invitation to think about the notion of ‘a village by a village’. After we had visited the location, and had seen what the expansion would mean to Vijfhuizen, we decided not to design an architectural block but to create a scheme for the entire expansion. Our observation at the location and the general criticism of VINEX neighbourhoods indicated that the public space and a lack of (social) cohesion were generally regarded as shortcomings. In order to deal with this problem, we created a design that did not express the concept of community in religious, economic or cultural terms but rather as ‘new tribalism’, a self-chosen lifestyle. Starting from the idea that each parcel in this system would have just as much interior space as exterior space, we thought up a modular model in which everyone would con-

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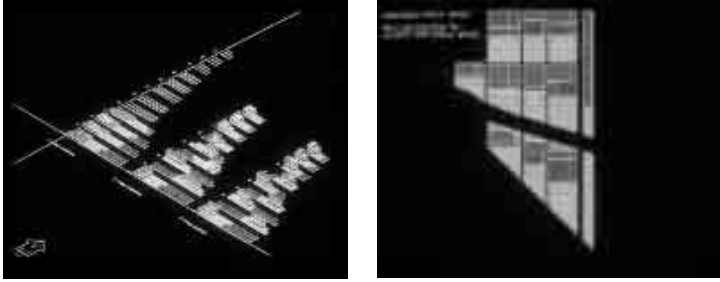
(50) Kaaij, Fred, letter to VMX Architects dated 22 January 1998.



Image illustrating our concept for a new community in Vijfhuizen: new tribalism.



Diagrams of different development of private and public space in Vijfhuizen.



Rendering of the relationship between built and unbuilt, and private and public, Vijfhuizen.



Vijfhuizen model.

cede a part of his or her exterior space to generate a semi-public exterior space. We introduced the idea of the PEG: Participatory Exchange Ground, a pixel from which the new village could be created. It was an abstract, almost mathematical model, which was described by the critic Arjen Oosterman as follows: "In Dutch society, the unique combination of capitalism and social democracy, of individual and community, is directly translated by VMX into ground use: each parcel consists of 50% interior and 50% (private) exterior space. But because construction will be implemented two or three storeys high, another 25 to 33% of exterior space remains over for communal use. In this way, up to 50% of the exterior space can be communal in the larger quarters. (...) The analytical-rational approach concentrates the assignment on visualizing choices free of commercial ideals or fantasies. It apparently has faith in the idea that (up to a certain degree) it is still possible to organize people in social structures by means of architectural means and within the prevailing new market democracy."<sup>(51)</sup>

Convinced of the potential of our plan, architecture faded into the background; we devoted our attention to figures, ratios and parcelling.

Making a 'kijkdoos' (show-box) seemed rather childish and instead we decided to use one of the project boxes from the Hamburg exhibition to outline our plans by means of slides. When we put together our 'show-box' prior to the joint presentation, you could feel the dismay of the other architects. They had complied with the prescribed terms and probably now realized just how childish a show-box actually was. During the presentation, I discussed how little suburban houses in Almere, for example, differed from houses in Asia.<sup>(52)</sup> My theory was that, although we thought we were unique in the Netherlands, reality proved otherwise. Implicitly, our message was that if we really wanted something other than suburbia, we ought to think in terms of public space instead of designing varied houses — in other words, façades. Despite the fact that our proposal was

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(51) Oosterman, Arjen, 'In het dorp: woonbuurt van VMX Architects', *Archis* no. 9, 1998.

(52) My experience of the study trip to South-east Asia was useful here, shortly after my return. I used various slides that I had shot during the trip for the presentation.

very abstract, everyone seemed enthusiastic. We were the only ones to receive an applause. In retrospect, we must acknowledge that at the presentation our plan for Vijfhuizen was not yet completed. We only had a short period to work on the project and co-operation within the office was difficult. It was as if we had been paralysed by the power of our own concept. We were working with an inexperienced team, including ourselves. Moreover Leon went on a skiing holiday in the week that all the components of our research had to be combined into a design, so that we turned up with a plan with many loose edges. I am convinced that we would have generated a better plan if Leon had been present then, because he would have forced us to work in concrete terms. We had now immersed ourselves in an abstract proposal and we had not proven that our model would work in real-life practice. Nevertheless, I still believe that we made a brilliant analysis of the situation in Vijfhuizen, one that was oriented to our social agenda at that time: making communal space from private space.

Of course our idea did not fit in with the VINEX attitude in which everyone thinks primarily of himself, but the interesting feature was that we did not produce a romantic alternative for a village. Our plan arose from an analytical-rational approach and was directed to making choices, independent of commercial desires or fantasies.

Around a week after the presentation, Fred Kaaij phoned us. He quoted from the jury report, saying: "To be honest, the jury did not quite know what to make of your otherwise excellent plan, because the question as to what contemporary village architecture would look like had not been unambiguously answered."<sup>(53)</sup> Accordingly, the municipality had decided to proceed with other architects. To us, it was an enormous disappointment that they did not have the nerve to take up the challenge. They were probably afraid that the 2005 deadline might be threatened by the changes to the urban plan that we had suggested.

Ultimately Liesbeth van der Pol did alter the urban plan and

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(53) Elaboration proposals for Vijfhuizen, jury report, sub-plan 8, March 1998.



Vijfhuizen model development.

allowed the four winners to design a small part of this new plan. To us, Vijfhuizen primarily opened the possibility of thinking about public space once again, not in terms of existing spaces like the market square or the boulevard but rather about new public space without coming to 'gated communities'.

#### Get Real

At the beginning of February 1999, a year after the urban planning study for Vijfhuizen, we were again approached for a study assignment, this time by the Housing Department of Amsterdam. In the context of urban renewal, they asked us, along with five other offices, to consider the programmatic and spatial possibilities of existing building blocks.<sup>(54)</sup> The architects were divided across three fictive blocks that were representative of urban expansion in various periods: a 19th-century block, an inner city block from the 1920s-1940s, and a block from the post-war housing stock in the Westelijke Tuinsteden ('garden cities' in the west of Amsterdam). In addition, each architect was given a theme to which he or she had to orient his or her efforts. The combination of the theme and the block had to lead to a design at block level (and direct surroundings) that could be made clear by means of maps, cross-sections, and impressions.<sup>(55)</sup> According to the Housing Department, it was important within the context of urban renewal for all architects to deliberate on the qualitative improvement of the living environment and the enhancement of differentiation within the housing stocks.

VMX was assigned a block from the latter category in Amsterdam Osdorp, with 'different living' as the theme. In a further outline, the theme was described as: "The introduction of as many new living forms as possible within the existing building block." The new houses had to be more flexible than the previous ones, had to be larger, and there had to be an attempt to create more houses with ground attached. Between the lines, the real question was: "How can one create a successful neighbourhood

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(54) The other architects were: Big House, ENSS, NL Architects, Rowin Petersma, and ZAPP architectural office.

(55) The themes were: living differently, transformations, and parking solutions.

such as Amsterdam Zuid in a problem area like Amsterdam Osdorp?" Our view was that this was only possible to a limited extent. This is the reason that we produced a more realistic but not less ambitious alternative under the title 'Get Real'.

We began with a comprehensive analysis of the Westelijke Tuinsteden. "The General Urban Expansion Plan of 1934 formulated by CIAM chairman Cornelis van Eesteren was the basis for the construction of the Westelijke Tuinsteden. This was an integrated plan in which all future zoning plans were established."<sup>(56)</sup> The implementation of this plan began before the war and was continued after the war. The Westelijke Tuinsteden were conceived in the light of the ideals of the thirties: the greatest possible harmony of the functions of living, working, recreation, and traffic. The plan is often described as a classic example of Het Nieuwe Bouwen (New Functionality) as championed by the CIAM, but this is not correct. First of all, the date of most of the neighbourhoods — post-war — means that CIAM principles were no longer applied in their purest form. The ideals of 'light, air and space' were also disrupted by the housing need which made densification within the Urban Expansion Plan essential. People had to accept less spacious houses and less expensive architectural solutions.<sup>(57)</sup> The name Westelijke Tuinsteden is also not quite right.

The Garden City, as defined by Ebenezer Howard, is a city model in which the spatial order shapes the social order and vice versa. It is a concentric model in which a green belt separates the existing city from the garden city. It is a marriage between the town and the country. However, the Westelijke Tuinsteden have no green belt separating them from the city. Howard also states that the garden city should also have an informal, independent, orderly society on a small scale; the Westelijke Tuinsteden certainly do not have this, they remain connected to Amsterdam.

A characteristic feature of the General Expansion Plan is the lobe structure with the Sloterpas (lake) as the centre. The plan

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(56) Tellinga, Jacqueline (ed.), *De Grote Verbouwing. Verandering van naoorlogse woonwijken*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers (2004).

(57) Borrowed from Dirk Bergvelt in 'Veertig Jaar Later', *Architectuur Lokaal*, Amsterdam (2004).



First and second slide of the Get Real presentation.



ignores the traditional closed building block and a parcelling of strips and courts has been introduced. The designers of the General Expansion Plan — L.S.P. Scheffer, the head of the urban development department, K.T. van Lothuizen, head of the population study department, and C. van Eesteren — themselves speak of a new urban concept that they refer to as the 'finger city'. In this urban concept, new suburbs are built on to the old city and separated from one another by green strips, so that the green areas penetrate deep into the city. As a result, one erroneously refers to these suburbs as 'garden cities'.

In 1960, during the construction of Osdorp, the General Urban Plan was adjusted. The east-west park strip was scrapped. The parcelling of strips, corners, and courts meant that only central areas with a public and collective nature remained open.

In the eighties, a restructuring plan for Osdorp was presented as a consequence of the fact that houses measuring 50 m<sup>2</sup> are regarded as too small for the requirements of modern residents, and because the areas of open ground were experienced as being unsafe. In the nineties, a proposal was made advocating the demolition of a quarter of all the rented houses in the Westelijke Tuinsteden and the construction of owner-occupied houses in their place. In addition, 11,000 new houses should be realized so that the total housing stock would increase by 20%. "With this densification, the distance to the original ideal of the garden city will increase and Osdorp will acquire a more urban character."<sup>(58)</sup>

The generally accepted strategy for suburbs such as Osdorp can be traced back to the idea of optimization on the basis of densification. In the concrete case of our block, the assumption was that large groups of people would like to live here if the housing assortment were more varied. However, as architects, we knew that the diversity in housing typology is relatively high in these areas. In fact, the renowned tradition of social housing construction is based on the endless variations in housing types that were realized in these neighbourhoods. We also had the

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(58) [Nota Richting Parkstad 2015](#), Bureau Parkstad, 2002: "Before 2015, 10,000 houses will have to be demolished and 17,500 will be constructed in their place, a densification and renewal that should primarily consist of owner-occupier houses. In 2000, the number of rented houses amounted to 76% of the assortment, in 2015 that must be 45%."

feeling that the desire to live in post-war suburbs largely depended on the neighbourhoods in question. Osdorp was a suburb with a poor image, but that did not apply to all suburbs.

In order to get a better grip on the issue, we decided to compare two extremes from the period 1945-1965, Buitenveldert and Osdorp; the 'good' and the 'bad'. Besides a clear difference in image, the suburbs had obvious architectonic differences. For example, Buitenveldert — the classic example of a successful post-war neighbourhood — had substantially less differentiation in its housing assortment than Osdorp. Our simple comparison reinforced our suspicion that housing differentiation was not the most important obstacle. The problem lay rather in the number of houses involved. Our study indicated that there was an acute shortage of houses within the Amsterdam circular, but the suburbs just outside the ring — the Westelijke Tuinsteden — were simply ignored by the house-seeking middle classes. If there were no suitable houses available in the centre, this category of residents preferred to move to the new VINEX neighbourhoods that were being created on the fringes of the Westelijke Tuinsteden. The Municipality's response to this problem was to make Osdorp a part of the centre by means of densification. With regard to the prevailing housing typology — apartments — this idea was defensible, but in terms of physical and mental distance to the centre of Amsterdam, it was disputable. As a transition area between the centre and the VINEX suburbs, we believed that a different future scenario was more interesting.

To increase the attractiveness of Osdorp, we proposed that the neighbourhood should not be regarded as a part of the city centre but rather as a part of suburbia. By demolishing 45% of the existing building blocks and by expanding the remaining houses either horizontally or vertically, 60% of the houses could be removed and a density would be created similar to that in VINEX neighbourhoods (around 35 houses per hectare, 17 per acre).

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The existing building blocks that we were asked to renew.

Furthermore, if the ground made available by the demolition of the houses could be privatized, there would be the possibility of realizing private gardens for all the other apartment blocks. With this intervention, Osdorp would be transformed into a green suburb and, as a consequence of the scarcity of houses, more demand would be created. If this strategy were to be applied to the other Westelijke Tuinsteden, a green post war ring would be created around Amsterdam, a transition zone between the historical centre and the satellite cities.

Our proposal had the effect of a red rag to a bull. It was exactly the opposite of what the Municipality envisaged and the response was analogous. Various people within the Municipality appreciated our boldness, the clarity of our research, and the logical connection between facts and the proposed approach. They were impressed by our work. Others were less convinced. They thought we had formulated an unrealistic plan because we had proposed dilution in a period in which Amsterdam was struggling with a housing shortage. Visiting critic Martin Werkman of the Bos en Lommer district articulated his criticism as follows: "The VMX proposal is inspiring but goes too far. (...) Too much too far in a response to Get Real."<sup>(59)</sup>

What I found conspicuous in the presentations of other offices was the light-footedness with which many of them had received the study. For example, NL Architects had been given the assignment to solve the parking problem in a nineteenth-century building block. As requested, they indeed produced various options but they had not researched the impact of their designs on the rest of the city. Perhaps we were too naïve when we thought that our proposal would really lead to something and that we would have to underpin our plan as well as possible. Nevertheless, the non-committal nature of the others was inconceivable to us at the time. In retrospect, a more light-footed approach may have its merits because municipalities indeed often do nothing with the results of such studies — as was the case with Get Real. However, the great advantage of our

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<sup>(59)</sup> In the minutes of the [Themaprojecten Stedelijke Vernieuwing](#) meeting, 24 March 1999.

approach is that the performance of comprehensive studies enables us to accumulate a vast amount of knowledge.

Furthermore, our attitude has won us much respect from the Municipality and fellow architects. We believe in the things we are engaged in, and it is extremely disappointing to have to accept that we were used as cannon fodder.

#### Success that kills

"If there is one tendency in Dutch architecture with the potential to cause an earthquake in the next few years, it is the growing appreciation of an anachronistic form language, for architectural solutions that seem to originate in the Middle Ages and architectonic finishing that evokes the idea that the stonemason still appears daily at Dutch building sites." This is the start of the article 'Het Gelijk van Krier' (Where Krier Was Right) in the [Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2000-01](#) (Yearbook of Architecture in the Netherlands). The gist of the article covers the sudden popularity of historicizing architecture in the Netherlands at the end of the nineties. At that time, there was a coalition government of social democrats and liberals and a prosperous middle class was the focus of attention. As a result of the alleged hardening of society, the residential consumer opted *en masse* for a tranquilizing form language and the property developer followed submissively. However, the "Great Leap Backwards," as Kelly Shanon described the equivalent of this development in North America — better known as 'New Urbanism' — is not based on genuinely new ideas but is primarily caused by a feeling of loss.<sup>(60)</sup> Subconsciously, the loss of family values, the decline of a sense of community, lack of safety, and disappearance of historical identity play a role. Prior to the identification of this new tendency, the editorial staff of the Yearbook had wondered, under the title 'De schaamte voorbij' (Beyond all shame), what the new trend was worth. "Is this the stage of decadence that inevitably precedes a free fall? Is it an illusion of the times, a misunderstanding that is waiting to be cleared

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<sup>(60)</sup> Shanon, Kelly, 'De grote sprong achterwaarts', in [Archis](#) no. 3, 1998.

away? Is it the beginning of a new tradition? Has the moral ambiguity typical of the Dutch been breached so that the 'abundance' can be consumed unchecked?" The editors conclude with the thesis that the tendency mentioned can have the unexpected effect of one realizing that quality (whether old-fashioned or not) demands investment in both conceptual and financial terms.

Within the context of new construction assignments, the discussion on history may have been new to many people at the end of the nineties, but this is certainly not the case with reference to existing buildings.<sup>(61)</sup> Paul Meurs, among others, distinguishes two concepts: a synthetic and a dialectic idea.<sup>(62)</sup> The first has the aim of creating a homogeneous landscape in which new functions and buildings harmonize with the existing historical built-up structures. In the dialectic approach, functional harmony is the most important feature. Meurs sketches how the attitude of architects and policy makers radically changed after the Second World War. According to Meurs, the monument policy in force before 1940 was against progress (in the sense of large-scale demolition of old areas) and each architect was interested in urban heritage. There was a debate in which the modern had to be united with the traditional. After the war, the preservation of the historical heritage became the full responsibility of restoration architects and professional and institutional guardians of monuments. The debate with modern architects and urban planners was extinguished. We were only tangentially aware of both discussions when we began on our fourth project — or fifth, if you count the design for DEVCO — in Den Bosch. Of course we also saw the popularity of historicizing new construction in this city but we regarded it as a flight of fashion. We allowed ourselves to be led by the enthusiasm of the Municipality, which in retrospect unfortunately turned out to be rather distant from the feelings of a few 'opinioned' citizens. We never expected the historical concept to be championed so fanatically in Den Bosch. The result became a nightmare.

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(61) Paul Meurs shows in his book *De moderne historische stad – ontwerpen voor vernieuwing en behoud* (The Modern Historical City – designs for renewal and preservation), NAI Publishers (2000), that the issue of keeping old and new in equilibrium is not new. Using historical examples, he illustrates the struggle with the adaptation of the historical city in various Dutch cities.

(62) Ibidem.

In the mid-nineties, the station area in Den Bosch was scheduled to undergo a neo-classicist makeover. Elements of modern architecture can be recognized, perhaps with difficulty, in the renewed station building itself, but the Stationsweg — the boulevard that links the station to the inner city — and the new Paleiskwartier to the west of the railway line radiate the spirit of the *Belle Époque*. Project developer Geoffrey Groenewoud owned a characteristic property with its own ground on the corner of the Stationsweg and the Van der Does de Willeboissingel. Although only half of the parcel had been built upon, the whole plot had been designated as a monument.<sup>(63)</sup> However, according to the zoning plan, Geoffrey was allowed to realize six apartments on the remaining ground. Geoffrey had twice attempted to obtain building permission for the apartments and after the second unsuccessful attempt, urban planner Co van Amstel advised him to hire a 'respectable architect'.

Co gave him the names of three suitable candidates: Vera Yanovstchinsky, Tangram, and VMX.<sup>(64)</sup> Geoffrey himself had little interest in architecture, he only wanted building permission and had become so desperate that he immediately took Co's advice. We were not by definition Geoffrey's first choice, we were only the ones who picked up the phone first. We made an appointment for Wednesday 26 May 1999 and he showed us the premises.

Geoffrey gave a very rushed impression in that first meeting, he would have preferred us to begin drawing up a plan that very day. We told him that it was not our style to set things down on paper as quickly as possible. We wanted to realize a good project and told Geoffrey that the result was extremely important to us. In that first meeting — perhaps somewhat emboldened by our success in Den Bosch — we made it clear to him that, for this reason, he would not be allowed to implement our design without involving us. At that time, Geoffrey was completely uninterested in the conditions or the architects who might be working for him, all he wanted was building permission.

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(63) In the strictest sense, the entire parcel was built on, but one half of the parcel was occupied by a monumental building and the other half was filled with a later addition, one story high with a closed façade. The only place where this extension was visible was on the side of the avenue where the extension resembled a garden wall with two doors.

(64) The fact that we were on Co van Amstel's list was probably the result of the reputation we had gained with the Municipality. After the positive experiences with 3UP2DOWN, the Study Villa, and the B-House, we had gained the reputation in Den Bosch of being highly motivated and decisive architects.



The building Geoffrey wanted to develop, here seen in 1936. To the left is the 'monumental' garden wall.

He agreed to our conditions. The most important reason for us to work with Geoffrey was the combination of a hunger for new work and an interest in the prominent location that Geoffrey wanted to develop. In addition, we felt encouraged by the fact that the Municipality had suggested us.

Our interest in the project was genuine but Geoffrey's limited involvement in the substance of the project gave the co-operation an aura of an arranged marriage. We did not have a particularly good working relationship. Any meetings usually took place at Geoffrey's house in Vught and they were unstructured. I can remember how we had a meeting with him on a blazingly hot day and how he sat in his swimming trunks while his wife walked in and out of the room in her bikini. At the conclusion of another meeting, Geoffrey took us to his garage — with a marble floor — which was full of boxes containing strange articles. He pulled out shower gel and gave it to us as a present — as if we stank!<sup>(65)</sup>

Trying to convince ourselves that this would just be a normal project, we started work despite the rather strange conditions. We first looked at the possibilities of designing the apartments as extensions to the existing building, with the idea of creating a synthesis between old and new. However, during the design process, Geoffrey found a tenant for the existing house and we had to adjust our plan. Then we examined the possibility of constructing a detached building next to the monumental premises. We drew up a plan with one apartment per storey and thought up the idea of the Twister. In this design, the lift is located in the middle of the building with the apartments around it. In contrast to the usual structure, the necessary staircase would not be next to the lift shaft but would wind around the exterior façade of the building, in a spiral movement, making an incision in the façade. It was fascinating to imagine how a visitor would move around the building by means of this incision staircase as he or she climbed or descended the stairs. Moreover, the staircase

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(65) I used to joke that working with Geoffrey felt like balancing on the edge of criminality. Every time we departed from his place I had the urge to check under my car first...

transformed the building into an independent and dynamic volume within the existing historical street façade. Finally, the lift would be the most efficient connection between the street and the roof, which would also be equipped with roof gardens for the residents.

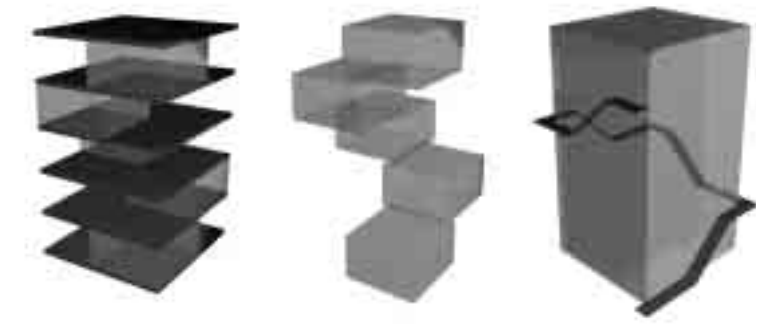
After Geoffrey's unsuccessful attempts to obtain building permission, the Municipality, in consultations with the Welstand (Building Inspectorate) and the urban planner concerned, had expressed its preference for a "high-quality modern design" as a supplement to the monument on the Van der Does de Willeboissingel — the premises were popularly known as 'Crielaars', after the dance school of the same name that had occupied the premises for years. Our design was an elaboration of the Municipal point of departure: a custom-made box-shaped volume with glass façades. In the autumn of 1999, we presented our Twister concept to the Welstand and the Monument Committee, and both turned out to be enthusiastic about the plan.

The Welstand described our design as follows: "The quality of the design is high; it will be a monument of the future if the further elaboration is of an equal standard."<sup>(66)</sup> The Monument Committee reported: "This design contains the capability to develop into an example of how elements that make an important contribution to the changing and adapting cityscape can be added in these present times without damaging the essence of the city." The Committee continued: "We can declare that the chosen point of departure requires very careful finishing, materialization and colour scheme, as well as close supervision during the construction period. Only an implementation of the design without any compromises can lead to a successful final product."<sup>(67)</sup> In the follow-on procedure, the Building Inspectorate insisted on radicalizing the design by requesting a completely glass façade with different forms of transparency. In its advice dated 5 June 2000, the Committee was also convinced of the qualities of the Twister project. It wrote: "The Committee is full of praise for the starting points of the design. A powerful

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(66) Advice dated 4 October 1999.

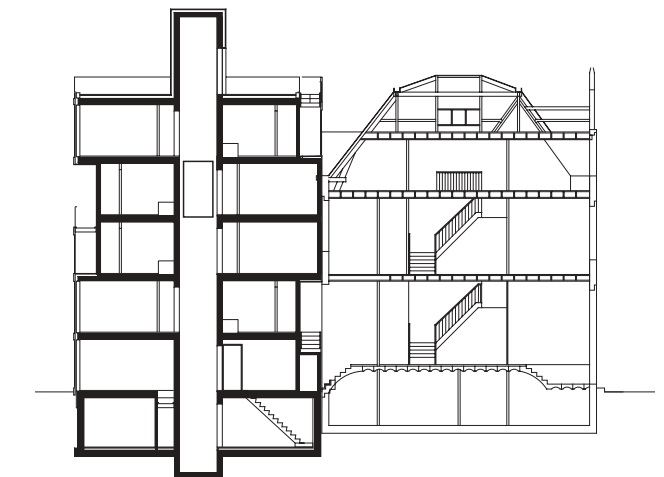
(67) Advice dated 13 December 1999.



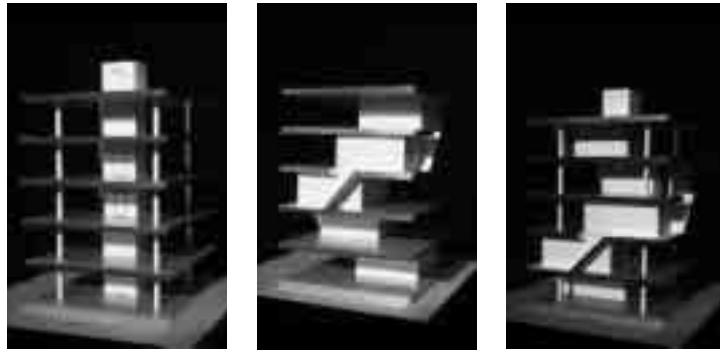
Twister idea, using an exterior staircase to set the building apart.



First design for Twister, combining the existing building with a new addition.



Twister section.



Twister, models.

building has been created in a convincing manner. It responds to the monumental surroundings by means of refined finishing and meticulous control of material use." Furthermore, as the strongest point, the Committee mentioned "the search for both horizontal and vertical alignment in glass (similar to the Crie-laars premises in its brickwork details), where clear, translucent and opaque glass are dealt with in a refined way."

Encouraged by these pieces of advice, we were enthusiastic about the realization of the project. It seemed to concern Geoffrey little what the project exactly looked like, he only became enthusiastic because he began to believe that building permission was finally within arm's reach. However, things did not go according to plan.

We returned from a meeting with the Municipality and while I was walking along the street with a scale model of Twister under my arm someone sneered at me: "So you're the architect who's causing all the problems!" I was astounded and incapable of replying. Although the project had been fully approved by the Municipality, that was when the real problems began.

In the period that the monument license — needed for the building permission — became available for public perusal, several objections were sent to the Municipality, including objections from the Stichting 's-Hertogenbossche Monumentenzorg, Heemschut Bescherming Cultuurmonumenten, and several neighbours. For this reason, on 4 September, the Municipality organized a public hearing in which the aggrieved parties could orally present their objections.

These objections appeared not to be directed toward the design itself but rather to the location. H. van den Heuvel (of the 's-Hertogenbossche Monumentenzorg, Den Bosch Monument Preservation Society) said: "The people are absolutely against it (...). It induces irritation and aggression." W. van Oostveen — the secretary of the same Society — remarked: "It is not a complaint about the building itself, rather about the place where it is



Twister, street side.

to be built.<sup>(68)</sup> The result of the hearing was that the Municipality found that the objections were unfounded and wished to issue building permission via a procedure involving the Provincial Executive. In addition, the Municipality received a positive advice from the Director of the Preservation of Monuments Society on 21 December of that year. The monument permission was issued on 8 March 2001, with the announcement that objections could be submitted for a period of six weeks following that date.

The Stichting 's-Hertogenbossche Monumentenzorg seized this opportunity to try to stop the project and submitted an objection once again. However, this objection was verbally withdrawn after a few weeks, according to the Municipality. The so-called 'Article 19 procedure' that was necessary because the plan did not fit into the existing zoning plan, although it did conform to the revised draft zoning plan, was started.

A year later, on 21 January 2002, the Municipality could finally announce the intended building permission in the local newspaper: the *Bossche Omroep*. Shortly after this, in March 2002, the Stichting Monumentenzorg again raised its voice, referring to an unjustly ignored objection. The matter escalated in 2003 when F. van Gaal, a member of the city council and a member of the Kring Vrienden van 's-Hertogenbosch (Friends of Den Bosch Association) had picture postcards of the plan produced.

The card showed a photo collage in which our design had been greatly enlarged. Without our permission, Van Gaal had taken the images from our website and used them for his own ends. Under the picture he had placed the ironically intended text "Greetings from exciting Den Bosch", and the intention was that opponents of the plan could demonstrate their dissatisfaction by sending all these cards to the Municipality.

To us, as the architects, the situation around Twister had become uncomfortable and unpredictable. We had to call in a lawyer to ensure that these cards would be destroyed, but the harm had already been done. We had had a good reputation in

(68) Both gentlemen are quoted in 'Plan Doessingel niet uit de mouw geschud' (Doessingel plan not simply dashed off), *Brabants Dagblad* of 5 September 2000.



Fax to lawyer, showing the postcard of Twister and the VMX remarks.

Den Bosch, and had realized several interesting buildings, but Twister turned public opinion against us. We were pushed and pulled on all sides. The Municipal committees wanted a more radical design and we thought that they knew what they were doing, that they were experts. Ultimately they turned out not to know what was going on. We ourselves were dumfounded by all the developments around Twister, so much so in fact that we took our website offline.

#### The end of our studies

In January 2000, we were approached by Maud Groenberg, the project manager of the Westerpark city district of Amsterdam, to perform a study on the Van Diemenstraat. After disappointing results in previous studies such as Vijfhuizen and Get Real, we were a bit reserved about agreeing wholeheartedly to her request.

The Van Diemenstraat was a busy, unattractive street, and an important traffic artery for the centre and the station area. As a component of the so-called Integrale Buurtontwikkelingsplan Zeeheldenbuurt, IBOP (Integrated Development Plan for the 'Naval Hero' Neighbourhood) the District Department wanted to research the possibilities for improving this bottleneck. The Van Diemenstraat had been specifically designated as a study area for concrete development possibilities within the IBOP project. Of course it was enticing to devote ourselves to a research assignment once again, but because we had now understood that studies are not intended to lead to real assignments but instead are deployed as discussion material, we had our reservations. We therefore proposed that we would perform the requested study for a relatively low fee if we were allowed to work exclusively on the assignment.<sup>(69)</sup> The Municipality agreed immediately and insured us that we would be the only office that would be carrying out a study on the Van Diemenstraat. Our assignment was to research, on the basis of the existing structure, which new programmes could be possible for the Van



Van Diemenstraat, existing situation.

<sup>(69)</sup> In its invitation for us to perform the study, the District Department had proposed a total fee of F1 15,000 (€ 7000) including all material costs. Ultimately the study cost is more than F1 100,000 (€ 45,000).

Diemenstraat and what the spatial consequences of these programmes would be. To start with, we analysed the traffic flows in the street. We discovered that, with a stream of 17,000 cars a day, the Van Diemenstraat functioned as an important radial within the central ring. In contrast to the other radials in this structure, the Van Diemenstraat had a considerably narrower profile; other radials were at least 10 to 20 metres wider. Because the existing street had to be taken as the starting point of the study, we further searched for attractive streets in Amsterdam with a profile similar to that of the Van Diemenstraat.

We discovered examples such as the Cornelis Schuytstraat (18.2 metres wide), the Ferdinand Bolstraat (19.5 metres wide), and the Albert Cuypstraat (20 metres wide). These are streets with a similar profile but with a completely different appearance and programme than the Van Diemenstraat. Parallel to looking for streets with a similar profile, we also sought streets with a similar role in allowing access to and from the centre. This quest came up with examples such as the Plantage Middenlaan (27.7 metres wide), the Weesperstraat (35.9 metres wide), and the Amstelveense Weg (45 metres wide). Besides the dimensions of various exemplary streets, we also collected supplementary data on each street, covering traffic movements, traffic flows — pedestrians, cyclists, cars and trams — and the programme. We were busy for days counting the trees in various streets, inventorying the shopping assortment, and describing the building typologies and various living forms. With this approach, we preceded the facts in a certain sense, perhaps against our better judgement. What we were actually doing was taking the study as a real assignment so that we were working extremely meticulously: it was like watching paint dry!

We proposed performing further research on three possible profiles and on applicable spatial and programmatic scenarios. The first scenario involved maintaining the existing profile. The advantage of this approach was that the characteristic construction of the street could remain intact. The disadvantage was



Map of traffic density in Amsterdam, revealing the Van Diemenstraat as an important link in the circulation system.

that the flow of traffic would have to be drastically reduced if one wanted to realize an experiential quality similar to that in the Ferdinand Bolstraat for example. The second scenario involved the demolition of a part of the existing street façade and the introduction of a new construction strip. In this way, a profile 27 metres wide could be created and specific relationships between old and new could arise.

A third possibility involved demolishing all the buildings on one side of the street and replacing them with a narrow strip of new construction. As a result, it would be possible to create a street with a profile 30 metres wide, comparable to the Maas Boulevard in Rotterdam. Although the District Department seemed mainly interested in this last option, the reality of this scenario was problematic because the policy of Amsterdam as a whole was to keep the IJ-weg — of which the Van Diemenstraat was a part — as a two-lane road.

Having worked on the study for six weeks, we heard from Angélique Haver — one of our staff — that another office was also working on the Van Diemenstraat. Angélique knew someone at the Venhoeven office and he had told her, while discussing a study for a tunnel under the Oostelijke Handelskade, that they too were engaged in a study on the Van Diemenstraat. Somewhat unsettled, Leon phoned Rob van Dam, the urban planner who had guaranteed our exclusiveness at the time. Surprised by Leon's inside information, Van Dam assured Leon that he need not worry. In his view there was absolutely no competition between our work and that performed by Venhoeven, it should be regarded as complementary. Moreover, the VMX study was the official study that was supported by the District Department. Having gone so far in the process, we accepted Van Dam's explanation and continued to work hard to elaborate the second scenario — the 27 metres variant — within the limits of the programme.

After the comparison with the other streets, we researched the impact of adding new construction to the existing buildings and

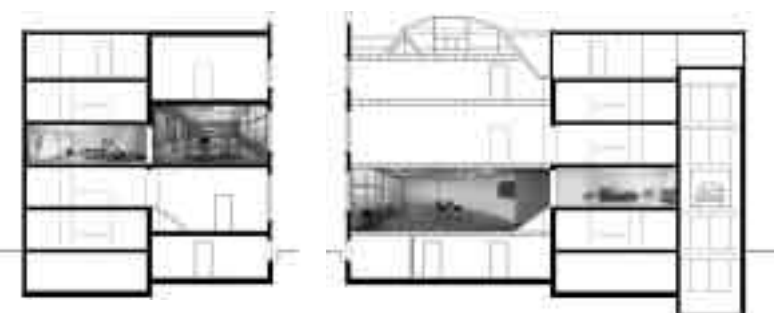
we became enthusiastic about this possibility. It turned out that we could demolish 108 houses and could rebuild the same number of houses, this time offering more space for living. Furthermore, 175 parking places could be realized in or under the new building. Another attractive feature was the fact that a connection between the existing and the new building could be made in two of the four blocks we proposed. In other words, it was possible to think in terms of dwellings that consisted of a new section with a garage and study on one side, and an old section with a living room and bedrooms: the best of both worlds. When we realized the potential of this hybrid construction, we elaborated our proposal further and we even began to define target groups for each block and living typology.

Our surprise was immense when, on Thursday 22 June 2000, we entered the room to present our plan. Two assessment panels were hanging there for two plans. A flyer that was issued at the entrance to the hall indicated the intention of the evening. "Tonight there are two presentations, both of which are oriented toward the solution to the traffic problem in the Van Diemenstraat. (...) Prior to the District Department taking a decision to study one of the plans further, the District Department would like to hear the response of the residents to both plans. (...) For this purpose, you will receive two stickers: the yellow sticker is for Venhoeven's plan, the blue sticker is for VMX's plan. We request you to place one sticker on each plan. You can choose from: in favour of this plan, against this plan, or more info required over this plan."<sup>(70)</sup> It felt as if we had walked into a trap with our eyes wide open. We had no choice but to outline our plan and listen to that presented by Venhoeven.

Seething with pent-up anger, we had to watch how Venhoeven had not adhered to the brief we were given. He had designed a kind of Manhattan-on-the-IJ and had extended his tunnel from the Oostelijke Handelskade under the Van Diemenstraat. The situation became painful when the city councillor Fred Kramer,



Van Diemenstraat collage.



Van Diemenstraat, sections showing the marriage of old and new. Parking and dining in the new part of the section, living in the old part.

<sup>(70)</sup> Agenda for the Public Information Evening for the Zeeheldenbuurt, 22 June 2000, from the VMX archives.



Van Diemenstraat model, showing the new extensions in white.

who was supposed to defend our plan as the official study, observed that the public appeared to favour Venhoeven's plan and he began to disassociate himself from our plan. We were astonished by this degree of populism and opportunism, and decided to leave immediately.

The following Monday we sent an indignant letter to Fred Kramer, mentioning that we found his behaviour unacceptable. We recounted the conditions under which we had accepted the study and how much time and money the project had cost us. We also mentioned that we had believed his explanation of the status of Verhoeven's plan at the time, and that we now felt cheated. We wrote literally: "Our office works primarily to realize good plans rather than make profits. As a consequence, we are often prepared to invest in projects, as was the case with your study. Accordingly, a young and ambitious office such as ours has few reserves, as you will understand. We cannot afford a completely meaningless investment, based by completely unfounded promises in this case. It will have a great impact on our office."<sup>(71)</sup> Instead of excuses, Kramer sent a letter in which he stated that it was us who ought to be offering excuses for leaving the public information evening prematurely, which he found ill-mannered.

Venhoeven's proposal eventually turned out to be financially unfeasible, and due to the commotion that had arisen around the procedure for the plans, the decision was taken to allow a third office to perform a follow-on study.<sup>(72)</sup> In retrospect, we felt misled by this study. We had done everything to prevent frustration arising, similar to that caused by Vijfhuizen or Get Real, and we even thought we had a reasonable chance of a follow-on assignment. However, the actions of an unreliable politician meant that all our efforts had been in vain. After the Van Diemenstraat study, we resolved never to work on studies again, not to allow ourselves to be the plaything of politics.

Of course this was an absurd resolution, but we did not accept any studies for a lengthy period after the Van Diemenstraat

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<sup>(71)</sup> Letter to councillor Fred Kramer, Westerpark District Department, 26 June 2000, from the VMX archives.

<sup>(72)</sup> Atelier Zeinstra Van der Pol accepted this assignment.

escapade. When we later heard that Fred Kramer had had to resign as the result of a scandal around an apartment in Silodam (a luxury housing project in the area) that he had purchased with prior knowledge, selling it immediately after its completion, we understood that the failure of the Van Diemenstraat project actually lay beyond our influence.

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## CLIENT LOVE

### Chemical attraction

Although the term suggests otherwise, not everything that an architect creates is architecture, and certainly not in the early stages; it requires time. Unfortunately, architecture is not simply a product of pure patience, there is more needed to make a success of a certain talent. As a (novice) architect, you have to find a favourable working environment in which you can work on your own development and can discover your own motives.

Often this situation will only arise as a result of the trust that others invest in you. Good architecture has less to do with budgets or material conditions than with something intangible that you could refer to as 'faith' — the faith of a client, to be exact; or the faith of an organization in allowing an architect to create a new countenance; or the faith of a governmental authority that recognizes the importance of a stimulatory policy. In short, an architect is dependent on a form of trust, a form of love almost. A client — whoever that may be — must believe that an architect is capable of creating a good building that not only meets the financial demands but also has or will have cultural significance. It is this unquestioning love — comparable to maternal love — that allows freedom and forms the basis for the personal development of an architect.<sup>(73)</sup> At the same time, it is also this love that creates the conditions for the development of an architect's own distinct agenda.

Within current architectural practice, protective and stimulating clientship is often more of a clandestine situation than a habit. Architects give the impression that they are at the helm and that clients play a minor role.<sup>(74)</sup> In fact this is a denial of both practice and history, in which clientship plays a major role.

Experience has taught us that the relationship with a client is extremely important for the success of a project. The capability to assess whether or not a co-operation will work is more important for the realization of a project than the knack of being able to get along with a client. Whereas in our early projects we were convinced that we would be able to change the views of

<sup>(73)</sup> The fact that maternal love is indeed important to the development of the well-balanced individual has been proven by recent neurological research. Pioneering work by Wayne Brake of the University of California in Santa Barbara and Bruce McEwen of the New York Rockefeller University indicates that rats that are separated from their mother for three hours a day do not develop a group of genes that are responsible for the growth of new neuron paths in the brain. It has also been shown that the production of proteins that are important to the brain is two to three times less than it should be. Source: *Intermediar* 13 by Schipper de, Simone, *Wetenschap & Techniek* of 28 March 2002.

<sup>(74)</sup> The role of the client is gradually becoming highlighted with initiatives such as the Gouden Piramide — an annual award for the best client — although in many project descriptions the role of the client is minimized in favour of the role of the architect.

the clients and that it did not matter with whom we were working, we gradually realized that it is essential to have a good client in order to create a good project. We are convinced that it is interesting to state and describe this chemistry between the client and the architect. On the one hand, it is a more conscious way of dealing with the mechanism, on the other, it charts the variety of maternal love within architecture.

In contrast to the visual arts, patronage is not a tradition in architecture. In art, patronage works in two ways: the client can display himself as an art lover and the artist can develop with a certain amount of security. The wealthy fifteenth-century Medici family, which offered protection to various artists, is the classic example of good patronage.<sup>(75)</sup> There are also examples of maternal love for creative spirits in Dutch history; the Kröller family is a good example here. This wealthy family was not only a good buyer but was also a patron of young artists.<sup>(76)</sup> The fact that architects could also rely on the favour of the Kröller family is demonstrated by the fact that people such as Peter Behrens, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Hendrik Berlage, and Henri van de Velde were given the freedom to develop their oeuvre.<sup>(77)</sup> The fact that patronage — although no longer referred to by that name — still exists is shown by the fact that the legacy of the Kröller family, in the form of the Kröller-Muller Museum in the Hoge Veluwe Park still issues periodic assignments to young architects.<sup>(78)</sup> The various prizes and subsidies for novice architects in the Netherlands can be regarded as a modern variant of patronage. We shall return to this topic later.

Besides providing trust and financial scope, a client can also have a more lasting effect on an architect. The client and the architect can join one another in a mutual love of architecture and can stimulate one another to enter into new experiments, as is demonstrated by the ever-mysterious but productive relationship between Truus Schröder — client of the renowned Schröder House — and Gerrit Thomas Rietveld. In a relationship of mutual trust, they found a stimulus to enter new enterpris-

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(75) The fact that De Medici family took the idea of 'artist' in a very broad sense is shown by the fact that Michelangelo's renowned Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana was also commissioned by the family.

(76) They purchased work by Mondriaan, Seurat, Léger, Van Gogh and Picasso before they became internationally famous.

(77) There is only limited freedom here. For example, Mrs Kröller checked the daily progress of Mies's design for the villa in Wassenaar. The family also wanted the exclusive use of these architects. When Berlage wanted more freedom to accept work other than from the Kröllers, there was much friction. Probably as a result of the strict conditions and the severe demands, the villa in Wassenaar that the family had had designed first by Behrens, then by Mies, and finally by Berlage, would never be realized.

(78) The MVRDV office could start up their career partly due to the assignment to design three pavilions for the Hoge Veluwe Park.

es.<sup>(79)</sup> This belief in an architect and the involvement of a client such as Kröller or Schröder is probably what many architects mean when they say they are looking for a client who wants to create 'architecture with an architect'. We also know this feeling, we even have a name for it: 'client-love', a symbiotic cooperation in which the architect and the client benefit from one another's input.

Client-love is an important condition, if not the most important condition, for good architecture. The preceding text will indicate, however, that the concept does not have a clear and unambiguous definition. Client-love has many shapes and degrees.

To make the picture complete and, at the same time, more complex, it can be said that client-love exists not only between an architect and a client but also — and certainly on the international stage — between architects themselves. For example, the late Philip Johnson was once described by Rem Koolhaas as a patron for whose favours architects young and old fought. He wrote: "I worked at the Institute for Art & Urban Studies (IAUS) ran by Peter Eisenman, and it was inevitable that many of the discussions concerned Philip Johnson. One of the things that surprised me right from the outset was the influence that he was supposed to have. This was enormous, apparently the whole of New York fought for his favour. The entire pecking order was based on how well-disposed Philip Johnson was toward you."<sup>(80)</sup> Although he was not a client in the strict sense of the word, Johnson was not only largely responsible for the elevation and maintenance of the architecture climate in the USA, but also for the evolution of this climate.<sup>(81)</sup> As a consequence of the fact that he brought architects into contact with clients, new possibilities arose. Johnson's career also proves that client-love is not only indispensable for novice architects. Even for the so-called 'great architects' it is still the case that someone has to believe in his or her work, must display interest, take risks, and offer opportunities. The fact that Johnson regarded it as his personal responsibility to supervise the extension of the

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(79) If not in a formal sense, the contact with Truus Schröder meant the end of Rietveld's marriage in a practical and psychological sense, as Bertus Mulder implicitly describes. Mulder also describes how Schröder found liberation from the conservative culture of her (deceased) husband in the architecture of De Stijl. Bertus Mulder, *Gerrit Thomas Rietveld – Leven, Denken, Werken*, p. 21, SUN (1994).

(80) Taken from an interview for *VPRO Laait* with Rem Koolhaas, broadcast on 28 May 1997.

(81) Even at the beginning of his career (1932) Johnson showed himself to be an important stimulator of architecture when he organized in conjunction with Henry-Russell Hitchcock an exhibition of international architecture: *The International Style in the MoMA*. The idea of new international architecture was made public with this much-discussed exhibition. More than sixty years later, the stimulating role played by Johnson is still remarkable, according to Rem Koolhaas: "If you ask me what the personal merit, what the greatest quality,

of Philip Johnson is, I think it is something on a purely personal level. He has an inconceivable ability to look at things and devote attention to them. That is the biggest difference between Johnson and the rest. Almost all architects are mainly interested in themselves. Philip Johnson is the only person who has viewed things systematically and with an inconceivable commitment, and has really paid attention and wants to know what things are about. Of course, this gives a certain power on a personal level, because it gives him a certain attractiveness as a friend, comrade, because you occasionally hear important truths from him.", *ibidem*.

Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York is evidence of this.<sup>(82)</sup> Thus, client-love can also be the love that lies between mentorship and friendship. Returning to the Dutch context, we can state that in addition to clientship and mentorship there is also an institutionalized form of client-love: the previously mentioned subsidy climate. The renowned Dutch architecture climate is largely supported by active governmental involvement.<sup>(83)</sup> Not only has the government assumed an exemplary function in this country, it also places the emphasis on the cultural significance of architecture in covering its own architecture. Furthermore, by means of awards, grants and subsidies, individual architects are given the opportunity to develop themselves and thus can build up their own distinct agenda.<sup>(84)</sup> It seems as if the Dutch architect is spoiled by so much attention — one even talks of conceit — in comparison to architects in other countries. Nevertheless, one can also think of the architectural climate in a less normative manner. Various subsidies and clients have enabled us to develop our own ideas step by step. By showing interest not only in the result but also by appreciating and facilitating the process by means of client-love, they have given us the opportunity to seek out the margins in various assignments so that we have been able to formulate our own agenda. Initially, the emphasis lay in seeking new working areas for an architect under the conditions of the free market. Subsequently, the accent shifted to looking for spatial possibilities to forge mutual cohesion between people and between people and their surroundings. After this, we discovered the significance of material and we have been extremely conscious of the ideas of artificial and genuine. The final result of all these explorations is that we have gradually become capable of understanding architecture in all its dimensions. Instead of developing a purely opportunistic attitude in order to acquire as much work as possible, we have been able to work on a mentality, a consciousness almost, in which being able to comprehend the points of view of clients and users occupies a central posi-

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(82) Koolhaas also discusses this commitment in the above-mentioned interview. He says on Johnson: "As you know, he had an unbelievably intense relationship with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), he was a kind of mentor. As a result, he was obsessed in the last few years of his life by the idea that the extension to the MoMA had to be in safe hands. He took a number of trustees to important architectural projects, not only mine but also those of others. We once flew zigzag across the Netherlands in a private aeroplane to view projects", *ibidem*.

(83) With the publication of the *Ruimte voor Architectuur* (Space for Architecture) memo in the spring of 1991, the policy basis was formed for current Dutch architectural policy. With this memo, the Ministries of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, and of Housing, Regional Development and the Environment wished to reinforce the cohesion between construction policy and cultural policy. Architectonic quality was divided into three coherent values: the cultural value, the user value, and the future value of architecture. In 1996 the second

memo, *De architectuur van de ruimte*, was presented. The existing policy area was extended to higher scale levels. This meant that from this moment onward, disciplines such as landscape architecture, urban planning, physical planning, and the construction of infrastructural works all came under architectural policy. It was self-evident that the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and of Public Works would be involved in the policy making, in addition to the above-mentioned Ministries. These two memos have formed the conceptual basis for policy right down to the present day. In 2001 the *Ontwerpen aan Nederland* (Designing the Netherlands) memo was presented. The main goal of this memo is to reinforce the input of the designing disciplines in spatial and architectonic assignments by means of made-to-measure governmental participation in nine large-scale projects. With the incorporation of the above-mentioned higher scale levels in the architectural policy, the successive memos covering spatial planning and the new law on physical planning have become of increasing importance to architecture.

tion. We have also learned that there must be a joint yearning to come to a conclusion. There must be mutual respect or even a force of attraction.

Although the suggestion is so often evoked that architects can choose what they want to do, that they can work independently of clients etc. on the realization of their own dream, reality is actually the opposite — at least it was in our case. It is only due to the trust of others that we have been capable of developing and testing new architectonic ideas. This does not mean that we do not pursue our own ideals and, to quote Philip Johnson once more, we actually present ourselves as practitioners of the oldest profession under the moon.<sup>(85)</sup> Our aim is thus not only to please the client and receive a reward, we wish to earn his or her trust and to create something new. Accordingly we also search for possibilities to develop ourselves within an assignment. Instead of forcing ourselves as visionaries upon a client, we regard it as our responsibility to respond to his or her requests and to approach him or her critically. As hunters we wait for our chance to create architecture from a normal assignment because we receive the trust allowing us to deviate from the well-trodden path.

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(84) The Netherlands Architecture Fund, which supports architects by means of financial aid and study trips to intensify their knowledge, has existed since 1994. In a certain sense, the establishment of this Fund forms the coping stone in a series of developments which, in the nineties, opened a range of opportunities for architects to develop themselves and to reflect on their (own) work. With the above-mentioned *Ruimte voor Architectuur* memo (1991), the policy basis was laid for the development of these possibilities. Anticipating this policy, a number of important organizations were set up: the Netherlands Architectuurinstituut (1989), which was to function as a 'central knowledge institute', the Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur (1993), the Berlage Instituut (1990), and Architectuur Lokaal (1993). Besides these new organizations for the promotion of architecture, there had always been the possibility for architects to request individual subsidies from the erstwhile Fonds voor Individuele Subsidies (now the Fonds BKVB).

(85) Loosely taken from Bernard Hulsman who caricatured Johnson in the *NRC* after the exhibition *Ads & Architects* in the NAI, in the spring of 2005: "The exhibition seems to be intended to prove the view of the recently deceased American architect Philip Johnson. His statement that the architect was a whore adorns, in a bowdlerized version, one of the walls of *Ads & Architects*: 'Architecture resembles the oldest profession in the world. It has only one goal and that is pleasure for reward'." *NRC Handelsblad*: p. 18, Tuesday 29 March 2005.

1999 — 2004/ ARCHITECTURE AT LAST

We have often found ourselves in a position of not being able to control our destiny. Making the most of a situation then becomes a creative act in itself, even more so when operating in marginal situations, giving significance to the insignificant. In this position we have learned that almost every project has the potential to generate aspects of architecture, it is just a question of being constantly on the look-out for it.

## NOT ALL CAN BE ARCHITECTURE

### The twins

We were always sceptical about the plans for IJburg. Politicians and other parties concerned talked about IJburg as if it would become a new urban quarter of Amsterdam but we had the idea that IJburg would ultimately become just another normal suburb. However, the municipal plans referred to the 'Nieuw-Oost' ('New East') district with images of Amsterdam inner city, of London, and of rural scenes. It was presented as *the* solution to all dwelling problems in the city.<sup>(1)</sup> In the vicinity of the historical centre, readily accessible by car and public transport, and with 'nature' only a stone's throw away, it would be possible for everyone to have an own house with a garden and parking space in IJburg.<sup>(2)</sup> Being rather sceptical, we were never actively involved in the planning around IJburg. We knew about it but we did not participate in initiatives, either pro or contra. It was only when we were asked to design dwellings for IJburg that we had to devote attention to the planning history of this most recent land-reclamation. It was then that we became cogs in the design machine that was constructed for IJburg by the municipality. In order to comprehend our designs, our starting points, our frustrations and our final results, it is necessary first of all to describe the main contours of the IJburg project. What follows is our interpretation of this history.

The history of IJburg can be traced back to 1964. In that year, Van den Broek and Bakema designed their renowned urban expansion of Amsterdam into the IJmeer. However, this Stad op Pampus (City on the Island of Pampus) never got further than the planning stage because the state chose to accommodate the population growth of Amsterdam in the Bijlmermeer suburb and in the nearby villages of Hoofddorp, Almere, Zaanstad and Purmerend. An increasing demand for living space led to the national government, the municipality and the province again looking at the possibility of expansion into the IJmeer in the eighties, but again these plans were shelved.<sup>(3)</sup> When the Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra, VINEX (Fourth Memo on



Van den Broek & Bakema, urban design study for Pampus, 1964.

(1) Right from the start, the plans for IJburg had proponents and opponents. It is remarkable that this latter group never drew the obvious comparison with the Bijlmermeer, a suburb realized at the end of the seventies and generally considered to be a failure. The opponents were more worried about the loss of natural features due to the construction of IJburg than about the realization of a new ghetto. The Red het IJmeer (Save the IJmeer) workgroup, in which the Milieucentrum Amsterdam (Amsterdam Environment Centre) and Natuurmonumenten (Nature Monuments) were united, submitted a protest against the plans for IJburg and attempted to prevent the construction by means of a referendum on 19 March 1997. However, this attempt stranded because it did not exceed the electoral threshold. Nevertheless, the arguments of the workgroup had indirect consequences for the development of IJburg. The consequences of the construction for the natural living environments were taken into account more emphatically in the plans. This approach has been translated into the so-called 'nature compensation projects'. These projects refer to both the land and the landscape environment of IJburg

and are aimed at compensating the influences of the development of the area.

(2) On this topic, the Stedenbouwkundig Plan Haveneiland en Rieteilanden West (Urban Blueprint for Haveneiland and Rieteilanden West) dating from 25 October 1999 states (p.9): "IJburg will become a neighbourhood without boundaries: for young and old, handicapped and non-handicapped, prosperous and less prosperous. (...) IJburg can become a quarter where sufficient space is available (both at home and outside) to allow different styles of life to exist next to one another."

(3) In 1987 Ashok Bhalotra created a design for expansion into the IJmeer for 65,000 houses. This plan was also shelved.



The new vacant ground at IJburg.

Physical Planning), dating from 1990, stated that compact new construction ought to be realized in and around the existing cities, the Municipality of Amsterdam accommodated this idea in its urban plan of 1991. In this plan, the Municipality set itself the task of developing the Nieuw-Oost location, which was later referred to as 'IJburg'. A plan was formulated for the construction of 18,000 houses in Nieuw-Oost.

It was only two years later, in 1993, that the plans for Nieuw-Oost attracted the attention of architectural magazines. In its *Ontwikkelingsschets '93* (Development Sketch) of that same year, Amsterdam Urban Planning Department proposed having a number of experts design housing environments for the new district by means of multiple assignments. In 1994, four architectural offices were approached: West 8, Kraaijvanger Urbis, Van den Oever Architecten, and Gunnar Daan Architectuur. The housing environments to be designed had to conform to the following conditions: a high average density of 60 houses per hectare, a high construction rate of 2000 houses a year, a high percentage of houses in the free-market sector (70%), and as many houses with gardens or ground areas as possible. Despite the strong impulse given by West 8 and Kraaijvanger Urbis, among others, for the landscape and architectural design of the entire urban district, none of the offices was asked to continue with further elaboration. Instead, a planning team consisting of four external consultants was formed. Dirk Sijmons (landscape architect), Frits Palmboom & Jaap van den Bout (urban planners) and Klaas van der Lee (municipal architect) were asked to formulate a further developmental vision and to initiate the first step toward an urban plan.<sup>(4)</sup>

The plan that issued was designed by Palmboom et al. and it expressed a radical break with the *Ontwikkelingsschets '93*. Where the plan of 1993 took one interconnecting area as the basis of the development, Palmboom suggested building an island city consisting of six parts.<sup>(5)</sup> With the introduction of exceptional programmatic elements such as a harbour, a park

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(4) Loosely taken from Westrik, John, 'Het Woonmilieu IJburg' in *Archis* no. 5, p. 7-9, 1995.

(5) Earlier design studies — such as the *Ontwerpstudie Nieuw Oost* by Gerd Urhahn in 1992, and the living environment study of West 8 — advocated one large island because this would do more justice to the scale of the IJmeer.

and a beach, Palmboom attempted in an inventive way to ward off the criticism frequently applied to VINEX neighbourhoods that they displayed no differentiation.<sup>(6)</sup> The urban plan he proposed was no longer purely dependent on the quality of the architecture of the houses, as is often the case elsewhere. Accordingly, the vulnerability of the plan was considerably reduced. This plan formed the basis for the *Nota van Uitgangspunten voor IJburg* (Memo of Starting Points for IJburg) formulated by the Municipality in September 1996.

With the *Globaal Stedenbouwkundig Plan, GSP* (General Urban Plan), the first stage of the development of IJburg was initiated. There was great enthusiasm for the plans.

"In the design for IJburg, the restraint that building on water entails has been converted into a strong image with the result that on 4 September Amsterdam city council supported the plan in an almost Albanian manner — an unprecedented luxury in the capital. Investors are eager to participate in the realization of this adventurous island empire."<sup>(7)</sup> In accordance with the generally accepted ideas of market-working and retreating government involvement common in the mid-nineties, but fearful of criticism that market parties were being allocated too much power in the development of the VINEX locations, the Municipality of Amsterdam concluded co-operative agreements with a number of market parties — property developers and housing associations — in April 1998. Under the term 'consortiums', three bodies were set up to function as principals in the development of IJburg: Waterstad, IJburgermaatschappij, and IJdelta. Within this construction, the municipality was responsible for the construction of the islands and the main infrastructure, whereas the consortiums were responsible for the substantiation of the living areas and the corresponding public space. In April 1999, it was agreed that the municipality and the consortiums would jointly formulate an urban plan for the Haveneiland and Rieteilanden (parts of the IJburg project). The consortiums then compiled a supervisory team to monitor the

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(6) For a comprehensive description of the criticism of VINEX, see also the section on Vijfhuizen. Besides rejecting content-related criticism, Palmboom also bases his views on practical matters. The bottom of the IJmeer has a long geological history that impedes the construction of one large island. Particularly the presence of a so-called 'primal channel' as a result of a sidestream of the River Rhine determines where the islands can be constructed by means of sand spouting.



Position of IJburg in relation to the city of Amsterdam.

(7) Boekraad, Cees, 'Een voorportaal in buitenwater' (Foreportal in external waters) in *De Architect* no. 10, pp. 68-73, 1996. Boekraad explains the enthusiasm by continuing: "A number of factors can be mentioned for the success of IJburg. Not only the way in which the plan deals with many obstacles, demands and interests has contributed to this, but also the rapid and open manner of working. The civil servants of various departments, a project team, and a design team consisting of Frits Palmboom, Jaap van den Bout, Dirk Sijmons, and Klaas van der Lee, amounting to a total of thirty people, worked in a workshop that has lasted almost six months for the purpose of keeping the lines of communication as direct and uncluttered as possible and preventing delays and unnecessary mutual strife or political rearguard actions."



The images we used to explain why we think people move to IJburg: for the possibility of having a barbecue, a garden, and space to park their car(s).

quality of the various subplans in the elaboration of the first part of the plan.

Thus, in broad contours, the planning structure for IJburg was as follows. The plan for the islands was to be drawn up by Frits Palmboom and his colleagues.<sup>(8)</sup> Then there was a supervisory team consisting of: Felix Claus, Frits van Dongen, Michael van Gessel, Kees Rijnboutt and Aard Oxenaar, who further elaborated the plan for the Haveneiland and Rieteilanden areas.

The urban plan for these largest and most image-determining islands consisted of a grid pattern of streets that gave access to a configuration of apartment blocks.<sup>(9)</sup> Various architects would elaborate parts of the block under the leadership of a co-ordinating architect. In the design of the apartment blocks, the developing parties — the consortiums — were expected to formulate answers to topical residential demands. For this purpose, the consortiums compiled a brief for each block, described the level of ambition and if necessary a thematic background for the block. They also appointed the co-ordinating architect for each block. On the basis of the brief and in close consultations with the co-ordinating architect, the developing party chose architects to develop sections in each block. Finally, the co-ordinating architect was responsible for all the construction sections in his or her block, right up to the stage of the preliminary design. He or she also was the only person to present the plans to the supervisory team. This team assessed the various plans and checked them against their own urban planning conditions. For this purpose the supervisory team had been given a right of veto, so that it was impossible to ignore them.

The planning around IJburg took place when the housing market and the price of houses in the Netherlands were at a premium. As a result, ambitions for IJburg ran high. The above-described planning structure was undoubtedly created by the Municipality of Amsterdam with the best intentions in the world. IJburg would and had to be a success, and with the introduction

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(8) Palmboom and van den Bout, *Global Stedenbouwkundig Plan*, 1997.

(9) In the description of the plan for Haveneiland, this choice of a grid is explained with: "The basis of the plan is that the urban plan creates the conditions for a balance between order and chaos and coherence and variation, and links up to the social relations of the times allowing more influence from market parties and residents." This was followed by: "The grid developed for Haveneiland harmonizes and provides space for the specific conditions of the location, the programme, and the style of development. The grid is used to create a clear urban ground plan of streets and closed building blocks." Taken from *Stedenbouwkundig plan Haveneiland en Rieteilanden West*, p 13 (1999).

of a broad structure of consultancy, they thought that this would be guaranteed. In actual practice, this consultancy structure was an impulse for an obscure process of negotiation and exchange. The design meetings with the supervisory team were also rather unusual. Due to the indirect manner of presentation and the omnipotent position of the supervisors, it seemed to some architects as if they had been sent back to the school benches. What was originally meant as a quality guarantee resulted in personal discussions and even in arguments. Under pressure from the quality standards imposed, the supervisors dominated the final plans. This situation was described by Marlies Röhmer, the co-ordinating architect for Blok 36, as follows: "We are all sitting in the classroom. It is very warm, we are packed together. We do an exercise. We are not expected to look at one another's work or even to acknowledge one another's presence. Then the master gives his opinion. Some are relieved, others are oppressed, someone is sent out. But suddenly there is a great reversal. We succumb to a great feeling of solidarity, we pursue one ideal. In conjunction with the Quality Team under the leadership of Quality Kees (Kees Rijnboutt) we go for Quality Street. We even abandon our children for this communal goal. Happy and relieved we leave the hut on our way toward the big bad world."<sup>(10)</sup>

After the launching of the planning procedure, the consortiums initiated a run on the architects. Within the space of one day we were approached by two different property developers to create plans for two different blocks. De Principaal — a component of the IJburgermaatschappij in this project — asked us to design an apartment building for Blok 17 under the co-ordination of the architect duo Bjarne Mastenbroek and Dick van Gameren. Johan Matser — also part of the IJburgermaatschappij — asked us to design an apartment building for Blok 23, co-ordinated by Branimir Medic and Pero Puljiz.<sup>(11)</sup> Within the Haveneiland plan, Blok 17 and Blok 23 were regarded as exceptions, and the co-

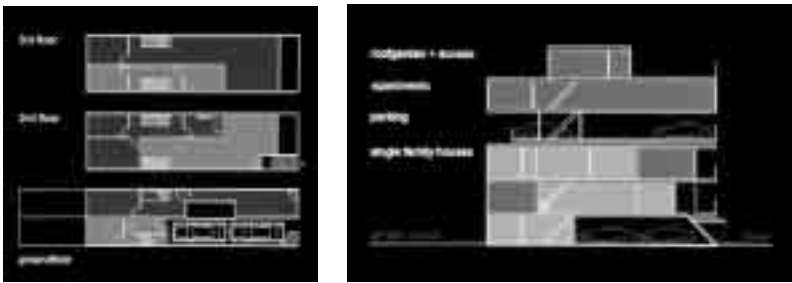
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(10) The original statement was made by Marlies Röhmer in a lecture on IJburg in the Zuiderkerk in Amsterdam on 12 October 2000. Source: Tilman, Harm, 'Kwaliteit IJburg daalt naar onaanvaardbaar niveau' (Quality of IJburg falls to an unacceptable level) in *De Architect* no. 12, 2001.

(11) We knew Johan Matser because we had also designed the project on the Sarphatistraat for them. We had not yet worked for De Principaal, they only knew us from the same project on the Sarphatistraat where they developed a block in conjunction with Claus & Kaan.



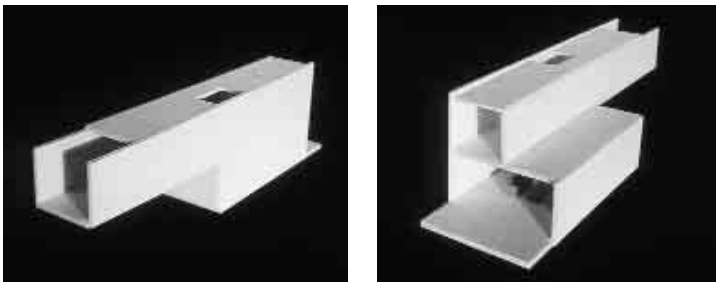




First attempt to solve the parking problem by designing *tarte-tatin* houses with parking on the roofs.



Model of *tarte-tatin* house.



First models for apartments with a double orientation.

Bjarne had realized in conjunction with Winy Maas (MVRDV) in Utrecht a short time previously.<sup>(14)</sup>

During the workshops for IJburg 17, it became clear that Bjarne's plan would not work.<sup>(15)</sup> It turned out to be impossible to satisfy his regulations and accommodate the programme of 190 apartments, with parking places, in the block. This problem led to a lengthy discussion with De Principaal concerning modification of the regulations. During this discussion, the apartments were distributed to the various architects so that the process would not be delayed.<sup>(16)</sup> We were allocated the corner of the block with the cheapest houses. Bjarne and his company would do the luxury houses. The discussions with De Principaal eventually led, in the summer of 2000, to the agreement that the block would have to accommodate under ground car parking facilities.

Somewhat surprised by the way things were going, but determined not to become dispirited by the difficult working situation, we subsequently began on designing our section. After the rejection of various parking solutions, we oriented our efforts completely to the demand to create apartments with a double orientation: to the street and the inner court. Our idea was to play a voyeur-like game with the antitheses of 'public/private', a well-known theme in suburbia.<sup>(17)</sup> With regard to the material use on Haveneiland, however, the urban planning conditions were rather strict. The urban plan stated: "The range of materials to be used is limited. Above all, it is essential that the materials age with grace. Our preference is for a choice of basic materials (brick, natural stone, wood, or glass) with street façades in dark colours."<sup>(18)</sup>

In line with this demand, it had been agreed that brick would be used for the closed parts of the façades.<sup>(19)</sup> However, Bjarne's demand that the block should be 22.5 metres deep and our objective of designing houses across the full depth of the block meant that we had to design a façade that was as transparent as possible in order to allow as much light as possible into

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(14) Villa KBWW, Utrecht, 1997. The internal publication *IJburg*, in which the partial elaboration of the plan for Haveneiland and Rietlanden West was illustrated by the supervisory team, displays the above-mentioned villa by Mastenbroek and Maas on pp. 38-39. It has been processed into a row-house, which evokes the suggestion that people regarded this house as a prototype for IJburg and thus explains the choice in favour of Mastenbroek.

(15) In the first workshop for Blok 17 on 23 March 2000 VMX presented, in line with the specifications, a design for drive-in houses and *tarte-tatin* houses: houses with a parking place on the roof of the house. The combination of these typologies produces a complex block in which the features of the single-family house and those of a multiple-family house could be retained. However, the draft design stage of May and June 2000 makes it clear that particularly the option of high-level parking is not feasible for financial reasons. In the definitive draft design of 28.07.2000, the decision had been made to have a garage under the total VMX block.

(16) NL Architects, Arons en Gerlauff Architecten, de Architekten Cie, and the Architectengroep (Bjarne Mastenbroek himself) were involved in addition to VMX in the design of Blok 17.

(17) Dan Graham plays with the voyeur-inspired architecture and the glass façade of the dwelling house in his 'Alteration of a suburban home'. A interesting and influential lecture on this work can be found in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue: Wall, Jeff, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, Toronto, Art Metropole, 1999.

(18) From *Stedenbouwkundig plan Haveneiland en Rietlanden West*, p. 19 (1999).

(19) Brick is used for both VMX buildings on IJburg. This was the first and only time up to the present that this material has been used, under pressure from the architectural preconditions.

the houses. (Of course, this objective was also the result of our previous idea of voyeurism.) Because brick had also been prescribed for our other project on IJburg — Blok 23 — and because we had avoided this material in previous projects, we decided to research the relevant possibilities.

We analysed various brick buildings in Amsterdam and we discovered that brick was applied either as plate material or as monolithic material. We subsequently decided to opt for both ways of working: one for each block. Brick as plate material (panels) seemed to offer the most potential with the glass façade of Blok 17. In conjunction with Terca, a brick manufacturer based in Zaltbommel, we developed a proposal for the façade. But, as so often, things turned out differently.

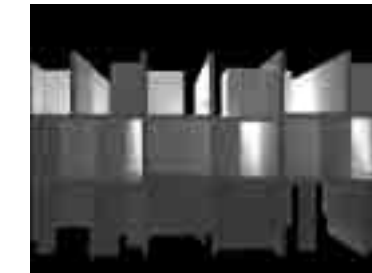
Our design for a part of Blok 17 — we referred to it as 'IJburg 17' — was interesting but it always felt secondary to our design for Blok 23 ('IJburg 23'). Although the houses of IJburg 17 were more interesting in spatial terms than those of IJburg 23, this latter project was more complete. The houses, the apartments, and the outdoor space harmonized well, whereas in IJburg 17 the apartments were clearly of a lesser quality than the houses, and the outdoor areas were less elaborate. Although there were sufficient interesting features in IJburg 17 — the staggered houses and the glued brick panels, for example — the block gave us a feeling of incompleteness, despite the fact that it met all the specified conditions. We had questioned the set-up of Blok 17 right from the outset but at the end we received the blame for the problems.

However, various design rounds and lengthy discussions eventually indicated that the Blok 17 design regulations formulated by Bjarne and De Principaal were unworkable. First of all, we were informed that our design would cost too much. But, calculations showed that this was not the case. Then it was said that the contractor did not believe in the housing typology we had designed; he wanted back-to-back houses. When an estate

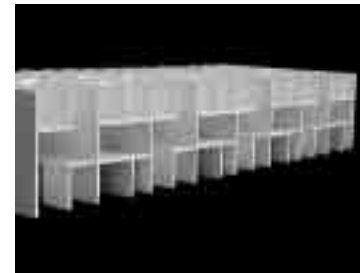
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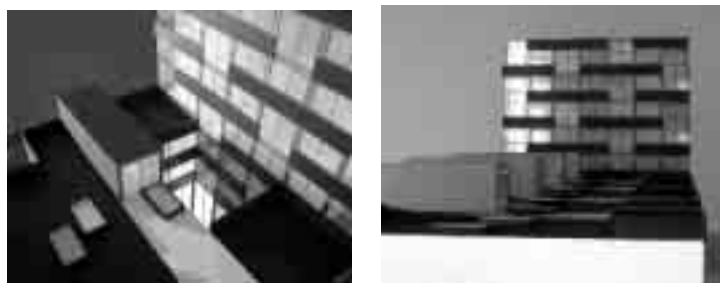
One of the first renderings of IJburg 17, showing the block as a glass volume.



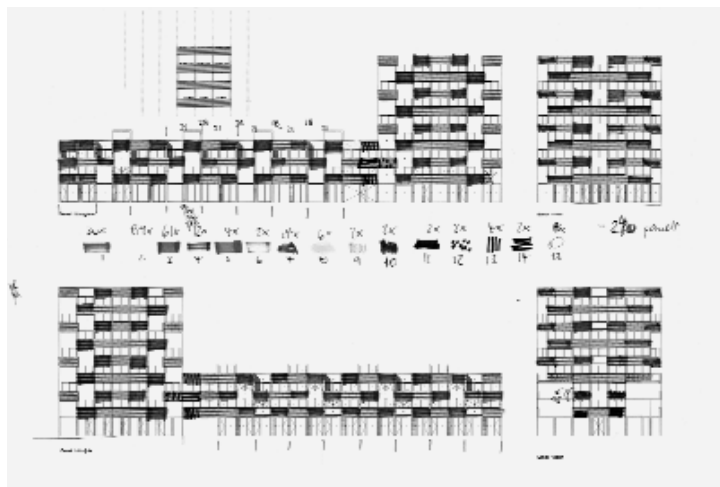
Model of the low-rise apartments.



Analysis of various brick buildings, showing that brick can either be used as a solid material or as plate material. Production of a test panel in which the bricks are glued together.



Images of the model for IJburg 17.



Elevation study for using differently coloured brick panels, IJburg 17.



Rendering of IJburg 17.

agent declared that we had designed excellent houses, the contractor remained unconvinced and claimed again that we had exceeded our budget. Even tenders from subcontractors that proved the opposite could not convince him. It was a very obscure process but eventually we received a letter from Han Michel — the director of the IJburgermaatschappij — in which he threatened with the fact that VMX would be held responsible for the failure of Blok 17. He wrote: “The core of our endeavour is to come to an unconditional agreement of all involved parties on the terms of reference of the budget. (...) The contractor and the other architects have already agreed. From your fax dated 29 March, we understand that this does not apply to VMX architects. We regret this very much. The consequence is that when one of the parties does not agree to the specifications, Blok 17 cannot be further developed. The progress of the project where one party withdraws is not an option.”<sup>(20)</sup> I was completely taken aback by Han Michel’s letter and I phoned one of his staff to say that VMX was withdrawing from the project. I told him that we were convinced that the problems associated with Blok 17 had arisen beyond our sphere of action and that we could not accept any responsibility whatsoever for the non-development of the block. After this the tension got almost unbearable and the other architects pleaded with us not to withdraw from the project. De Principaal was so shocked by our determination that they proposed a meeting between Han Michel and myself. I expected Han Michel to offer his excuses, but the opposite turned out to be the case. He expected me to tender my excuses, but I repeated what I had said earlier. Subsequently, people tended to act as if the problems with Blok 17 had arisen as a result of this impasse, but this was far from true. The most important reasons why the decision was taken to cut short the development of Blok 17 were: the fact that the housing market had plummeted, the fact that Bjarne Mastenbroek had considerable arrears with his design in comparison to the other architects, that the budget for the total block could

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<sup>(20)</sup> Michel, Han, in a letter to VMX Architects dated 4 April 2002, from VMX archives.

not be met, and the block contained housing typologies that were relatively difficult to sell. The foundering of Blok 17 was an unpleasant experience for us. It felt like throwing away a huge amount of work, everything seemed to have been for nothing. Since the termination of the development we have never again been involved in any new plans for Blok 17, and the last that we heard was that architect Henk Döll had been approached to make a design.

A completely unexpected occurrence is the fact that, more than three years after we had imagined that our plans for Blok 17 had all been in vain, an important part of the design has again become topical. In our plan for the houses in Leidsche Rijn, it appears that the houses originally envisaged for Blok 17 have been a major success in their new setting, and our design has met great enthusiasm from the developers and the buyers.<sup>(21)</sup>

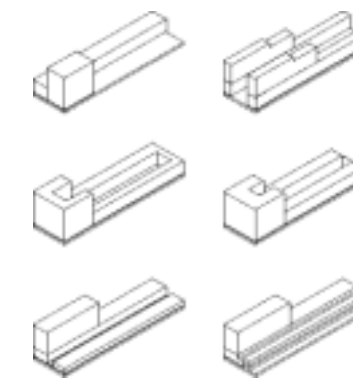
#### IJburg 23

Blok 23 is situated in the middle of Haveneiland, enclosed by other building blocks and bordering on IJburg’s main access road, the IJburglaan.<sup>(22)</sup> Approximately 1/3 along its length, Blok 23 is traversed laterally by a canal. As co-ordinating architects for Blok 23, Branimir Medic and Pero Puljiz had a different approach than Mastenbroek and Van Gameren. Although they also took a semi-public inner court as a starting point, Medic and Puljiz had calculated that three towers should be included in the block in order to fulfil the conditions of the brief. Instead of the Super-Dutch-like method of folding and interweaving in order to get the programme to fit — as had been the case with Blok 17 — they opted for a sculptural block that gained form by combining compact volumes that could rise up to eight storeys here and there. This combination of high-rise and low-rise could also express the difference between apartments and single-family houses. Medic and Puljiz also made an agreement with the supervisory team that only three architects would work on Blok 23 instead of the usual five. To use the terms of the co-

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<sup>(21)</sup> For more details on these houses, see ‘The limits of democratic design’ later in this episode of the VMX Agenda.

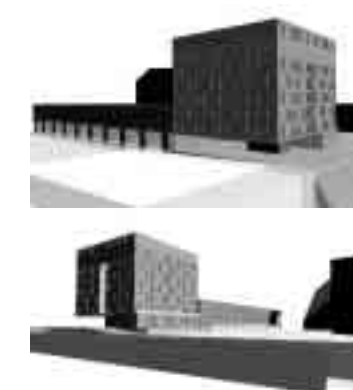
<sup>(22)</sup> Blok 17 has an almost similar position, but this block is shifted slightly more to the west. As a result, Blok 17 is not traversed by a canal, as Blok 23 is, and the northern part partly borders on a park.



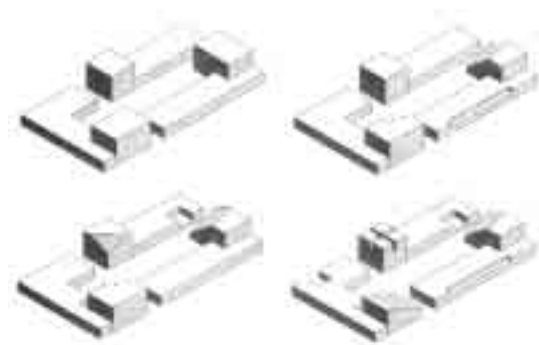
Volume studies for IJburg 23.



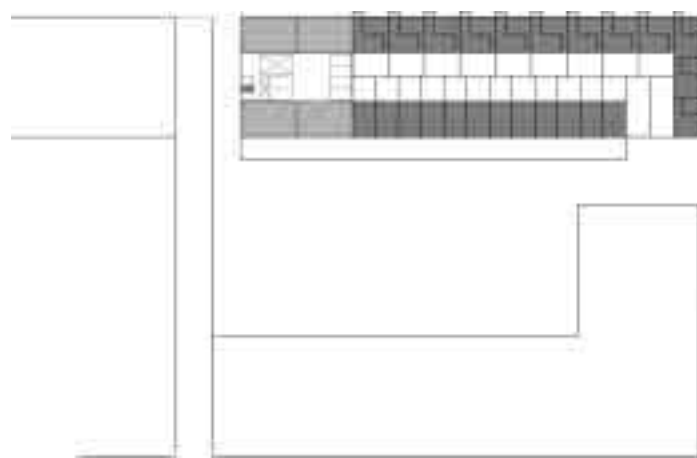
Division of house typologies.



First renderings for IJburg 23.



Total design for Blok 23 by De Cie. The block in the upper left corner was 'given' to VMX.



Early plan for IJburg 23, with drive-in houses on the public sides of the block.

ordinating architects, Blok 23 was divided into three hybrids. Hybrid number 1 was allocated to the Architecten Cie., number 2 to the Architectengroep (Van Gameren and Mastenbroek), and VMX was given number 3.

Hybrid number 3 consisted of an elongated volume that gradually descended from high-rise to low-rise and ended in a row of terraced houses. The programme consisted of: luxury owner-occupied houses, medium-priced owner-occupied houses, medium-priced family houses (maisonettes and apartments), and luxury apartments.

Considering the motives for people to buy a house in IJburg, we could not ignore the idea that people consciously or subconsciously preferred a house with a garden (or terrace) and parking space. Although this suburban dream had been suppressed in the official descriptions of IJburg, we seized the opportunity with Blok 23 to design houses that responded perfectly to this demand. The architectural conditions stated that the single-family dwellings should be realized in low-rise construction. By making the houses relatively broad on the street side (and the inner courtyard), we were capable of designing shallow houses, which resulted in an open space within our own block. This open space could then be used for private gardens. After the spatial possibility of creating private gardens had been generated, we realized that these gardens would never be appreciated as real gardens if they also formed the roof of an underground car park. After all, real trees do not grow on a roof.

It then became clear to us that a good relationship between the car and the house, without this adversely affecting one's (own) exterior space, would be crucial for the success of our aim to design good suburban houses. We began with a combination of drive-in houses and 'park houses' in the low-rise sections and with maisonettes and apartments in the high-rise.<sup>(23)</sup> Layers 1 and 2 of the tower would contain maisonettes. On layers 3 to 5, four apartments would be grouped together on one floor, con-

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(23) The term 'park house' refers to the single-family house designed by VMX for the collective inner court of Blok 23. Drive-in houses were not possible here because the inner court could not be reached by car.

sistently oriented toward two sides of the tower, with an exterior space in the form of the loggia. When the drive-in houses turned out to be impossible, we examined the possibility of having a car lift to meet the requirement that all owners should be able to park in the block.<sup>(24)</sup> It turned out that a car lift would not be much more expensive than a car park under the block. Moreover, besides being an affordable option, a car lift would emphasize the relationship between high-rise and low-rise: after all, without a lift, it would be impossible to have gardens. And ultimately, a car lift ensured that residents up to the sixth floor would be able to park their cars next to their own front doors. The combination of a new parking solution with a private garden, a dark monolithic brick cladding, and the rhythm of storey-high glass fronts glued into the façades to indicate the living rooms in the block made IJburg 23 an architectonically strong unit: a perfect alternative for the suburban plankton that is currently being realized elsewhere in VINEX neighbourhoods.

During the design stage of Blok 23, the general euphoria unexpectedly changed to gloom. In 2001, little remained of the optimism so ubiquitous in 1996. Under the eloquent title: 'The Loss of an Exemplary Process', the critic Harm Tilman issued a warning: "(The) quality of IJburg is falling to an unacceptable level. IJburg is perhaps the most prestigious construction project currently in preparation in the Netherlands. Ambitions have run high right from the start. Much time, energy and money has been spent on formulating plans. Almost the entire top of the Dutch architectural world has been called in. However, as the process advances, expectations are diminishing dramatically. The ambitious initial design has been trimmed down so much that it looks like only a poor result will be realized. The parties involved all point the finger at one another."<sup>(25)</sup> Stimulated by an article by Bjarne Mastenbroek in the *Parool* (daily newspaper), Tilman also describes how a combination of rising rents, increasing construction costs, and high ground prices have

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(24) Drive-in houses were not allowed by the client, so that we had to adjust our plan.

(25) Tilman, Harm, 'Kwaliteit IJburg daalt naar onaanvaardbaar niveau', in *De Architect* no. 12, p. 28-33, 2001.



Model views of IJburg 23, outside and inside.

turned IJburg into a planning and financial problem rather than an urban development and architectonic assignment.<sup>(26)</sup>

As a consequence, the gap between the plan and the implementation is rapidly growing. The ratio of cheap houses to expensive ones is also shifting. Whereas the original intention was to have 30 per cent social housing, 40 per cent medium-priced owner-occupied houses, and 30 per cent expensive owner-occupied houses (the last two categories financing the first), this proportion was slowly abandoned. The extra municipal demands regarding environmental norms also had to be simplified in order to keep the plans feasible. In our case, the adjustments remained limited. IJburg 23 was primarily delayed in the implementation process. The most important adjustments that we had to make were a reduction in the number of typologies, and the addition of an extra parking layer in the tower. The backbone of the design, the combination of the car lift and the private gardens, remained intact. The monolithic image of the block also underwent relatively few changes. In other words, the strong architecture of the design remained intact.

The fact that the client — represented by Monique van Loon — and us were not the only ones who were convinced of the merit of IJburg 23 can best be illustrated by the Zuiderkerk Prize (an annual award conferred by the Municipality of Amsterdam for the best housing project within the city boundaries). Winning architectural awards is often a matter of luck, but I have also become convinced that you can encourage luck to come your way. Having gained a nomination for the Zuiderkerk Prize in 2001, I was invited in 2002 to inform some of the jury members of the process behind our design for the Sarphatistraat — the project for which we had been nominated at the time. To round off the day, a visit to IJburg and the corresponding information centre were part of the programme. In the discussion that arose in the information centre concerning new-construction plans, I drew attention to the scale model of IJburg 23. I explained how we had solved the problem of combining the desire to have a

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Testing material samples for IJburg 23 on the office window.

<sup>(26)</sup> Bjarne Mastenbroek wrote in the *Parool* of 28 June 2001 under the heading 'Waarom IJburg zo duur is? Vraag dat Amsterdam maar' (Why is IJburg so expensive? Ask Amsterdam) that the municipality — which owns the land on IJburg — misuses its monopoly position to increase the prices of the ground. Councillor Duco Stadig (PvdA) responded in the same newspaper on 30 June by saying that Mastenbroek had uttered absolute nonsense, and he emphasized the low price of ground on IJburg. Mastenbroek closed the discussion on 3 July with an article entitled 'De grondprijzen op IJburg deel 3' (Ground prices on IJburg, part 3) by giving an example that proved the contrary.

private garden with personal parking facilities, and people were obviously enthusiastic. When the jury met a few weeks later to choose a winner of the Zuiderkerk prize, the recollection of our project was evidently still fresh in their memory and the *Parool* of 18 December 2002 contained the following article: "The Municipal Housing Department of Amsterdam has announced that the Zuiderkerk Prize for the best house-building plan 2002 goes to VMX Architects and the property developer IJburgermaatschappij. For the Haveneiland-West section of IJburg, VMX conceived 'houses as a custom-made suit', where single-family dwellings are combined with a luxury apartment block." The jury report itself states: "The inventive stacking, the diversity of living typologies, the good orientation of the houses, the multiple applicability of the floor plans, parking in front of the door up to the fifth floor, the powerful and innovative architecture, the proportions and the consistency of the block, and the pioneering experimental character of the plan as a whole have ensured that this plan has convincingly won the Zuiderkerk Prize 2002."

Normally, as an architect, you hear in advance whether or not you have won a prize. But in the case of the Zuiderkerk Prize, it was a complete surprise to us.<sup>(27)</sup> I got the impression Koen van Velsen — who had also been nominated — was convinced of his impending victory and had gone to sit prominently at the front of the hall. I was sitting somewhere in the tenth row and Leon was sitting somewhere at the back. We were both astounded when I was asked to come to the front. What made the victory extra sweet was the fact that a week previously we had seen the first NAi prize being awarded not to us but to MVRDV.

Of course the Zuiderkerk Prize officially only referred to IJburg 23, but to us the consequences of this award went further than this single design. After all, IJburg 23 had once begun as a twin, but had ended as an only child when IJburg 17 foundered. It was a situation that gave more cause for grief than for happiness when the analogy with human twins was taken into

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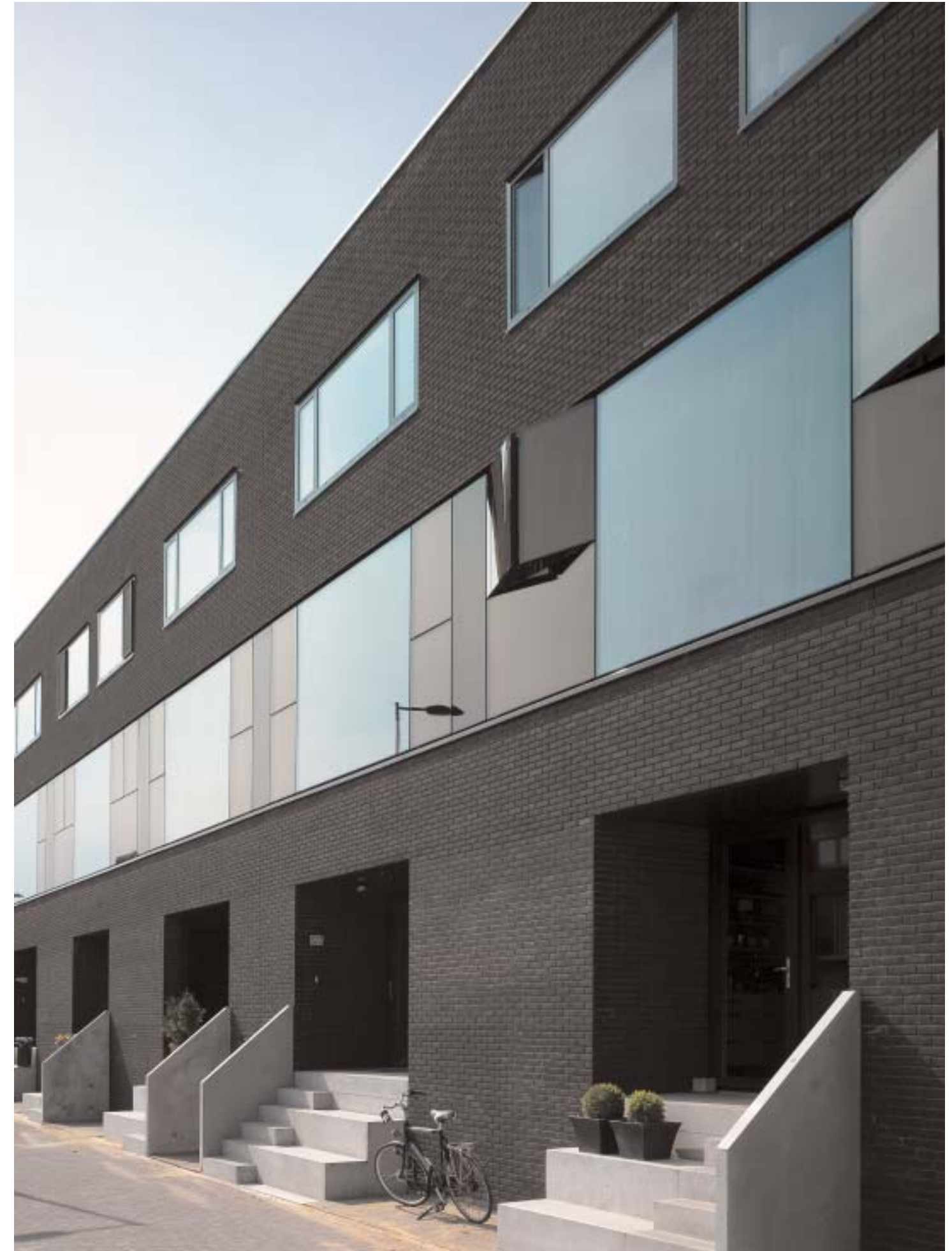
The making of IJburg 23.

<sup>(27)</sup> Simultaneously with the Zuiderkerk Prize we had also been nominated for the first NAi Award for our design for the Bicycle hotel. Shortly before the prize-giving ceremony, however, it became known that MVRDV would receive the award, so that by the time the ceremony was held all the excitement had vanished.



Street side of IJburg, showing the entrance to the family houses.

account. A future as an imperfect block, always provoking thought of the other half, would seem to be a rather unenviable fate. But after the period of frustration and mourning for the failure of IJburg 17, a light feeling of contentment settled upon us after receiving the Zuiderkerk Prize. IJburg 17 was far from perfect in comparison to IJburg 23. We slowly became accustomed to the idea that it was perhaps better for IJburg 23 that our 'poor relation' never saw the light of day after all.



Street side of IJburg, showing the entrance to the family houses.



The car lift of IJburg 23.

#### Making a difference

At college you are taught that an architect ought to be progressive. The creation of coherence, order and structure is your mission, the banishment of narrow-mindedness is your ideal. Think big without losing sight of human dimensions, that is the secret. Besides developing a vision on the world, it is self-evident that an architect must also ensure that the most minimal construction — the house of the *existenz minimum* — evokes a spatial experience. In such statements, it is implicit that an architect can choose what and what not to do. The idea is that you can shape the world as you wish. However, practice demonstrates that reality is different. As an architect, you turn out to be a small fish in a big sea of clients, politics, and economics.

You are never sure of employment and working on different assignments is more often a dream than reality. Nevertheless, this does not mean that, as an architect, you should not consciously work to occupy a position. In our case, that realization came when VMX had existed for around five years.

Initially, I had not noticed it, but the questions at the end of lectures and discussions with fellow architects actually showed that we had obtained relatively diverse assignments in the five years of VMX's existence. We had realized a bicycle parking facility, houses, and an office block with a hotel, and we were working on a school building. Without deliberately seeking diversity, we had observed that it was essential to keep on looking for completely new types of projects in order to keep the motivation going. Unnoticed, this quest resulted in an aim to prove that we were capable of taking on new challenges; we consistently succeeded in obtaining new projects, which again resulted in a diversity of assignments of which others could be jealous. It was only when we noticed that colleagues often remained 'stuck' within one kind of assignment — out of sheer necessity or perhaps deliberately — that we went looking for opportunities to build up our own position by means of these assignments.

Consequently, to us, the focus shifted from assignments that were different, because they were new to us, to assignments that were different because they were supplementary to, or the opposite of, realized or long-term assignments.

Pieter Veenstra, who, like myself, taught at the Academie van Bouwkunst (Building Academy) in Tilburg, asked me at the beginning of 2000 whether or not I might be interested in a new project.<sup>(28)</sup> Pieter was rather secretive about it, and told me that he was involved in the selection process for a project that I could not yet be told about. Because I am always inquisitive about new possibilities, I invited Pieter to come to our office so we could tell him more about VMX and our work. As I recall, after hearing a comprehensive explanation, Pieter sat for hours examining models and panels without offering any information about his secret assignment. After a short conversation with Pieter — in which he only gave evasive answers — Leon abandoned all hope that anything worthwhile would come out of the meeting. In contrast, I was still inquisitive and allowed Pieter free rein. A few weeks after his visit, we received an invitation from the Altrecht Foundation to give a presentation on our work: 'Deltahuis Den Dolder, 9.30 on 15 June', was all the invitation said.<sup>(29)</sup> Pieter had told us so little that we had no idea what the selection procedure was actually for. It was only the fact that Altrecht was a large organization for mental health care that gave an indication that it probably concerned accommodation for health-care functions. On that day, a total of six offices had been asked by Pieter to present their work. Of these six, I remember only Marx & Steketee, EGM, and Moriko Kira, in addition to ourselves.

Of course, we were surprised and excited that we were on the Altrecht list.<sup>(30)</sup> But we wondered how we could possibly convince the management of this organization of our qualities. After all, health-care institutions are not known for their preference for experimental architecture, and normally opt for experienced

architects. In an attempt to circumnavigate the issue of experience with similar projects, during our presentation we placed the emphasis on our aim of working without preconceived ideas.<sup>(31)</sup> We explained how, in previous projects, we had often begun without specific experience but we had always ensured that we acquired the necessary knowledge either by learning ourselves or by hiring in specialists. With the tone of our presentation, we also accentuated how seriously and devotedly we took our work. Our plan worked. A few days after the first presentation, we received an invitation to give a second presentation.<sup>(32)</sup> The choice was now between VMX and EGM Architecten.

For the preparation of the second round, we received from Altrecht the results of a study on new-construction variants for the Willem Arntsz Huis (WA-House) location, the main branch for the city of Utrecht.<sup>(33)</sup> The study showed that the current psychiatric hospital — of which the oldest parts dated from 1461 — no longer met the requirements in terms of quality, health care, safety, and building management. In view of the historical links of the hospital with the city and the objective of not isolating the mental health facilities from society, we were asked to develop a spatial vision for the given location.

When it became clear what the starting points of the selection would be, we made an energetic start on developing a well-founded vision. We approached the issue at different levels. First of all, we examined the location. It was a historical spot in the middle of the old inner-city fabric of the city of Utrecht. To avoid lengthy procedures, it soon became clear that it would be sensible to design any new construction within the limits of the zoning plan. To review the possibilities, we analysed the existing construction at the site: it was a hotchpotch of styles and construction works around a concrete high-rise block by architect Wouda (Wouda building, 1976). Then, at a more general level, we looked at the history of the hospital as an architectonic assignment, the specialization within this building typology,



Invitation from Altrecht to give a presentation of our work.



Views of the courtyard of the Willem Arntsz Huis as it was.

(28) My teaching position at the Academy was to a certain extent a consequence of the exhibition Nine+One. I had come into contact with Annette Marx (Marx & Steketee) and she asked me to teach at the Academy in Tilburg. I supervised students in Tilburg from 1997 to 2000.

(29) Altrecht is the most important organization for mental health care in the central and western parts of the Province of Utrecht.

(30) At that time, VMX had produced four buildings: the T-House, HZMMC, 3UP2DOWN, and the B-House.

(31) In a strategy that seems to be borrowed from football, we proposed attack as the best defence. We presented our lack of experience as an advantage: we were open-minded and prepared to learn.

(32) The second and decisive presentation took place on 27.06.00, again in the Delta Huis in Den Dolder at 13:30.

(33) The study had been commissioned by Altrecht and proposed a reconstruction that was completely impossible within the prevailing zoning plan.



The panels that were used in the second presentation for Altrecht.

the policy of the government, and the expectations in the future. On all these points, we sought examples and statements by experts. With regard to the hospital architecture, we came across an interesting statement by P. James and T. Noakes in *De Architectuur van het Ziekenhuis*. They claim: "The functional and technical complexity of modern hospitals has often led to the neglect of aesthetic quality, thus raising doubts about whether they can qualify as architecture."<sup>(34)</sup> In other words, it was clear that hospital construction, as a specialization, was primarily based on knowledge of the function and much less on the capacity to allocate form. In line with these comments, other people also pleaded for a different approach. For instance the architect H. van Beek, of Atelier Pro office, said: "Experience can be extremely dangerous. You think you know everything and without realizing it, you consistently build the same building."<sup>(35)</sup> However, just before the selection of the architect for the WA-House, a remarkable choice was made in this respect. The magazine *De Architect* reported that from a group of four, the outsider — architect Max van Huut, of the Alberts & Van Huut office — had been chosen for the new construction of the hospital in Zwolle. They wrote: "The client preferred Van Huut's vision (...) The ambition was to produce a much-discussed building that clearly distinguished itself from the common image of hospitals. (...) Van Huut drew a plan in the idiom for which the office became renowned. And it was exactly this idiom that distinguished it from the visions of the other competitors."<sup>(36)</sup> With regard to the policy and the future, we found the following quote: "It is clear that the hospital will alter radically in the coming decades. It will lose many of the features that it has possessed since its creation as a separate type of building in the eighteenth century: the nursing wards will be smaller, they will partly be replaced by 'care hotels', polyclinics will probably be distributed across the city in the form of 'exterior polyclinics'. Architects will be given new chances."<sup>(37)</sup> We offered our picture of the historical context, an analysis of

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(34) P. James, T. Noakes, 'Hospital Architecture', Harlow (1994) as quoted in Mens, Noor; Tjihuis, Annet, *De Architectuur van het Ziekenhuis*, p. 11, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1999).

(35) Beek, H. van, as quoted by Noor Mens in *De Architectuur van het Ziekenhuis*, p. 85, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1999).

(36) Mens, Noor, 'Dilemma's bij de keuze architect ziekenhuis' in *De Architect* no. 5, pp. 13-14 (2000).

(37) Mens, Noor, *De Architectuur van het Ziekenhuis*, p. 195, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1999).

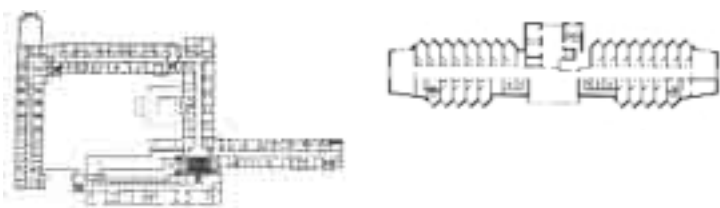
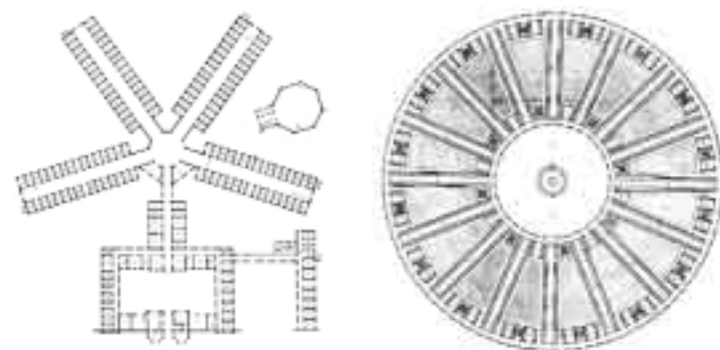
the existing situation, and a view of the development of hospital construction and future policy with allusion to these quotes and by means of reference images on presentation panels. To supplement the information on these panels, I explained how VMX would work in co-operation with the people from Altrecht and I concluded my presentation with several personal observations and pieces of advice. I said that I found it to be of the utmost importance that the new construction should be seen in its context, that there more unity and coherence ought to be introduced into the existing situation, and that the biggest mistake in designing the hospital in recent times was that buildings had been conceived as care machines. In view of the fact that time and money (budget) were important points to Altrecht, I remarked between the lines that in opting for VMX people actually got two architects for the price of one, or even better, an architect and a manager for the price of one — a typically Dutch argument. I cannot assume that this latter argument really had much impact, but later I heard from members of the selection committee that I had been 'irresistibly' sharp, amusing, and open in my presentation. Thanks to the comprehensive preparation and an excellent presentation, the improbable actually happened.

A little more than two weeks after the presentation, we received a letter from Altrecht which stated that they would be pleased to work with VMX "on the development and realization of the newly constructed WA-House".<sup>(38)</sup> Altrecht preferred VMX above EGM Architecten, who were *the* hospital builders in the Netherlands. It was a fantastic moment when we heard we'd been selected. After IJburg, this was a definitive mark of approval. In personal terms, I had the feeling that designing a hospital would be a highpoint in my architectural career. In the preparation for the decisive presentation, I had become increasingly convinced that the hospital as an architectonic assignment had become increasingly but unjustly ignored by architects in the past few decades. Whereas hospitals can be decisive in someone's life, and can also be important public constructions, we encoun-

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(38) Letter from Altrecht dated 14.07.00, VMX archives.





Besides famous examples of hospitals, we also studied the organization of prisons, a building typology that, like the psychiatric hospital, deals with control.

tered only one recent architectural competition for the extension to a hospital. In 1999, L'Hôpital Cognacq-Jay, a hospital for terminally ill patients in Paris, had organized an architectural competition among renowned architects.<sup>(39)</sup> With the exception of this competition, scarcely any attention was devoted to hospital architecture, while the design of these buildings was regarded as a grand architectonic assignment not so very long ago. One only needs to think of the sanatoriums of Hoffman, Wagner, Aalto and Duiker to understand what the position of the hospital within architecture once had been.<sup>(40)</sup>

In the Netherlands, the turning point occurred just after the Second World War. Due to the increasing demands and prescriptions, the design of the hospital became the domain of nameless specialists and the topic became uncommon as an architectonic assignment. The only exception to this rule is the Huize Padua psychiatric hospital at Boekel for which Aldo van Eyck designed a considerable extension in 1989.<sup>(41)</sup>

In the nineties, the attention given to hospitals diminished even further, and there were only a few specialist architectural offices that devoted their endeavours to these complex buildings.<sup>(42)</sup>

In the mid-nineties, when a young generation of architects was attracting attention with spectacular houses, offices, museums, university buildings, pavilions, bridges, squares, and urban development plans, the designing of hospitals seemed to have definitively evaporated as an architectonic assignment.<sup>(43)</sup>

The assignment to build a psychiatric hospital in the centre of Utrecht was a stark contrast in this context. Here, the problems were large and concrete: a complex location, very specific patients who often had to remain in the building for lengthy periods, a limited budget, strict conditions in terms of logistics, and opinionated citizens (neighbours) who followed the new-construction plans meticulously.<sup>(44)</sup>

It was not the opportunity to realize, finally, a spectacular public building that was decisive in my desire to obtain this assignment no matter the commitment, but rather the feeling of being

able to accept responsibility as an architect. In an almost old-fashioned yearning to create a building that would have significance in someone's life, I felt the need to enter a new path, no longer purely to play the conceptual and typological game that had put Dutch architecture on the map: I wanted to make a difference!

The feeling that I had of being able to make a difference in someone's life by means of architecture can be dismissed as romantic drivel, but it can also be regarded as very contemporary. From the mid-nineties onward, the work of the sociologist Ulrich Beck had an effect on an increasing number of architects, who became convinced that a new phase of modernization had begun. After rational modernism without a social component, and frivolous but fatalistic post-modernism, the pressure of globalization and deregulation generated a situation in which process planning began to play an ever more important role. Beck spoke of reflexive modernity in which a quest was initiated for responsible opportunities for growth after the boundless trust in progress — modernism — and the observation that there were limits to the growth — post-modernism. Taking the uncertainties that globalization had uncovered, no longer depending on the guiding hand of the government, and knowing that risks can never be reduced to zero because they are the result of complex processes, reflexive modernism placed more emphasis on responsible individual choices.<sup>(45)</sup>

Following Beck's line, a reflexive architect is thus someone who can make an estimation of the uncertainties within the process and the politics that surrounds it. Even more so, a reflexive architect formulates strategies to steer spatial problems toward a possible solution on the basis of these uncertainties. The only compass that the reflexive architect can use in this process is that of his engagement and estimation capabilities.

This spirit was almost tangible. Even without having read Beck you could feel that, after a conceptual approach to architecture, there was a need for architects who thought not only in terms of



Sanatorium Purkersdorf, designed by Josef Hoffman, Vienna, Austria, 1904.



Paimio Sanatorium by Alvar Aalto, Paimio, Finland, 1929.

(39) Five architects were invited to participate in this architectural competition: Toyo Ito, Jean Nouvel, Architecture Studio, Dominique Perrault, and Chemetov + Huidobro. Ito won with a convincing design for a garden with pavilion-like extensions. All submissions were published in, among others, *Archis* no. 6, pp. 58-64, 2000.

(40) Also prior to the modern icons Aalto and Duiker, the designs for 18th-century clinics such as l'Hôtel-Dieu by Poyet, Leroy and Viel, or the Hôpital pour deux cent fous curables by Tenon are examples of renowned hospital architecture. The fact that the design for the hospital of Venice by Le Corbusier, which was never built, still has a reputation among architects indicates that hospitals were once seen as important architectonic works.

(41) Because the extension by Van Eyck largely concerned a closed wing, the range of publicity for the building remained limited.

(42) Prior to the eighties, various offices were commissioned on a once-off basis to build a large hospital. To mention two major names: the St. Lucas Hospital in Amsterdam by Peutz (1966-1968) and the Lukas Hospital in Apeldoorn by Van den Broek and Bakema (1974). After 1980, one sees mainly three names recurring in large-scale hospital contracts: Campman Tennekes Architecten (St. Franciscus Gasthuis Rotterdam, St. Antonius Ziekenhuis Nieuwegein, Streekziekenhuis Waterland, Purmerend, Streekziekenhuis Hilversum, Flevo Ziekenhuis, Almere); Architectengroep Duintjer (Academische Medisch Centrum Amsterdam, Streekziekenhuis Gooi-Noord Blaricum, Slingeland Ziekenhuis, Doetinchem, Ziekenhuis Bronovo Den Haag); EGM architecten (Onze Lieve Vrouwen Gasthuis Amsterdam, Juliana Kinderziekenhuis Den Haag, Woongebouw Delta Psychiatrisch Ziekenhuis Rotterdam, Wilhelmina Kinderziekenhuis Utrecht, Merwede Ziekenhuis Dordrecht, UMC St. Radboud Nijmegen, Rode Kruisziekenhuis Beverwijk, Beatrix Ziekenhuis Gorinchem, Academisch Ziekenhuis Utrecht).

(43) In the period at the end of the nineties — described as 'Super Dutch' by the critic Bart Lootsma — Dutch architecture became remarkably spectacular in a short period. In his book *Het kunstmatige landschap* (Artificial Landscape), Hans Ibelings explains this by placing great emphasis on the Dutch feeling for logic. Armed with logic taken to extremes, offices such as MVRDV, UN Studio and NL Architects — and also OMA and Neutelings Riedijk to a lesser extent — designed striking buildings that seem to have no other aim than to be noticed, to represent a 'functioning system'. Leaning on statistical data, these offices seem to regard architecture as a remote and abstract form of scenario thinking in the way of 'what if' and 'if this then that'. This design attitude contrasts starkly with the design attitude that was required by the WA-House assignment. Here, personal involvement and political manoeuvring were key activities.

(44) The most important logistic limitation in the assignment was the fact that the hospital had to continue functioning with patients and staff at the existing location. We had to work on a running engine.

(45) *Reflexive Modernization, politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, by Beck, Giddens, Lash, Polity Press, appeared in 1994. To understand why VMX regarded itself as a reflexive office it is useful to summarize the work of Beck c.s. Beck describes reflexive modernism as a response to the gaps in post-modernism. The most important reason to reject modernism was the fact that the latter train of thought was based on an infinite faith in progress. Modernists believed that progress was unstoppable and that the world would become a better place due to progress itself. Post-modern thinking demolished that idea without producing an alternative. This means, and this is what Beck mainly writes about, if we want to go further than post-modernism, humanity cannot be seen as separate from nature. The core of reflexive modernism thus is that progress cannot be seen as being separate from unpredictable external factors. Embedded in what Beck terms 'the risk society' reflexive modernism tries to find a way to cope with uncertainty. In The case of VMX a reflexive manner of acting expresses itself in the way this office approaches commissions. Without prejudice, VMX regards every commission as an opportunity to create architecture.

data and effects but who also worked on the basis of their own commitment and empathy. It was this undertone that evoked my desire to design a hospital.

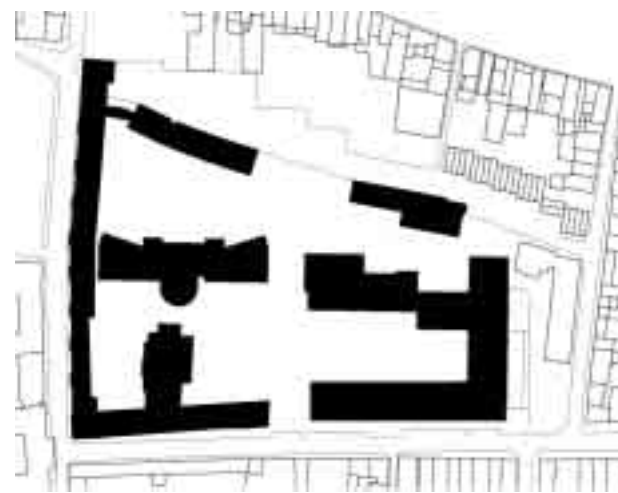
Shortly after Altrecht had opted for VMX, people introduced us to Folkert Jans of PTG, the project management office that would supervise the WA-House project. In the negotiations over our fee, Folkert asked us to put forward a suggestion. Up to that time we had always performed fee calculations ourselves, Leon always based these on his own experience. However, because the assignment for the WA-House was large and complex, certainly in our eyes, and because the work would also cover a few years, Leon suggested hiring in an independent consultant — Gerard Heijke.

Gerard proposed a fee that Folkert immediately swept from the negotiation table with an improbably low counter-offer. Gerard then advised us to refuse the assignment because he was convinced that we would have to invest our own money in the project. But having come so far I really wanted to do a hospital, to enter a new path. We deliberated long and seriously on the pros and cons and after some negotiation eventually decided to accept the assignment against a rather low fee.

When the contract had been signed, there was no way back, even when we began to realize that we had entered a snake pit. For example, the definitive programme turned out to be much more detailed than we had feared, a major logistics puzzle with staff and patients had to be solved, and the existing construction could not be demolished because the various buildings had not yet been written off.<sup>(46)</sup> During construction the patients would have to be housed at the site. Also it turned out that Altrecht absolutely wished to retain the existing car park. To make everything worse, the norms for patients' rooms altered during the design process.<sup>(47)</sup>

However, the above-mentioned problems are not unique; in fact, they are more of a rule than an exception in projects of this

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Plan of the existing situation at the Willem Arntsz Huis.

(46) The joint book value of these buildings was around eight million guilders (around 3,6 million euros), which, if we decided to demolish them, would be placed on our budget as a debt. In other words, we would inherit the debt. When it turned out later in our design process that this debt could be earned back by applying the design we proposed and disposing of the buildings, the Board of Trustees gave Altrecht permission to demolish the buildings although they had not yet been written off.

(47) Whereas at the outset of the project it was usual for two patients to share a room, the new norms prescribed that each patient ought to have his/her own room with a bathroom. Despite this radical change our budget did not alter so we had to create more rooms for the same money.

magnitude. What was unique, however, which we discovered when we were actually working on the project, was that the new-construction plans for the WA-House already had a 15-year-old history at the moment that we became involved. Various architects before us had not been capable of bringing the reconstruction or new-construction plans for the WA-House to a good end. In addition to spatial complexity, the rapidly changing insight into psychiatric care in the Netherlands probably also played an important role in this failure. In order to fathom out this side of the assignment, we had to inform ourselves of the main contours of this changing insight.

The history of modern psychiatric accommodation began at the end of the fifties when the modernization of Dutch mental health care was given an important impulse by a group of psychologists who became known as the 'Utrecht School'. From a phenomenological approach they shifted the accent from disciplining to normalizing and integrating the mentally ill in society.<sup>(48)</sup> In their view, the closed psychiatric clinic was equal to a ghetto: the depressing nadir of the functionalist distinction between body and soul. They envisaged a tolerant, hospitable and humane living environment by means of which psychiatric patients could be able to return to society.<sup>(49)</sup>

Around 1970, belief in the pliability of the individual also grew among the adherents of the so-called 'empirical behavioural sciences' — although on a different basis than that of the phenomenologists.<sup>(50)</sup> As a result, in the mid-seventies, there was increasingly severe criticism from two different angles of the functionality and efficiency that had been central to medical technocracy up to that point. The conflict became visible to the general public in an event that entered history as the Dennendal affair: the hard-handed evacuation of an institution for mentally handicapped by the police in 1974.<sup>(51)</sup>

In response to this situation, a management culture developed in the entire Dutch health care in the eighties. The hospitals were

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(48) Camiel van Winkel described the situation with: "Via notions such as 'empathy', 'pedagogical situation' and 'encounter', they tried in both their publications and their therapeutic practice to breach the scientific distinction between body and mind"; from 'Leegte als landschap' (Emptiness as a landscape) in *Moderne Leegte*, p. 45, SUN (2000).

(49) The concepts of the Utrecht School were also present in other sectors of Dutch society in the sixties and seventies, such as the tolerant penal code and education.

(50) Empirical behavioural scientists saw an analogy with the survival chances of predators that depend on their alertness, which again depends on their adrenaline production. This production is governed by stimuli from the environment. Translated into the human context, this means that both boring and frightening situations should be avoided to prevent the advent of negative effects on humans.



The Wouda building, seen from the courtyard and seen from the street.



At the start of the project we were told that we had to operate in an extremely difficult context since the neighbours would follow the new plan meticulously. In reality, the neighbours proved to be very co-operative. But when the construction of the new building started, a handful protested against the noise.

(51) In *Moderne Leegte* Camiel van Winkel astutely describes how psychiatry used to be regarded as something outwith society, a place where people were locked up and where mentally-deviant behaviour was punished with electric shocks and stupefying medication. Dennendal, in contrast, was exemplary for an alternative soft-handed approach in which an attempt was made with the help of small-scale living structures, not to brand the mentally ill as clinical cases but rather as almost normal people. An attempt was made to create a place where people could be themselves. To many, the Dennendal affair was not an isolated instance. In the small scale of the project and the refuge, they saw potential answers to the issues in urban renewal. After all, in the mid-seventies, many action groups believed that modern architecture was responsible for large-scale and cold functional constructions that transformed the inner cities which had grown organically into monofunctional office zones and shopping malls.



Analysis of beautiful public urban spaces in the historical centre of Utrecht.  
Comparison of the scale of the Willem Arntsz Huis, projecting the existing block on to beautiful spots in Utrecht.

then privatized, and the combined effect of increasingly specialized health care and market-effects ensured that hospitals had to compete with one another in the field of efficiency. As a consequence, hospitals were transformed into care factories whose architecture seemed to possess no more ideology than an expression of the power of the medical-technological complex.<sup>(52)</sup>

The start of the twenty-first century witnessed the placement of cautious question marks against market-effects in health care. The issue was whether or not health care was a marketable commodity that thrives in mutual competition. As columnist Marjoleine de Vos wrote: "When dealing with health care, a lot of things ought to be included that cannot be converted into profit and competition. Things like attention, friendliness, accuracy, solidarity, humanity, altruism, etc. You cannot demand these things and cannot buy them, you have to enable them. And they are not enabled by price competition. By coincidence, I was in hospital for a few days recently, in a room quite near the nurses' desk. I heard one of them complaining about someone else, one of her superiors, as I understood. "They just don't listen to us," she said desperately. "They only do management."<sup>(53)</sup>

Before we could formulate our own response to this situation, it was necessary to develop a method of co-operating with our client. The director of Altrecht, the psychiatrist Armand Höppener, is an ambitious man and right from the start there was the feeling of mutual trust. The only problem was that Höppener had no outspoken vision of his own. He was interested in our ideas and principles, but had a kind of hesitation when it came to presenting his own ideas. So what happened was that he agreed to our proposals but left us to fight out all the problems and sensitive issues with the heads of departments.

By now we have observed that Höppener's attitude is illustrative of the entire decision-making process within Altrecht. Peter

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(52) Adapted from Harm Tilman, 'Humane ziekenhuizen', in *De Architect*, April 2005, p. 4.

(53) De Vos, Marjoleine, 'Het ideale ziekenhuis', *NRC Handelsblad*, p. 9, Monday 4 April 2005.

Turpijn — the director of General Affairs for the Utrecht City division and the person with whom we had the most contact — after having waited 15 years for a new building is not interested in something new in the sense of 'innovative'; he simply wanted a new building. He, too, is very careful in his decision-forming and prefers to allow everyone to join in this process. This extremely democratic attitude is perhaps comprehensible if one looks at the history of Altrecht as an institution with a staff full of outspoken personalities, but if one genuinely wishes to realize something new, democracy is the worst method. Our experience was that good architecture is not only the result of a good architect but also of a good client with his or her own ideas who is prepared to take risks.

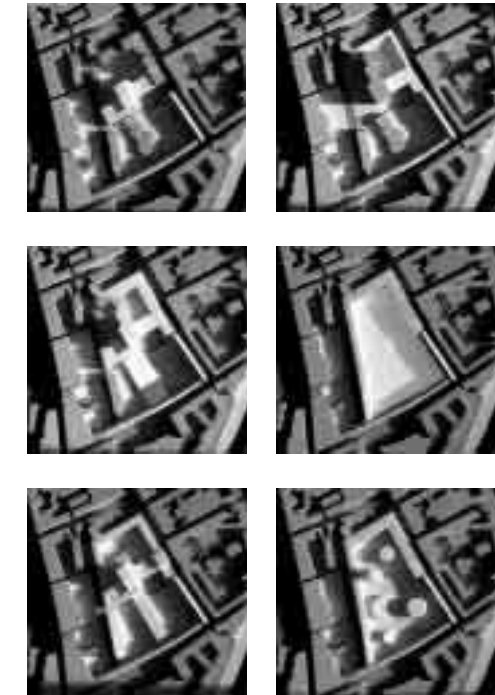
The reticence of our client to stick his neck out had much influence on the pleasure with which we worked on the design, certainly in the initial stages. We had the feeling that the project primarily consisted of things we *had* to do instead of a quest for new possibilities. The fact that this negative mood did not result in an abandonment of the assignment was largely thanks to my own naïveté. Just like previous projects, I also thought that I would be able to change Armand — and with him, Altrecht.<sup>(54)</sup> In retrospect, I have to acknowledge that I could not do so.

But I am convinced that our continuing optimism and consistent pursuit of new solutions — even if we had to defend our plans in the face of countless staff committees and patient groups — led to a greater disposition within Altrecht to take risks and accept experiments. To us, the assignment for the WA-House thus resulted in a number of spin-off projects for Altrecht. I shall return to that topic later; first the design process of the WA-House itself.

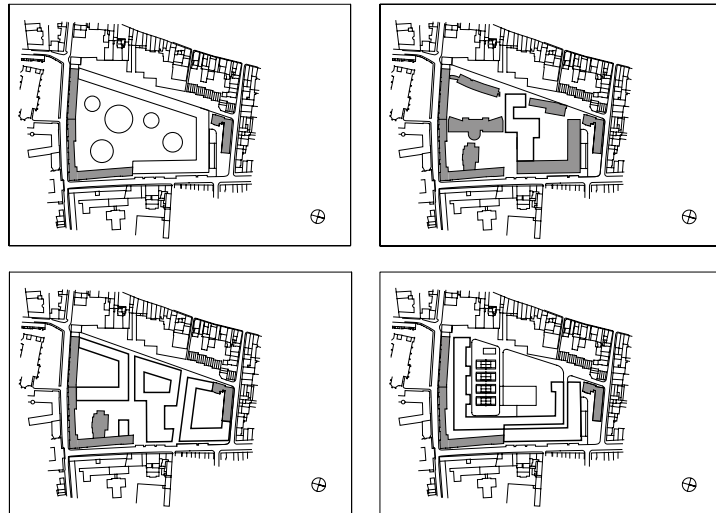
We began the design process by making a spatial analysis of the situation. The existing hospital had the character of a ghetto and, although the grounds were open to the public during the day, most Utrecht citizens preferred to avoid the hospital on

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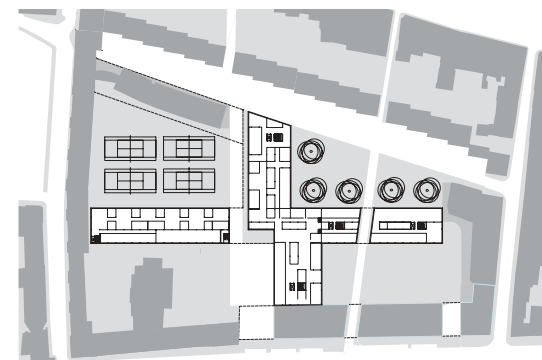
(54) In various previous projects such as the T-House and the HZMMC, I had been convinced that we could change our clients. Every case showed that this was not possible but this naïve idea ensured that we sank our teeth into our assignments and managed to bring them to a good end.



Spatial analysis showing different options ranging from the replacement of buildings to a complete reorganization of the site.



Four spatial scenarios.



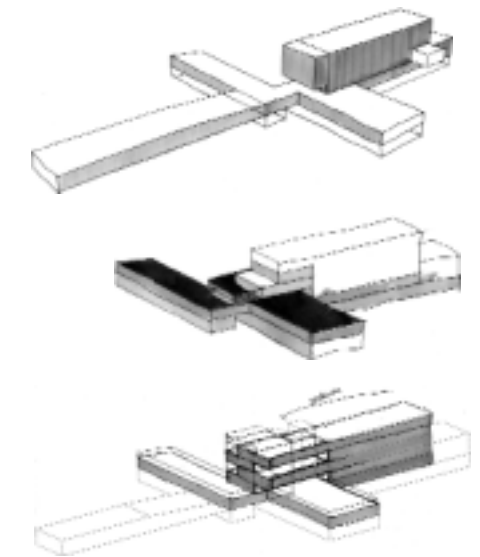
First cruciform pattern for the WA-House.

their daily route through town. To investigate the possibilities to change this situation, we formulated and analysed four spatial scenarios. In the first scenario, the Wouda building would be completely demolished and new construction would be realized on the edges of the parcel. The empty inner area created by this approach could be developed by market parties. In the second scenario, the Wouda building would also be demolished but the new construction would arise in the middle of the area. In the third scenario, two existing alleys in the urban fabric were projected across the site, so that the parcel was divided into three pieces with three possible locations for new construction or market parties. The fourth scenario proposed an L-shaped building in combination with an empty inner court that could accommodate new large-scale urban functions.

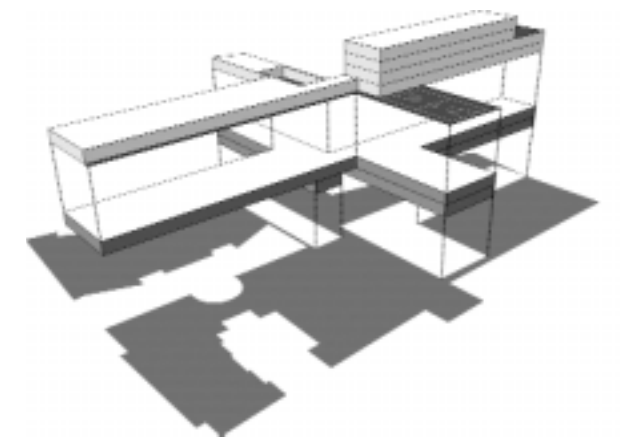
Altrecht held the idea that the normalization policy they pursued could best be expressed if the edges of the location were to be built up first, thus restoring the contours of the tattered city block. In the long term, 'normal' urban functions would establish themselves within this new hospital block so that the normalization would be complete — in other words, this was the first scenario that we had formulated. However, our analyses showed that the opposite strategy — the second scenario — offered much more interesting opportunities for both integration and future development. If people were to pursue the policy of concentrating the hospital functions in the centre instead of on the edges, market parties would be able to develop the edges of the site into new segments of the city. Instead of trying to introduce urban functions, which would always be isolated from the rest of the city due to their being surrounded by the hospital, the possibility would arise to interweave the new WA-House with the existing urban fabric. In addition to ideas on urban cohesion, our advice was also based on practical considerations. In this scenario, the zoning plan would not have to undergo any (drastic) changes. The spatial requirements of the hospital, which were continuously subject to change, also encour-

aged us to allow market parties only at the edges. After all, if one were to sell the heart of the location to third parties, there would be a real chance that one's own freedom of movement would be limited in the future. Therefore, our proposal was to maintain possession of the majority of the location but to open the grounds for the patients and the general public by introducing a configuration of public and private exterior spaces. For the very first time in the history of our office, we therefore did not design an autonomous object but rather a building that was almost completely the result of its context.

Taking the zoning plan as the starting point, we suggested a cruciform construction pattern which would not only create the necessary inner area but would also delineate four new semi-public squares.<sup>(55)</sup> Instead of embroidering further the existing situation in which a massive and closed structure would determine the appearance of Altrecht from all angles, we proposed using the four squares to generate four different appearances for the WA-House. The idea of a representative entrance square, closed inner garden, an informal residential square, and an office garden was the logical follow-on. The extension of the existing alleyway in the form of a pedestrian route straight across the grounds offered the supplementary possibility of opening the grounds to the surroundings. To stimulate the integration with the city at building level, we proposed reserving the ground floor for public functions: the entrance, various living areas, and rooms for the treatment of outpatients should be concentrated here. In our view, the patients' rooms ought to be planned on the top floor of the new construction, so that the daily route between bedroom, living room, and treatment room would display more analogies with living in a house than with a stay in hospital. The closed treatment and office sections could be installed between bedrooms and the ground floor. Finally, roof gardens on the various wings of the new building would provide areas that were exclusively for patients. Although in its description of the new construction Altrecht

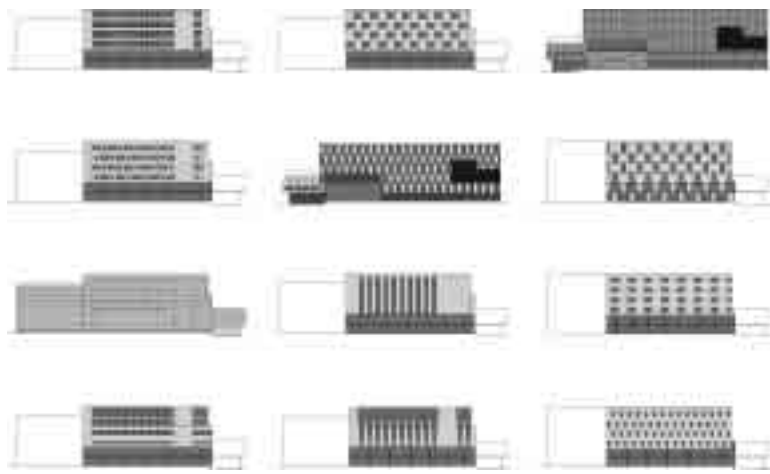


Sketches for the division of a programme that would display more analogies with a home than with a hospital.

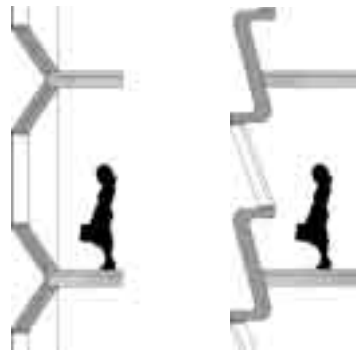


Definitive division of the programme: patient rooms on the top floors and treatment rooms and public functions on the lower floors.

(55) On the basis of the existing construction, the zoning plan prescribed this cruciform construction.



Façade studies.



Studies for a bay window, creating a private view for each patient.



Preparing one of the many presentations.

always assumed the perspective of the employee — the person providing treatment — and occasionally even depicted patients as a threat, our design always gave pride of place to the patients. We even clearly stated that if we had to choose, the patients were more important than the staff.<sup>(56)</sup> On the basis of this choice, it is obvious that we did not take a well-oiled treatment machine as the reference image for the WA-House, but rather the picture of a hotel or a resort where everything was oriented toward the comfort of the client (the patient). Just as in a real hotel, safety and security would be of paramount importance in our *hospital hotel*, but the comfort of the patients should not suffer from this. To us, it was self-evident that we, as architects, should be concerned with the issue of how the individual should be combined with the communal — something that we believed should always concern an architect. But it was only when we referred to our idea as ‘environmental healing’ that we had the feeling that the Altrecht people understood us. Armand Höppener then even expressed his appreciation of how we, as architects, were attempting to breach the isolation of the patients but simultaneously tried to guarantee their privacy.

The problem of convincing people plays a role in all assignments to a greater or smaller extent. First of all, the client has to be convinced, and then there are often various parties who wish a comprehensive explanation and justification of the design. Although it might seem logical that the art of convincing people is purely dependent on the content-related argument, real-life practice is often quite different. After all, it largely depends on the way you present your proposals, your tone, the images you manage to evoke, and the position you try to assume — or the leeway the client offers you. Besides argumentation, convincing people is also the consequence of the capacity to discover the appropriate terminology in every assignment. In the WA-House, this conviction arose when we described our role as architects as conceivers of space that would be pleasant for both patients

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<sup>(56)</sup> Our ideas were appreciated by Armand Höppener, but various heads of department turned out to want to devote more attention to the safety of the staff than to the welfare of the patients.

and staff. When the Altrecht people had been convinced, we thought that we had overcome the most important hurdle in the design process, but that turned out to be far from true.

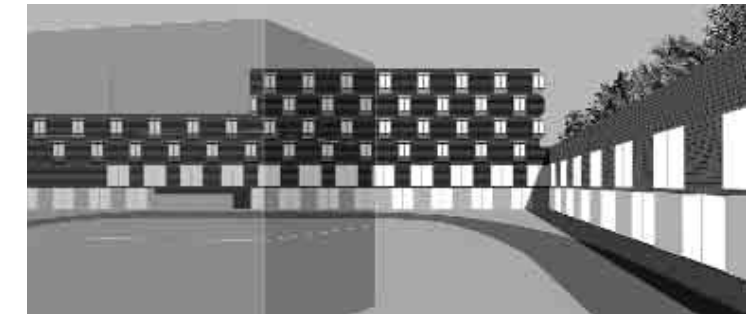
In addition to a client who had to be convinced, an architect almost always has to deal with a Welstand (Building Inspectorate) that passes a judgement on the design. By taking the Welstand seriously in all our previous projects and by involving them in the design, we had always had positive reactions. The WA-House was the first project in which we really encountered great difficulties.<sup>(57)</sup> On the advice of the Municipality of Utrecht, we first presented our plans to the Welstand immediately after we had finished the draft design in the summer of 2001.<sup>(58)</sup> What we presented was primarily a volume model and a whole series of images of possible façades and substantiations of the squares. However, we did not yet have a clear conclusion, so that the design looked like a building without façades or squares. Although we emphasized the countless possibilities — potentials — it soon became clear that the Welstand had fundamental objections to our project. In fact, people were generally opposed to the location of the building. Although we were planning to build within the margins of the zoning plan, they thought that this kind of large-scale building should be located on the city ring and not in the historical inner city. They preferred a small-scale, fragmented building. However, we had agreed with Altrecht that we would create a central modern building that would not hide away but would proudly radiate its presence. But the Welstand was implacable: it could not accept the design and sent us back to the drawing board.

For the second presentation, which took place a few weeks after the first, in autumn 2001, we had further elaborated our idea of the squares. Instead of only speaking about the various squares, we had designated various character traits to these squares on the basis of their position and function. With the help of reference images from the inner city of Utrecht, we had indicated how the new squares would link up with the existing

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<sup>(57)</sup> In most cases, an architect only has to deal with the Welstand — which is primarily concerned with the exterior of the building — but in the case of the WA-House we also had to deal with the College van Ziekenhuizen (Hospital Board of Governors) that monitored the interior. It was extremely difficult to communicate with this Board because it consisted mainly of very conservative people who did not want to hear our ideas. Eventually we developed a method to work with them as well and we succeeded in building an extremely unconventional pavilion in Zeist with their approval.

<sup>(58)</sup> This advice came from an experienced municipal urban planner who thought that, in view of the scale of the plan, it would be sensible to involve the Welstand in good time.



Images from our first presentation to the Welstand, showing possible façades.



Images from the second presentation to the Welstand, emphasizing the character of the squares and leaving the façades blank.



Images from the third presentation to the Welstand, deflecting the attention from the building itself, creating a tabula rasa for the façade.

city fabric. Unfortunately, the Welstand remained unconvinced. In their view, the design was still too large-scale, too massive and they encouraged us not to remain within the zoning plan but to think up a whole new concept. However, Altrecht exerted pressure to have the project built as quickly as possible. Thus, we had little choice but to stay within the zoning plan.

For the third presentation, we deliberately decided not to adapt our design but to present the plan in a different way. We wanted to make it clear that the design could be read in two ways.

It could be seen as one large building in the centre of town but could also be regarded as a succession of inner courts and squares that connected seamlessly with the existing historical structure. As the first picture in the presentation I showed the well-known picture in which you can recognize either a vase or two faces. Then I displayed a picture of the design for the Freie Universität Berlin by Josic, Candilis and Woods, in which a university complex can be regarded as a building or a series of inner courts. I mentioned that we saw our design primarily as four squares and only secondarily as a building. I emphasized the fact that the four squares would each have their own character and that the adjoining façades of the building would accentuate their distinction by means of materialization. I spoke of a vertical, a horizontal, a three-dimensional, and a plant-covered façade that would fragment the image of one large building, as it were. This strategy seemed to work, slowly the members of the Welstand began to recognize the quality of the design in the given context, and they agreed to the plan albeit somewhat reluctantly.

By placing so much emphasis on the outdoor areas, we deflected interest from the building itself and created a tabula rasa for the façade.<sup>(59)</sup> This allowed us the opportunity to design the façades in the definitive stages. In view of the budget, it was always clear that we would have to make use of cheap façades. In our first designs, we had already sought for inexpensive materials that could be applied in various ways in order to cre-

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(59) The fact that we could — temporarily — draw attention away from the façades was not only the result of a change in vision but it was also the fact that we did not situate the new construction on the existing historical streets. There was thus a little distance to the neighbourhood.



Renderings of the four squares from top to bottom, left to right: civic square, urban backland, city garden, and private garden.



WA-House, urban backland façade, under construction.

ate different façades. After the third presentation for the Welstand, I had the idea of researching the possibility of not distributing the budget evenly across all the façades, but perhaps developing two expensive and two cheap façades. The expensive façades would be for the patients and the general public — the city — and the cheaper façades for the offices and the inner garden. Once we had formulated this idea, it turned out to be possible to design outspoken façades; the 'patient façade' in particular offered the opportunity to articulate our idea of individuality and integration. Instead of allocating normal windows to the bedrooms that lie behind this façade, we designed modern bay windows. The result is a three-dimensional artificial façade in which patients have the opportunity to look around them by means of these bay windows and anticipate their return to society.

Ultimately all the restrictions led to the fact that the WA-House does not have very much architecture. Although I had always hoped that we would develop a great concept, it did not come to fruition. The building is primarily the consequence of strategic and rational choices. Much time was spent on the organization of the floor plans. The idea for the façades and the interior was developed relatively quickly, but their materialization cost a great deal of discussion with various parties: Altrecht, the Welstand, and the neighbours.<sup>(60)</sup>

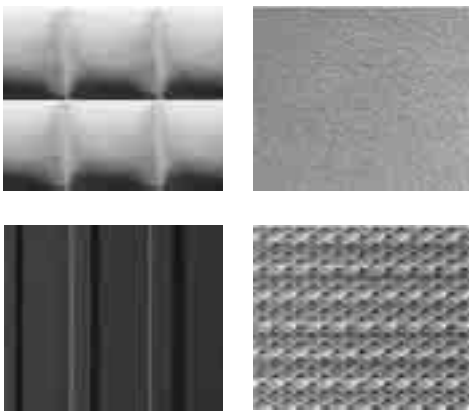
Just as in our first project — 3UP2DOWN — the WA-House only had a limited budget for the façades. However, in that first project, we had assumed the standpoint that even a cheap façade should look like a tailor-made suit. Although the cloth was cheap, the cut and the form betrayed the hand of a good designer. For the WA-House, we again evoked the relationship between architecture and fashion, but this time it was to underpin our idea of the application of artificial materials. Keeping in mind the notion of introducing more colour into the lives of the patients, we designed a façade made entirely of polyester for

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(60) Although everyone had warned us that we would encounter lots of problems with our coloured design, especially with the (well-educated) neighbours, it turned out that people did not object to the colourful façades, in contrast to the Welstand that mainly had difficulty with the yellow polyester façade. We had to return three times and it took a year before they agreed to the yellow colour.



Images from the fourth presentation to the Welstand, showing two expensive façades — the first and third ones from the top — and two cheap façades.



Four materials for four façades: concrete prefab elements, polyester, artificial wood and corrugated board overgrown by plants.

the bedrooms, a green corrugated metal façade — which would become overgrown by plants — for the inner garden, an artificial wooden façade for the offices, and a concrete façade made of prefab elements for the formal entrance. To various people within Altrecht, it was a shock to see that we did not use honest natural materials to support our idea of environmental healing, but preferred plastic and polyester. It was only when we argued that these materials would give the building a less heavy and permanent appearance that they began to understand our ideas.

Apart from our ideas on weight and permanence, our preference for artificial materials in this project could also be understood in terms of how critic Mark Wigley describes the relationship between clothes and architecture with relation to Le Corbusier. Wigley mentions that, for Le Corbusier, the ornament impedes the direct perception of architecture and that his unstained white architecture can be regarded as a pursuit of purification.<sup>(61)</sup> To Le Corbusier, white paint strips the object of its mask so that we can see its true countenance. However, Wigley continues by saying that this extremely thin layer of paint remains between us and the object. Accordingly, the white paint displays a strong analogy with fashion, a discipline that is devoted to concealment and suggestion. After Le Corbusier, Wigley refers to another architect who goes even further in describing architecture as concealment: Adolf Loos. Wigley paraphrases Loos — who in turn followed Gottfried Semper — from his book *Das Prinzip der Bekleidung* (1898) when he says: “This inversion (the demonstration of ‘false’ accessories being actually the ‘true’ essence of architecture) necessarily distorts the traditional economy of vision based upon a carefully preserved image of architecture in which that which is seen on the outside supposedly articulates, and is subordinate to, some inner truth.”

Instead of emphasizing the honesty of materials, Loos talks of the mendacity of nakedness — read decoration-less — architecture. Wigley wrote his comments on Le Corbusier and Loos in the second half of the nineties, when the aesthetics of honest

materials began to find worldwide application. In an interesting manner, he reverses the whole idea of truth and shows how the architecture of the mask is honest because the mask is recognizable as a mask. He reminds architects that honest materials could well be the emperor’s new clothes. Just as Beck’s work, Wigley’s notion of ‘artificial’ was also something that floated around during the design process of the WA-House. You could feel that architects were gaining more appreciation and interest in artificial materials. We translated this interest primarily into the concept of lightness. We wanted to create a light building that would not radiate the weight and durability of ‘honest’ materials from all its pores.



Top view showing the four squares and the roof gardens exclusively designed for patients.



WA-House, civic square façade, under construction.



The making of prefab concrete panels — cushions — and the modern bay window.

(61) Wigley, Mark, *White Walls, designer dresses: the fashioning of architecture*, MIT Press, 1995.



### The Nineties

For an architect, a (realized) assignment can generate new work in at least two ways. One possibility is that a new client sees the work — in real life or in published form — and approaches the architect on this basis. Another possibility is that the co-operation between a client and the architect runs so smoothly that the client decides to employ the architect for a subsequent assignment. Combined forms and consecutive occurrences of each process also turn out to be possible in practice. In our case, the assignment for the WA-House was a good example of how the co-operation with one client generated a whole series of projects: we regard them as spin-offs. These assignments are not only interconnected in terms of the client but also in terms of programme and budget. Nevertheless, each assignment is autonomous and formulates its own answer to its own issues. The term 'series' is the most apt way of describing the coherence between our projects for Altrecht.

In contrast to the renowned ideas of, for example, Durand, Paxton or various Bauhaus adherents, we had no longing for serial production or industrialized architecture. We did not begin our work for Altrecht with the intention of creating a series. The series arose during our work. Once we had become aware of the possibilities, we actively investigated the evolutionary possibilities of one typology. With a comparable programme, we demonstrated the architectonic possibilities of a self-developed typology in three different situations.

### Clarenburg

More than a year after we began on the design for the WA-House, it became evident that Clarenburg — the most open section of the WA-House but not a component of the VMX plan — needed to expand. At the beginning of the nineties, a two-storey building had been constructed on the grounds of the WA-House. It had been realized in such a way that a third storey could be added in the future.<sup>(62)</sup> The zoning plan also took this

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(62) The design for this building was created by Leo de Jonge Architecten, and dates from 1995.

possibility into account. It seemed obvious to us that the original architect would realize the expansion of Clarenburg, but Armand Höppener asked us to develop an idea. The brief that he — Altrecht — gave us consisted of twelve single rooms for patients, one communal living room, sanitary facilities, and office space for the nursing staff. We seized the opportunity to extend our work for Altrecht, not because we were short of work but because the challenge of placing 'a building on top of a building' was extremely attractive.

After making an analysis of the existing Clarenburg building, we were convinced that the new storey should not consist of a continuation of the existing architecture. Despite its age, this brick architecture, with its playful bay windows and slightly curved ground plan, seemed dated and boring. A new extension would have to have a light, almost temporary character.<sup>(63)</sup> It should not be seen as a new storey but rather as a new roof. This was a qualification of the assignment that induced more associations with residential living than with a hospital. Toying with ideas on building typologies that refer to a light roof construction, the notion of a corrugated iron shed roof arose. This typology consists only of a roof and accommodates a completely flexible inner space. If, as a kind of thought experiment, one were to imagine a shed on top of the existing flat roof of Clarenburg, an almost alienating reference to the classical barrel vaulting arose.

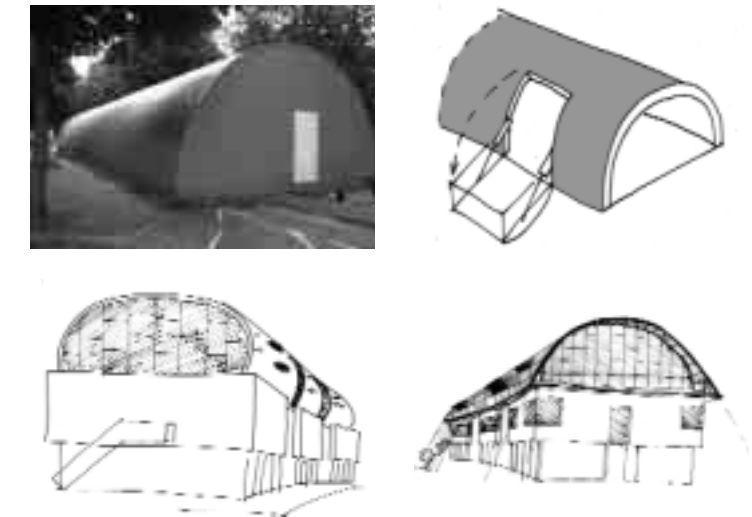
In the presentation in which we articulated our idea of a shed on top of Clarenburg, we first discussed the light-footed nature of temporary constructions such as the field hospital and the shed. Then we demonstrated the possibilities of a round or curved inner space that creates a feeling of security almost by definition, which we illustrated with images of an igloo and other primitive residential forms. After this, we showed our modern variant: a photo collage of a modified standard shed with clearly articulated windows and with an almost banana-shaped floor plan, just like the existing Clarenburg.

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(63) Just like our inclusive design for the WA-House, the temporary character of this construction was based on our observation that (psychiatric) hospitals are changing at an ever-increasing rate due to the fact that medical insight is re-appraised every five to ten years. Our attitude to this was to conceive buildings that combined an internal flexibility with a modern exterior.



Different options for adding an extra floor to the Clarenburg building.



Adding a typology to the Clarenburg building that would only be roof: a corrugated iron shed.



The Clarenburg building without and with the new, almost classical extension.

Not unanimously enthusiastic but convinced of the necessity to make a radical break with the existing architecture, and taking into consideration the alienating reference to classical architecture and simultaneously the light-footed nature of the new section, the Altrecht people agreed to a further elaboration of our idea. However, the elaboration soon showed that the use of pre-fab shed systems was impossible because these were too rudimentary and did not allow any adaptation. But the image and the spatial possibilities were so strong that we went looking for other possibilities to implement a semi-circular cap. A construction consisting of pre-fab steel frames to which profiled steel plates with beams and common ground are fixed, combined with insulation material and a top layer of plastic finishing, seemed to be the best method. In the meantime, the plans for the rest of the WA-House had assumed a more tangible form and it became clear that Clarenburg did not enjoy highest priority. In order to enable the demolition and new construction of the WA-House, it turned out to be necessary to re-accommodate another section somewhere else. Apparently still enthusiastic about the co-operation, Altrecht asked us to put aside Clarenburg for the moment and to investigate the possibilities for new construction at a location in the vicinity: the sanatorium in Zeist.

#### Eikenboom

In order to deal with the logistics of the new construction of the WA-House in Utrecht, it was necessary to move the Eikenboom — a section of the WA-House — to Zeist. As mentioned, VMX was asked to investigate the possibilities of that site. Because the Eikenboom is a section for patients with psychosomatic complaints who are largely dependent on wheelchairs, we first studied the possibility of adapting one of the existing sanatorium buildings. However, our conclusion was that most buildings could only be adapted with great difficulty to the requirements of the patients. Only one building could be considered for this treatment but the premises were too small to accommodate the



The Eikenboom building as it was with a tea pavilion.

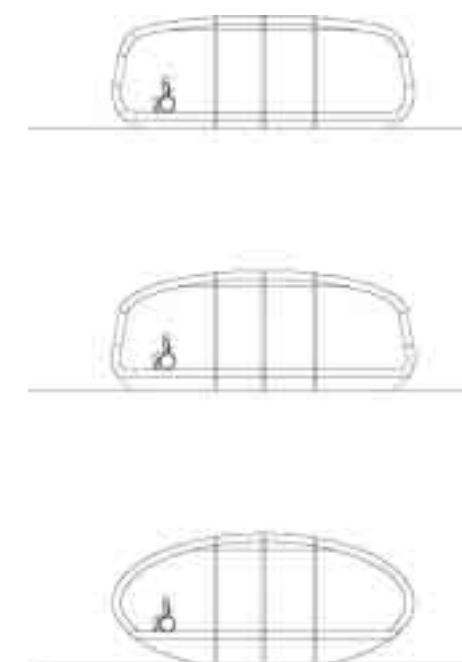
entire section. Subsequently applying the technique of adding pavilion-like structure to the existing structure of large buildings, we investigated the possibility of adding a pavilion to the only building on the site suitable for conversion. The location where the pavilion could be built was great: a campus-like construction in a beautiful beech wood. Our experiences with Altrecht had taught us that we had to generate a design for a client who wanted a kind of old-fashioned simplicity. Although Altrecht was one of the largest psychiatric institutions in the Netherlands, they did not attach value to an overdose of luxury, for neither the patients nor the staff and not even for the managers: everything had to be basic, in a good way. Thus, we took a simple box-shaped volume as the model for the pavilion in Zeist. We tested different variants and discovered that, as a consequence of the specific demands for the patients in question, the sleeping accommodation for the patients could best be placed in the new construction, and the rest of the programme — mainly areas for therapy — could be accommodated in the existing building.

The simple pavilion models that we thought up were quite good, but they lacked an outspoken relationship with the surrounding woods. Once we had made a programmatic distinction between the pavilion and the existing construction, it suddenly became clear that the pavilion consisted of more or less the same assignment as Clarenburg. The question was: could we propose the same solution here?<sup>(64)</sup> As a kind of test case, we tried to design a pavilion based on the Clarenburg ideas.

Because the preconditions in Zeist differed from the conditions in Utrecht, we eventually produced a different form. In contrast to Utrecht, a solitary object now had to be designed, an object that was not added to a roof surface but had to harmonize with the landscape. With Clarenburg in mind, and with the intention to minimize the surface area but maximize the view for the patients, it turned out to be possible to design a circular pavilion: a 'doughnut', as we soon began to call it.



Early models Eikenboom.

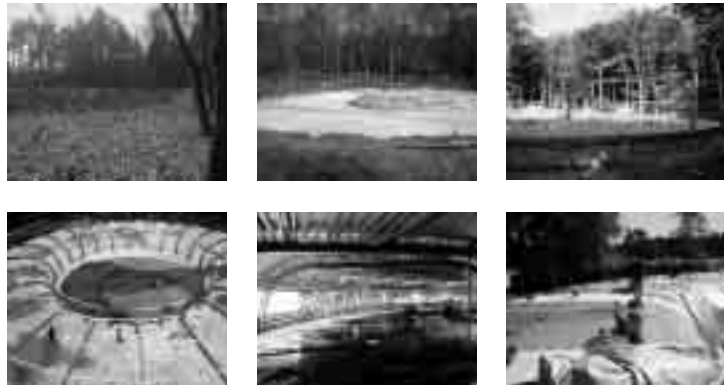


Early sections Eikenboom.



Doughnut model.

(64) As an architect, you are almost conditioned to think that the only explanation of the concept of originality is that you have to reinvent the wheel in every situation, have to begin right from the very start. The fact that it can also be interesting to re-use existing ideas — one's own or those created by others — comes as a bit of a shock to some people. Willem Jan Neutelings calls this re-use a form of laziness and states polemically: "laziness (...) is one of an architect's most useful characteristics". In Neutelings's view, the re-use of typologies, making a series, is regarded as productive laziness. See also: Neutelings, Willem Jan, 'On Laziness: recycling, sculptural mathematics & ingenuity', in *ELCroquis* no. 94, pp. 6-11, 1999.



The making of Eikenboom.



Courtyard and connecting corridor Eikenboom.

The patients' rooms were in the outer ring of the doughnut, the rooms for the staff were in the inner ring around their own inner courtyard. The distances between the staff and the patients were reduced to the width of a circular corridor that began and ended in the communal living room. Besides making optimum use of the view, the building, with its rounded façade, fits in smoothly with the surroundings. We were not interested in dominating nature by means of architecture, but rather in creating symbiosis between the building and the environment. The design was conceived with the idea in mind that the bright green synthetic façade would eventually be covered with climbing plants.

The Welstand (Building Inspectorate) in Zeist was immediately enthusiastic. Our idea of light-footedness and temporariness fitted in well with the aim to make as little impact as possible upon the existing wood. Although we never mentioned it so emphatically, an extreme form of durable building resounded through our observations because the pavilion could be relatively easily dismantled and reconstructed elsewhere.<sup>(65)</sup>

In contrast to our previous projects, the pavilion in Zeist did not primarily originate in the function but rather in an idea on form, a cross-section actually. When it became evident that we could again deploy one of our own designs, we discovered how this idea literally offered scope for modification into a related but simultaneously unique solution: the idea of an architectonic series was born. Because the pavilion in Zeist was needed earlier than Clarenburg, the second model from our series was the first one realized. However, the issue of the extent to which an architectonic series can be extended was not yet topical; that would only arise later.

#### Wier+

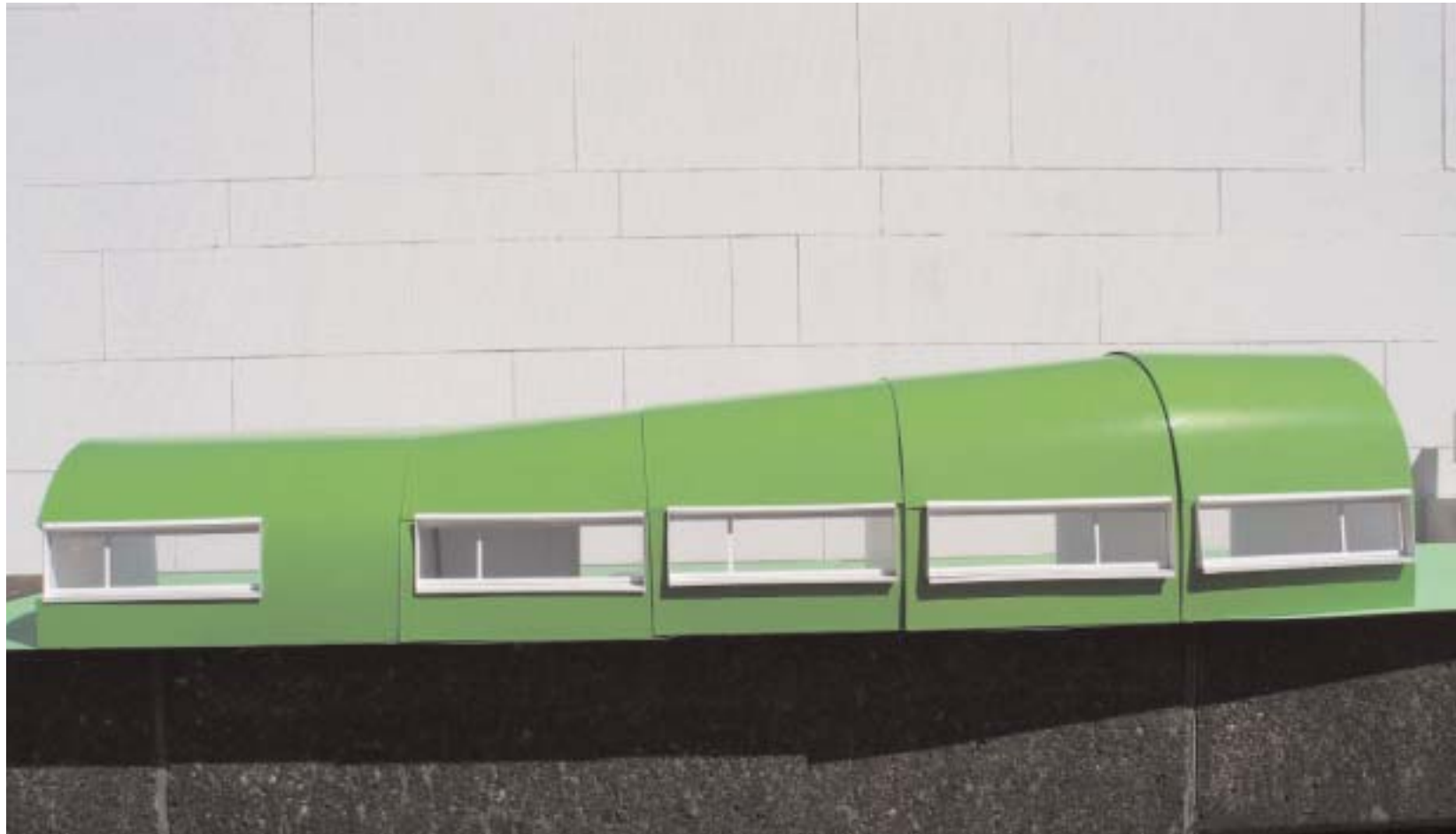
2003 was a poor year for us. In the summer, we mentioned to Siebo Wesdorp — head of the Housing Department of Altrecht — how VMX was doing and that we were short of work. We told

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(65) In our explanation of the design, we explicitly discussed the fact that there are no tabula rasa locations in the Netherlands. Every location has a history that is damaged to a larger or smaller extent when new buildings are constructed. By consciously dealing with history and the transience of various kinds of buildings, an interesting field of tension between preservation and innovation can be created.



Eikenboom, exterior.



Model Wier+, showing that in the elongated version of the building type we developed, the dimensions had to grow to fit the programme.

him openly that we were having a difficult time and that there seemed to be no improvement on the horizon. We had never had recourse to anything like this before, it had never been necessary. It was not easy to ask for work, at least, not for us. We had been able to get along for eight years with the things that came our way but, with a shortage of work, times were getting difficult. Prior to the discussion with Siebo, Leon had been ringing the alarm bells for around six months, saying that the finances were not looking good, but I did not feel the severity of the situation because we were hard at work. Of course, Leon saw that the work we were doing was finite and that, in order to guarantee continuity, we had to have two or three new assignments a year.

There are always plenty of people who promise you things and assure you that you are on their list (of architects). But waiting passively to see if anything derives from this assurance is not a very safe tactic. When it turned out that we did not receive any assignments at all in the period from January 2003 to the summer of that year, we decided we would have to adopt a more active strategy. Siebo was the first person we approached. We did not go to him to ask for work, but we wished to make it clear to him that VMX had accumulated much knowledge and that we were eager to hold on to our employees. Of course, the structure of VMX was partly the consequence of Siebo himself — read *Altrecht* — but the knife cut both ways; *Altrecht* also benefited from the maintenance of our knowledge. The bottom line was, however, that we had to try to sell our services, just like sales representatives selling photocopiers.

It was our last working day before the holidays and it was great weather. Having sat down at the desk with Siebo, our only message was: "Listen, we need work, can you help us?" It was a strange discussion, but we departed with a good feeling. Siebo was surprised that VMX hadn't mentioned this previously? He wanted to help, showed us a long list of projects, and promised



*Altrecht* facility at Den Dolder.

us that we would be placed on the list. It was not easy to do this, we went there with lead in our shoes, but subsequently we were glad that we had done so.

The first assignment we received as a result of the discussion with Siebo was a day nursery for Altrecht's branch in Den Dolder. We performed an initial study of this project but after we had completed the study it remained disconcertingly quiet. In a roundabout way, we discovered that the day nursery would certainly not go to Den Dolder and that the project actually no longer existed. We then approached Armand Höppener.

We knew that he wanted to organize an architect-selection procedure for the re-accommodation of a section in Den Dolder and we told him that we needed more than a 'nursery job'. In the next meeting that we had with him, it turned out that we had again been placed on a list. This was a great disappointment but we did not dare to show this in the meeting. When we were walking to the carpark after the meeting, we realized that we had to be more direct and we decided to walk back. Leon addressed Armand with a remark something like: "We actually came to plead with you Armand, please consider our office when issuing the assignment." Armand laughed a little and said he would think about it.<sup>(66)</sup>

At the beginning of 2004 Altrecht commissioned us to make a design for the accommodation of 24 mentally retarded psychiatric criminals: Wier+, as the project was called. A new forensic section was to be realized as a component of four other institutions for the same target group in the Altrecht grounds in Den Dolder.<sup>(67)</sup>

At first sight, it was a completely different target group from that at Clarenburg or De Eikenboom, but a closer look at the programme indicated that, here too, there was mention of patients' rooms, collective living rooms, treatment rooms, and offices. The only difference with Utrecht and Zeist was that the patients in Den Dolder would be locked in and would need a secured

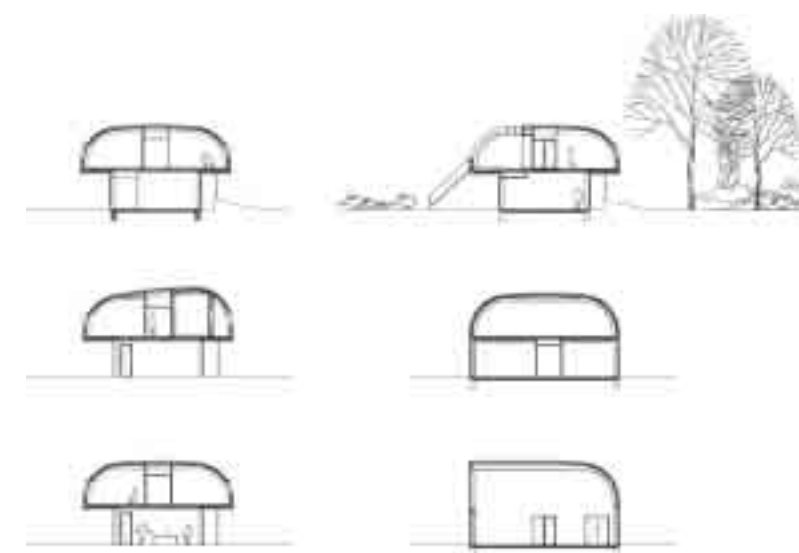
exterior space at their disposal. An important correspondence between Wier+ and the Eikenboom was the wooded location in which the programme was to be realized.<sup>(68)</sup>

Just as in Zeist, we first analysed the existing buildings in Den Dolder and we reached the conclusion that it would be possible to link two existing buildings with a new elongated building in such a way that a secure inner garden would be created between the buildings. We tested different variants but I actually knew right from the outset that I wanted to test the Clarenburg idea for possible application here. We interpreted the requirement to have a two-storey-high fence around the exterior space of Wier+ as a request to convert the cross-section of the Clarenburg model: a building as a fence. To put it simply, we used the same cross-section for the design for Wier+ as we had used for the design of Clarenburg. However, in Den Dolder, the building has been elevated one storey from the ground and we allowed it to float on a glass ground floor. In order to spare as many trees as possible but still enclose sufficient space in the inner garden, we developed a boomerang-like floor plan for Wier+. The patients' rooms are again situated in the outer ring and on the first floor, benefiting to the maximum from the spectacular view of the wood. The inner ring of the first floor contains all the living rooms. Protected from too much sunlight by an overhang on the first floor, the ground floor is reserved for the therapy areas.

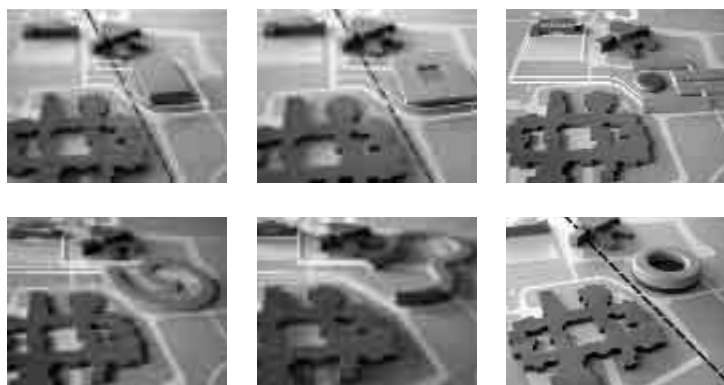
Building permission was sought for Wier+ at the end of 2004. We were rather enthusiastic about the third variant in our series, but in the last meetings I had an increasing feeling that the boundaries of the idea had been reached. Armand was not as enthusiastic as before, he seemed to have agreed in order not to delay the process.<sup>(69)</sup> Altrecht is without doubt one of our main clients and they gave us a good opportunity to design a series of buildings. They helped us through our lean period. In short, they were the perfect clients, but after five years of intensive co-operation our relationship now has more ups and downs.



Models of the elongated version of the building type we had developed for Clarenburg and Eikenboom.



Sections of Wier+.



Testing different variants for housing 24 mentally retarded psychiatric patients in Den Dolder.

(66) Armand Höppener first gave us a private assignment as consultants in the reconstruction of his mother in laws house, but nothing extra issued from that.

(67) The reason for the opening of the five forensic sections mentioned was the outcome of a study in 2001 that showed that an increasing number of delinquents with behavioural disorders were being locked up without any treatment. It also appeared that the crimes they were committing were becoming increasingly serious. A possible answer to this undesirable situation is suitable treatment, according to an ANP new item in the *Utrechts Nieuwsblad* of 01.09.2003.

(68) An important difference with Clarenburg, the Eikenboom, and the WA-House was that, in the assignment for Wier+, we could convince Altrecht that PTG was no longer necessary as an intermediary. Leon now became the project manager and thus fulfilled two functions, giving an indication of the confidence that people had in us.

(69) However, that Armand Höppener still has confidence in VMX is indicated by the fact that after Wier+ VMX was appointed to function as the supervisor for the entire area in Den Dolder. A project that issued from this is the reorganization of the so-called 'historical middle axis' of the grounds — Den Dolder Middenas — which is a long-term transformation project.

## NEW DISCIPLINES

### Reinventing the office building

On 16 October 2001 we received a letter from Jo Coenen, then the Rijksbouwmeester (Government Architect).<sup>(70)</sup> In his letter, Coenen invited us to participate with four other offices in the selection for the new construction of the Department of Public Works in Rijswijk.<sup>(71)</sup> We were extremely honoured to be asked. The project covered the design of an office building for a Public Works Department that is engaged in the management of the Dutch part of the North Sea: the Directie Noordzee (DNZ).

This organization is responsible for the water management, the nautical infrastructure, the management of the fleet and all the associated co-ordinating and administrative tasks on the North Sea. In order to make a choice from the selected architects, each office was asked to formulate written responses to the 'points of concern' raised by the Government Architect.

His points were:

- Vision of the location and the urban planning context.
- Vision of the character of an office and on the working climate in view of the ambition of the Public Works Department.
- Vision on the task of realizing the building within the established budget and within the available time.
- Vision on the intention to tender out this project in an innovative manner, in the form of an engineer & build contract.

Besides these visions, a description of one's own office also had to be provided.

We took the invitation from the Government Architect as if it were an architectural competition, and we compiled a booklet in which we articulated our responses and intentions. We were not enthusiastic about the location. In our view it was a rather anonymous spot in an equally unimaginative business park that could be anywhere in the Netherlands. A striking element was the fact that the rectangular parcel had clearly different bound-



The former office building of Directie Noordzee.

<sup>(70)</sup> The function of the Government Architect is traditionally fulfilled by architects: 1971-1974 Jo Vegter, 1974-1979 Wim Quist, 1979-1986 Tjeerd Dijkstra, 1986-1988 Frans van Gool, 1988-1989 Jan Dirk Peereboom Voller, 1989-1995 Kees Rijnboutt, 1995-2000 Wytze Patijn, 2000-2004 Jo Coenen, and from 2004 onward Mels Crowel.

<sup>(71)</sup> The other offices that were invited were: Luc Deleu, Van Herk & De Kleijn, NL Architects, and Christiaan Rapp. According to Coenen, the selection was based on the fact that the selected offices had all responded to the annual appeal with regard to non-public European tenders. The wide range of architects that were proposed indicated that the authorities were seeking divergent visions.

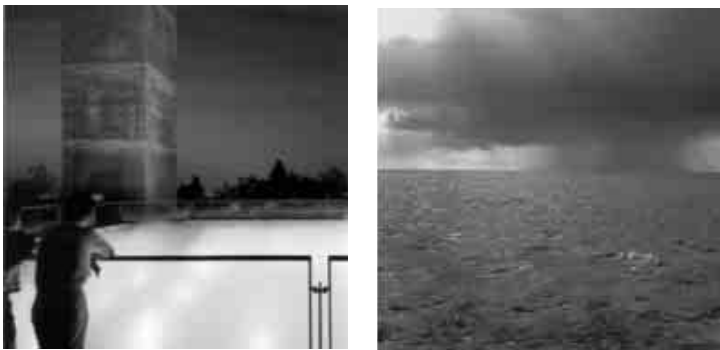
aries: at the front, it was accessed by a road, at the back it was bounded by a canal and a railway line, and on the long sides it was wedged between two mediocre office buildings. With this situation as the starting point and the above-mentioned wish for the character of the building, we subsequently investigated both extravert and introvert typologies. We examined the possibilities of designing the office as an object on the parcel or of organizing the office around inner courtyards. We represented the results of our study in images of models in our book. In the light of our negative assessment of the architectural context, the latter typology enjoyed our preference. We proposed further research of this model if there was a follow-on assignment. The idea of an office built up of introvert spaces grouped around patios that could offer interesting possibilities for a pleasant working climate was the image that we sketched for DNZ.

The concept of the building was soon clear to us. Perhaps not very original but very apt this time, we referred to the image of an *ocean liner*. What interested us in this image was not the appearance of a ship but rather the feeling of being one of the (ship's) crew in this new office.

With regard to the literal appearance of the office, we deliberately avoided making outspoken statements. We only said that the office ought to refer to the heroic structures for which the Department of Public Works is renowned. In addition to ideas about a relationship with the exterior areas and the idea of a ship's crew, we also proposed different variants for everyday operations. For example, we described how the inevitable conference culture ought to be more flexible in the new office.

The entire range, varying from *pit-stop meetings* standing around a table to extensive conferences that could easily take the whole day, ought to be included in the design. In other words, the office with civil servants as the crew ought to offer scope for creative solutions within the office work. Because we were (and are) convinced that the best solution from these endless variants could only be distilled from close consultation with

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Images we used in order to refer indirectly to the idea of an ocean liner.

the client, our book expressed doubt about turnkey solutions. We pointed to our office project in Zaltbommel in which we had had an unwelcome experience with tendering out so-called 'standard architectural activities'.<sup>(72)</sup> Accordingly, we proposed the opposite: "In your assignment, we expect to achieve the best result if we can work with a complete assignment. We are convinced that we are capable of realizing the best project for the DNZ and the Department of Public Works at the lowest construction cost within a traditional building process with multiple tenders."<sup>(73)</sup> In terms of working within the budget, we pointed out that VMX is a partnership of a designer and a manager. We had always managed to realize previous projects within the available budget and time and we had no reason to believe that it would be otherwise this time.

It was a strategic choice to emphasize our creativity, display various solutions, and to produce a document (A3 book) as the result of a brainstorming session instead of resounding answers to the questions posed. We did not wish to accentuate our authority as architects but rather to make clear that we had thought about the issue and had formed our own opinion, although we were also open to suggestions from future users. The fact that this approach contained the risk of being seen as sympathetic but also as hesitant was inevitable. However, we found that we had to take this risk because it was the only way that we could see ourselves working with the Department of Public Works. Apparently this was a good appraisal. Our book contained something everyone could recognize, and shortly after we had submitted it we received a phone call from Herma de Wijn, the deputy government architect. She said that VMX had been selected for the assignment. Her call came just before Christmas and what made it even more extraordinary was the fact that just after that we heard that we had received the assignment in the selection for the Kinder Cluster Noord in Leidsche Rijn. I think that we have never had such a good Christmas and New Year as in 2001. After the events in New

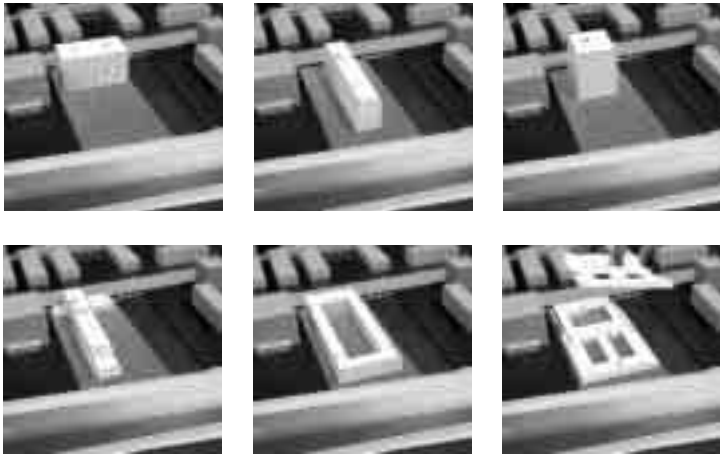
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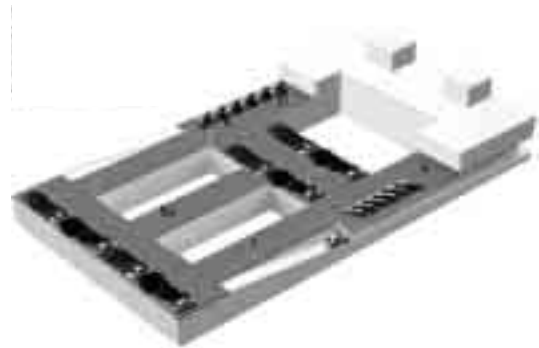
Site seen from one of the neighbouring plots.  
Site seen from side adjoining the railway line.

(72) See the section on HZMMC in the 'Discovering materials' episode of this book. This related how VMX was not allowed to do the supervision or the interior, which was a great disappointment.

(73) Selection document Directie Noordzee, 13 November 2001, VMX archives.



Testing various solutions.



Collage of our first (introvert) design proposal, organized around inner courtyards, turning its back on the context and creating parking space on the rooftops.



Model of the introverted typology we designed and model of the centralized typology we designed.

York earlier that year, the world was still in a state of shock, but we were euphoric about the new assignments.

The euphoria soon ebbed away when we heard from the project manager Herman van Langen that we would only be concerned with the project to the end of the final design stage, and there was also something else. In a phone call that Leon had with Herma at the end of 2001, she had mentioned two things: one was that the budget would be quite low and the other was that we would not have any contact with the client. The Ministry of Housing and Construction would be the intermediary between the client and the architect.

It turned out that the Directie Noordzee had had an unpleasant experience with another architect before we became involved in the project, so that they now wished to take a radically different approach.<sup>(74)</sup> To the Ministry of Housing and Construction, it was the first time that they implemented a project on a project basis. Van Langen had been specially hired to manage the project and strict agreements had been made with the Directie Noordzee concerning the planning schedules and the budget. The fact that the new working method still had growing pains is shown by the following anecdote.

Shortly after the start of the project, Herman van Langen came to our office on a spontaneous visit, along with his boss, whose name later turned out to be Mark Smit. Even before Smit had introduced himself, he began to yell at us. He said we were not working properly, that there were enough problems with the client, etc. We were astonished! We had never met the man, and Leon asked him if he would introduce himself before shouting in such a manner. It was a very unprofessional attitude and we actually seriously thought about withdrawing from the project, we could not and did not wish to work with such people. We had imaged that an assignment from a Ministry would be quite different. We thought that the government architect would be the perfect client but in actual practice it turned out that we did not

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<sup>(74)</sup> It has always remained unclear to us what the problem was with the first design. We first saw the design of Moriko Kira — the first architect chosen by DNZ — after we had completed our own design. She had clearly produced a made-to-measure solution, but the design had been rejected for reasons that were vague. In view of the quality of Kira's design, it is probable that the problems were political.

communicate with them but with commercial loudmouths.<sup>(75)</sup> After consultations with the office of the government architect, we agreed that in the future we would be able to have contact with people from the government architect as well as the users of the building, and that we would continue with our plans.

In the design, we wanted to create a building with a spatial dimension, however difficult that might be. After the spectacular office landscape that MVRDV had realized in the Villa VPRO (1997), we also wanted to re-invent the office. Having expressed our preference for an introvert model in the selection procedure, we analysed the history of the office since the mid-twentieth century in more general terms. We discovered a number of interesting stages in this evolution.

In the stage just after the Second World War, office design was strongly influenced by the principles of 'scientific management' as developed by Frederick Taylor and others. Taylor believed that office work, just like conveyor-belt work, could be divided into individual tasks that could be optimized and standardized. These ideas received the purest spatial translation in the first North American office blocks, and this would become the worldwide standard for decades to come. In the early sixties (1963) an innovative office concept appeared in Europe when the Quickborner Team, led by Wolfgang and Eberhard Schnelle, coupled the advantages of the American office to the theories of the American theorist Douglas McGregor. Human interaction then became the central theme in office design. Instead of sitting in rows facing the head of the section, the staff positioned themselves in a more independent configuration. The hierarchical structure of the company no longer determined the arrangement of the workstations, the layout was determined by the workflow. Communication no longer took place vertically, but horizontally, between the staff themselves.

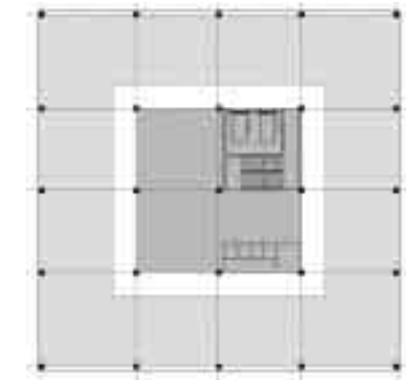
The oil crisis of 1973 was the first severe blow that technology had to suffer. As one of the results a schism occurred. From that

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<sup>(75)</sup> In retrospect, we believe that Herman van Langen supervised the project excellently. In fact, he ensured that we did not feel as if we were working for the Ministry of Housing and Construction. Without Van Langen the entire project may not have been so successful, many committees would have had to have their say, and we could well have landed in administrative rigmarole.

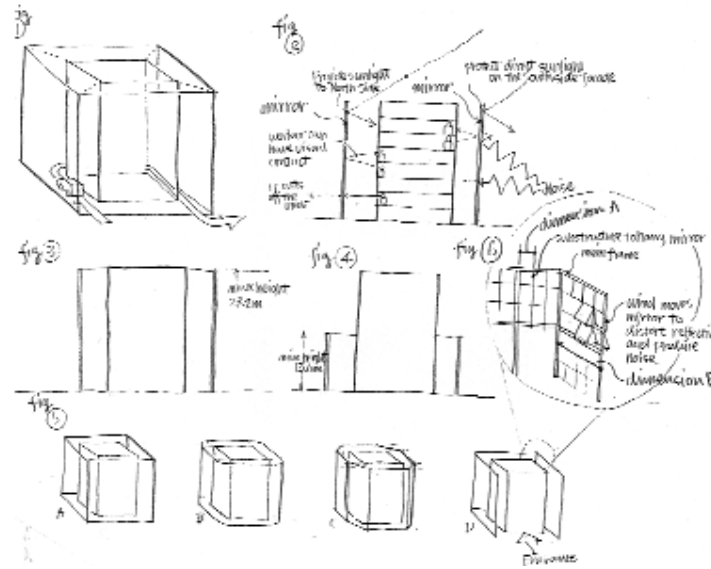
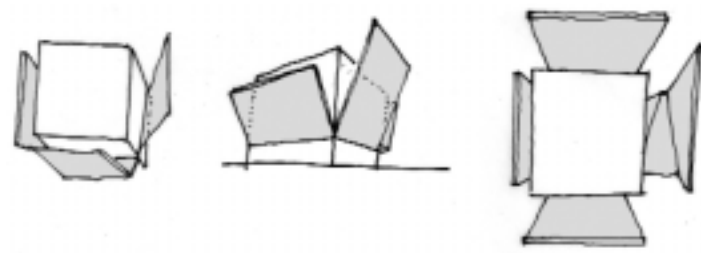


Plans and section of the introverted typology.



Plan of the centralized typology.





Sketches for making a double façade for the centralized typology by creating a sound barrier and the opportunity to open individual windows in the actual office building.

moment onward, the developments in Northern Europe and the Anglo-American world no longer ran parallel.

In the North-European welfare states, office staff obtained more influence over their working circumstances. Because cell-like offices with regulable natural ventilation and lighting met these ergonomic conditions best, this office concept became popular here.<sup>(76)</sup> In the Anglo-American world, the economy was the driving force behind the evolution of the office building. In contrast to the 'custom-made' European office blocks, the vast majority of the offices here were rented, and the investors expected to earn their money back within a period of five years. To meet the demands of privacy, communication and concentration, the solution was sought in new office furniture. Cubicles made their appearance — minimum room cells, open at the top, which can be arranged flexibly on empty office floors. In other words the role of the architect here was reduced to the shell of the building and the reception area.

The introduction of the PC and the globalization of international finance in the mid-eighties unleashed new developments. New requirements for lighting, data cables, ventilation, and the cooling of the new computer equipment resulted in a substantial demand for more space, and the standard floor-ceiling height was increased. When research into the Sick Building Syndrome revealed the relationship between the working environment and the performance level, the user-oriented office concept also began to gain ground in the Anglo-American countries.

From the early nineties onward, information technology — stimulated by the miniaturization of computers and telephones — influenced the organization of the office company. Staff became increasingly independent of place and time, made use of all kinds of networks, and worked in flexible co-operative patterns. Flexibility was the magic word, or, as the sociologist Ricard Sennett describes it: "People change jobs several times in their lives. People in enterprises no longer speak of 'jobs' but rather of 'projects' and 'workfields'. Many of the tasks that companies

(76) Serious attempts to combine the advantages of the free-floor plan — read: easy mutual communication — with a cell-like office concept were only undertaken in Sweden in this period. In 1978, the first combi-office was built, a combination of cell and openness, the Canon office in Solna, designed by Tengbom Architects.

once performed have now been tendered out to small companies and to people on the basis of short-term contracts. As a consequence, enterprises are now engaged in a permanent process of change."<sup>(77)</sup>

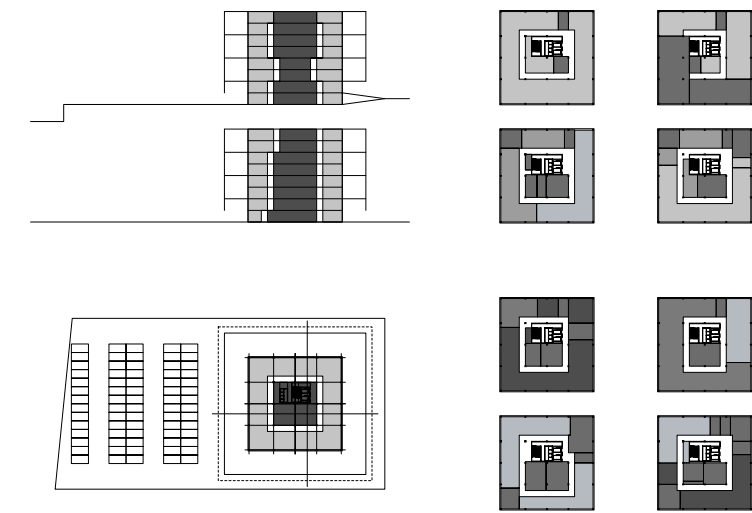
In our attempt to rediscover the office building, it became clear to us that we would not take the prototypical office — 12.60 m deep with a surface area of 1000 m<sup>2</sup> — as our starting point.

However, in working out the patio model, the required number of parking places produced great problems. Another possibility that we investigated for that reason was a plinth with a social programme, a front office above which the real offices would be organized in a slender volume. Without direct input from the user, however, it was very difficult to come to a conclusion.

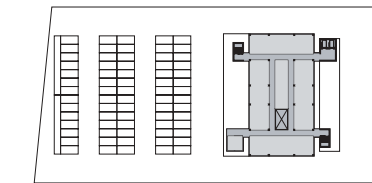
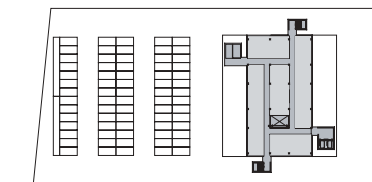
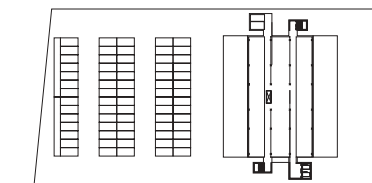
Under pressure from the planning schedule, we agreed a compromise with the Ministry of Housing and Construction: a rectangular volume, in the middle of the parcel, with a floor area of 700 m<sup>2</sup> per storey, eight storeys high, with flexible floor plans so that all shafts and cores would be located outside the main volume of the building. After the principle of the free floor plan with external access had been established, the image of the civil servant who had to cross a bridge — almost a gangplank — to reach his or her office arose. On his way to and from the wc and the coffee machine, the employee would pass the façade of the main volume at least twice a day.

However, it was still unclear what this façade would look like. Because our analysis indicated that the important aspect of modern office blocks is not the incidence of light but rather the cooling, we arranged a meeting with building physicists as soon as possible. These discussions indicated that the problem of overheating can best be dealt with by giving the building a mass and by reserving only a limited percentage of the façade for windows. A massive box was actually the best. When these ingredients for our office design had become clear, I knew what I wanted for the exterior of the building: I wanted a monolithic

(77) Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, Dutch translation, published by Byblos (2000).



Sections and plans for centralized typology with double façade.



Variations of a free floor plan, with all shafts, cores and access pushed out.



We had once suggested round windows for the hotel extension of our building at Zaltbommel. The client did not like our idea then, but we thought it was perfect for DNZ.

office block with round windows.<sup>(78)</sup> The round windows would make the floors unrecognizable, we would be able to command the view, and overheating by the sun would be kept to a minimum.

My idea for the façade was not immediately welcomed by the Government Architect. On 3 April Jo Coenen wrote a letter to Herman van Langen: "The approach to the project, the vision of the grounds and the building, and the concept for the partitioning and use of the building are appealing. (...) However, I would prefer further study of the façade in relation to the effect as a monolith and the effect of the façade openings: which variants in the field of materials and openings are suitable to achieve this effect. The openings, as visible from the street, still reflect a clear stratification in the storeys. Furthermore, I experience the openings, as seen from the inside, as being very dominant in the determination of the working climate."<sup>(79)</sup> As a reaction to this letter Herman suddenly became very nervous about us conforming to the planning schedule.

In an attempt to solve the problem, I decided to phone Jo myself. I knew him and had met him at Kristin Feireiss's farewell party. Jo arrived rather late then, and when it turned out that he knew several people I was sitting at the table with, I gave him my seat, something I regarded as normal but which he seemed to greatly appreciate. In addition, he had recently seen work by my students at the Academie van Bouwkunst in Tilburg. There was a kind of kindred spirit that gave me the confidence to phone him. In the discussion that followed, Jo soon got to the point about the windows: "If you think that it will be alright, then I'll agree." The latent problem of the round windows was thus solved and it was great to receive so much trust from someone. After the choice of the round windows, the next question covered the place in the façade where the frames should be inserted. Because round windows collect rainwater, we had two options: placing the frames deep in the façade, or pushing them

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<sup>(78)</sup> VMX had suggested round windows in previous projects — for the extension of the HZMMC, and also elliptical windows in the Sarphatistraat and for the WA-House. The idea of round windows for DNZ originated from the combination of creating a monolith and limiting the window surface area of the office block.

<sup>(79)</sup> Jo Coenen, in a letter to Herman van Langen dated 3 April 2002, VMX archives.

outward. When on a company trip to Copenhagen we saw, by chance, a building with round windows right 'on the façade', the problem was solved. The frames would 'float' as a kind of gigantic waterdrops on the tiled skin of the building.<sup>(80)</sup>

Against the wishes of the project management team but at our insistence, we were allowed to present the design to the client in Rijswijk. The presentation for the director Sjef Jacobs and a number of his close staff members took place on 22 April. I presented our studies and talked about our idea of the motivated civil servant who, as a crew member, would form an indispensable link within the whole. I pointed to the heroic constructions of the Department of Public Works and I mentioned that we thought that the DNZ office ought to have a similar robustness, ought to radiate determination and distinction at this non-location. I subsequently explained the floor plans. I illustrated how the empty floors could easily be changed into a cell office or in a working landscape. Only toward the end of the presentation did I mention the façade, the round windows, and the idea of giving the building a skin of round tiles.<sup>(81)</sup>

Jacobs and his staff responded very enthusiastically, they immediately wanted to schedule a new presentation in which we could show the design to a larger group of staff. I had not expected so much enthusiasm. I had only heard from the Ministry of Housing and Construction how difficult the client was, but reality turned out to be different. Nothing stood in the way of a rapid realization of the design, and the already high rate of design was further increased. The definitive design and the specifications had to be rounded off in such a short time that there was not even time to complete the design with scale models.

This was pretty frustrating, there were many small aspects that I wanted to test and change. For example, I was not satisfied with the way in which the building met the ground, nor with the effect of the windows in relation to the ground floor, things that

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<sup>(80)</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to rediscover this reference project in Copenhagen.

<sup>(81)</sup> VMX opted for an office with a striking countenance, although with an open office floor, rather than the standard notion of the generic office with an anonymous façade and differentiated floors. We believe that the freedom to partition the floor as one pleases contributes to the flexibility and the façade can give our building a characteristic countenance.



Sample of the round tiles that would cover DNZ like scales.

can easily be adjusted if scale models are used. But there was no more time for this. The tendering of the contract was unremittingly planned for November 2002. Then we would have one year to build the office block.

Troublesome details that demanded much investigation were: a skin of round blue-glazed tiles around two centimetres thick for the office volume and black stucco work for the external towers, both volumes with rounded corners, and a façade material that would turn the corner. The implementation of the whole could not be grasped in one go because no one knew for certain what the expansion effect of the tiles, in particular, would be. The number, the form and capacity for the expansion joints was the topic of lengthy discussion even up to the construction stage.<sup>(82)</sup> Here too, the strict planning schedule played a major role. Just like the design process, the implementation also requires time.

However, the Ministry of Housing and Construction were contented, their only anxiety was that the budget or the planning schedule would be exceeded. With the low tender leaving some financial leeway, we were given the opportunity to adjust the design.<sup>(83)</sup> Because the number of windows had been reduced in a previous economizing session and the glass façades had been removed from the tower blocks, we decided to reverse these changes. In retrospect, this was probably our greatest mistake. The cheaper and simpler version of the building would probably have been better.<sup>(84)</sup> Something that did not have a direct relationship with the costs but rather with the fact that the façade we designed was realized manually is the fact that the daily production can be seen on the wall and at the spots where the scaffolding was anchored. Furthermore, the black colour of the tower blocks now appears to be too dark, it should have been greyer.

After the design for the office building, we also succeeded in obtaining the assignment for the interior. Since our design for

the WA-House in Utrecht, we had been trying to take on other designers in our company besides architects and engineer, but there was never a real opportunity to do so. Keeping in mind the disappointment of the office buildings in Zaltbommel where we were not allowed to design the interior, we were now given the chance to employ an interior architect. This was Martijn Prins.

In conjunction with Martijn, we elaborated the idea of allowing the staff to experience the large empty area in the building in one way or another. Our proposal was to place the archives in the middle of the floor plan on each storey and to organize the workstations loosely around these. However, the vast majority of the employees wanted to have office cells. Reluctantly we subsequently divided our 'empty' office plan into cells. When, during the implementation of the construction, it turned out that the size of the company would decrease and a part of the office space would be rented out to a third party, we again insisted on an open layout. Having acquired expertise in interior design, the incorporation of a new discipline within VMX, we turned out to be capable of ensuring that all these changes led to an enhancement of the quality of the interior rather than a decline. Our recommendations were finally accepted by the client, and half of the building was implemented as an office landscape.

We were reserved about promoting the DNZ building, but the building was so striking that it received a great deal of attention from the press, even before completion. I knew that the NAI Prize would be awarded just after the completion of the building and my own experience as a jury member had taught me just how pleasant it was, to be surprised by something you had not seen before. Thinking that DNZ could offer this surprise and thus have a good chance of success, I deliberately tried to keep the building out of the press reports. In retrospect, this was a great mistake. The selection for the NAI Prize turned out to consist of only the most publicized buildings of the past year. My idea that a new, fresh, and unpublished building would be attractive to the jury turned out to be completely erroneous.



The making of DNZ.

(82) Initially the contractor agreed to pointing every 6 m<sup>2</sup>. During the construction, however, he had second thoughts and demanded that the tiles should be applied on a cavity construction and with a different pattern for the dilation joints.

(83) This was a very strange situation. In general, a client whose building turns out to be cheaper than expected would be delighted. It was different however with the Department of Public Works. The budgets are agreed in advance and if there is money over, the budget is reduced for the following year. Thus, we had to spend the money that had been reserved for the building although we had designed a cheaper building.

(84) This version was simpler and more straightforward so that the image of the central volume with four flanking tower blocks linked by overhead bridges would have been clearer.



Images of the finished project, working space and restaurant.

If we really wanted to have a chance, we ought to have promoted the DNZ building as rigorously as possible: a dismaying thought about the influence of the media.

#### The limits of democratic design

In the autumn of 2001 we were invited to participate in a selection procedure for a Brede School (community school) in Hoofddorp.<sup>(85)</sup> During the presentation for the selection committee, I displayed our work and talked enthusiastically about the Study Villa we had realized in Den Bosch. I also showed possible variants for a school in Hoofddorp. In view of the extensive programme, this design offered an interesting opportunity to create a large 'educational object'. I had the impression that the presentation went well and that the selection committee understood my ideas. After the presentation, however, one of the first questions posed indicated that my appraisal had been incorrect.

In an apprehensive tone, one of the members of the committee asked if I had thought about 'the children's format'. Not realizing that this was an important point to them, I responded that the 'children's format' would play no role in this building, it would be primarily a very large building, regardless of how one looked at it. The next question, which sounded even more anxious, was whether or not we had thought about the village culture? Still insensitive to local sentiment, I answered that there could be no mention of a relevant village culture in Hoofddorp; after all, one of the largest infrastructural hubs in the Netherlands — Schiphol airport — lay in its backyard. After this, there followed a series of questions that were more technical and organizational in their nature.

On my way back to the office, I was seized by the idea that perhaps the presentation had not gone as well as I had originally thought. There had been something cool in most of the questions. The day after the presentation, the notion that the selection committee was not enthusiastic about our work was indeed confirmed. Even worse, they had found me exceptionally arro-

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(85) As a result of the decentralization of the welfare policy, educational arrears policy, educational accommodation policy and the funding of schools, school boards, welfare organizations and municipalities have been able to develop their own policies for education and welfare since the end of the nineties. The idea of community schools arose as a consequence of this and as a response to the increasing demand for facilities and services that exceed purely educational responsibilities. There is no single form of community school, there are many variants to which this term refers. The best description of the concept is the definition given by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science: A community school is a coherent network of readily accessible and good facilities for children, young people and families, with the school as the nucleus. Because the community school involves both education and welfare, the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport was also concerned with the development of these schools. The collective aim is to enhance the development opportunities of children.



Entrance of Directie Noordzee.



Images of the finished project, Directie Noordzee.

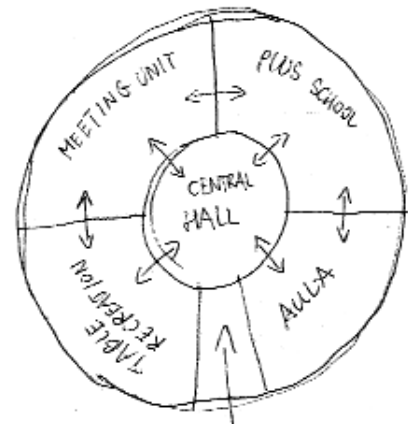
gant! During the internal evaluation of the presentations, the project manager appears to have said that he could never work with someone like this, not with such an office. The frustrating part of the situation was not only that we did not receive the assignment but, above all, it was the feeling that I had made a great error of judgement. In general, I thought I was quite good at assessing clients, estimating the problems, and finding the correct tone with which to approach people. Just as in the first presentation of the Study Villa, I was again completely wrong in the Hoofddorp case, whereas I had nevertheless had the feeling that I had touched on the appropriate points.<sup>(86)</sup> It seemed that I was prone to errors of judgement in the design of schools. After this disastrous experience, I resolved to approach things differently the next time. When we were invited via Edwin Oostmeijer to participate in a selection procedure for a Brede School in Leidsche Rijn shortly afterwards, we did not repeat the mistake of taking our own ideas as the starting point but we took co-operation with the users as the point of departure.<sup>(87)</sup>

Edwin had advised us to enrol for the European tender for the Kinder Cluster Noord (KC-Noord) in Leidsche Rijn. At the largest VINEX location in the country, KC-Noord would be the largest Brede School — people talked of a ‘cluster school’ — in the Netherlands and Edwin was a member of the selection committee. We sent in documentation of our work, but the committee was not immediately enthusiastic. Edwin, who knew our work better and had the feeling that VMX could be an interesting candidate for the assignment, managed to convince his colleagues to give VMX another chance and that they should meet the architects who had produced this work. Accordingly, the complete committee arranged to come to our office in Amsterdam for a presentation of our work and to hear our ideas about the assignment. With the idea of playing on our home territory, we prepared the presentation very thoroughly. Because our office is situated above a garage and the elevator had been out of order

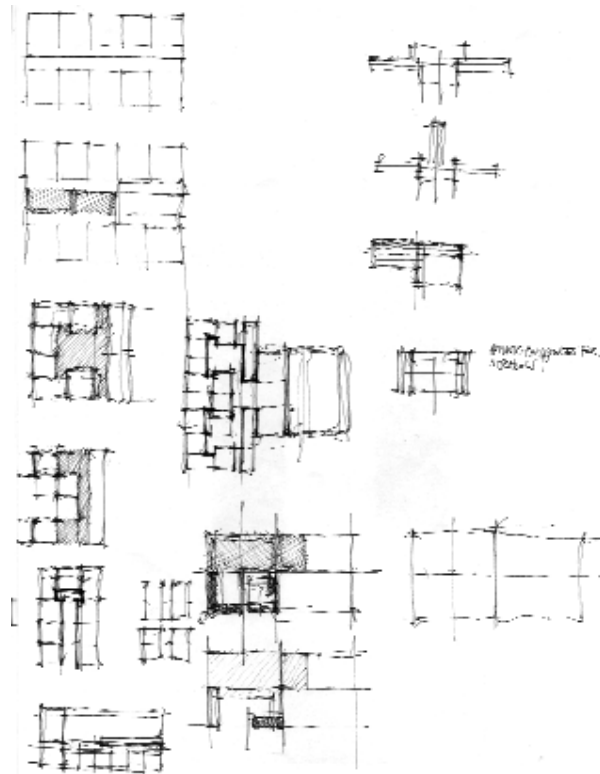
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<sup>(86)</sup> See also the text on the Study Villa in the ‘Discovering materials’ episode of this book.

<sup>(87)</sup> Edwin Oostmeijer was originally a journalist but gradually evolved into a project developer. The reason we know him is that he actively sought contact with us. He had seen our work in a publication — Sarphatistraat and 3UP2DOWN — and he wanted to use pictures of these projects for a selection. After an introductory discussion, we turned out to get along well, so that he suggested us for the KC-Noord project.



Sketch for an ideal school lay out.



Organizational sketches.

for years, we thought up a trick to bridge the difference in height. When the selection committee arrived by touring coach at the garage, we would be ready with a number of smaller buses. The committee members — almost twenty strong — would transfer to these smaller buses and would be taken to the parking deck on the roof via the internal system of ramps and a car elevator. There they would get out and enter our office via the roof garden. It was a great reception, which none of the committee members had expected. It was beautiful weather and the unusual entry gave the whole excursion the atmosphere of a school trip.

We had a video presentation ready. We had interviewed various clients about their experiences with working with VMX.<sup>(88)</sup> Everything was planned to perfection but we had not taken into account the intensity of the sunlight in relation to the capacity of our beamer: it was impossible to see the video, we could only listen to the voices. In an attempt to save the presentation I proposed that the committee should study the working atmosphere at VMX and we should move on to the second part of the presentation: discussions with the staff.

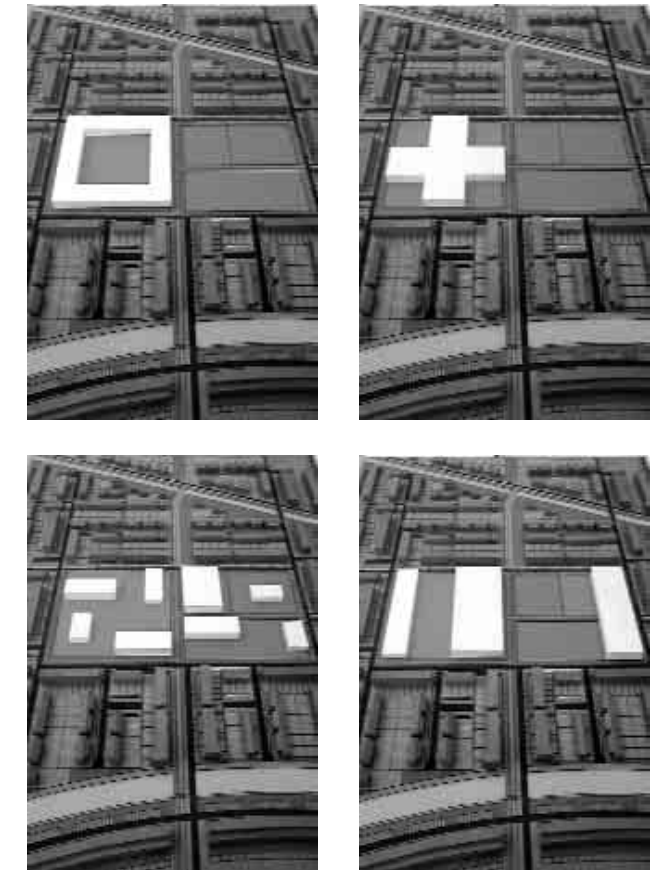
We had hesitated about this part of the presentation. On the one hand, we thought it important that the committee should obtain an impression of our way of working, of which the employees make up an important part. On the other hand, we were not sure that our staff would come up with the right answers to all their questions. The compromise was that we had held comprehensive discussions with the staff in advance. We ran through all the topics so that on the big day everyone knew what he or she would say and how we would answer the questions.

This turned out to be an ideal move, the committee was delighted with so much openness and they thought it was wonderful to speak to the staff. After the acquaintance with the people behind VMX, I explained our plans for the Brede School. In this explanation, I tried most of all to outline how we would perform the work if we were to receive the assignment. I began with a

(88) As clients we had interviewed Peter Turpijn of Altrecht and Maria van der Wielen of the Gymnasium in Den Bosch, among others.

short history of the development of school buildings in general, and I talked about my own experiences as a parent who brings his children to school every day. Mentioning my own experiences was primarily based on the fact that I wanted to stimulate the committee to think broadly about the concept of school.

In the school my children attended the smallest children sit in a basement. It might seem to be a rather unattractive prospect to leave your children behind in a basement, but in reality it means that when the parents leave and look back from the outside, they can easily see the children and the children can see them. After the examples, I discussed our ideas for a Brede School using scale models. I said that we thought that four different models could be created to accommodate the programme: an introvert model, an extravert model, a campus model, and an organization in strips. The first question after the presentation was, of course, which model enjoyed our preference? Partly strategically and partly honestly, I answered that we had no preference as yet, that we first needed more information. This, too, turned out to be the right answer. The committee members themselves had no preference but were looking primarily for good co-operation. Another legendary question I remember well came from Wendy van Krieken, who was one of the crèche heads. She asked if we had thought about the colour of the building. I thought: what colour and what building? We had no building as yet but Wendy assumed that, having generated such an extensive presentation, we must have thought about the colour too. Furthermore, she clearly indicated that she did not want a black building under any circumstances and thought it was sensible to make her standpoint clear as soon as possible. I had to disappoint her. No, we had not thought about the colour, but we would ask her opinion again once we got to that stage. After several more questions about co-operation, the presentation came to an end. We drove the committee down to ground level again and gave them a copy of the video tape from the unsuccessful presentation so that they could view it in the



Different models that could accommodate the programme.

bus. When the committee had gone, Leon and I had a good feeling about the encounter. Despite technical setbacks, we had succeeded in giving an open and distinctive picture of our work and our working method.

A few days later, when Leon and I left the office, we unexpectedly stood face to face with the entire delegation once more. They were on their way by bus to Tangram, an architectural office that is situated reasonably near us. It was a strange situation; with an indeterminate expression of recognition and curiosity we gazed at one another. It was only just before Christmas that we finally received the reassuring call: VMX had been given the assignment!

Receiving a new assignment is always linked to an intense feeling of happiness. It is a reward for the presentation of one's vision, for all the trouble taken to acquire the assignment. The feeling of elation was certainly present in the case of KC-Noord, but I would be lying if I claimed that we were not concerned about how to get everyone moving in the same direction. We asked ourselves how we would be able to take any decisions in consultation with the boards of three schools, one special education school, a childcare centre for handicapped children, two nurseries, extramural care, people from the community centre, the operator of the sports hall, and the developer of 60 apartments. In an attempt to develop a joint idea on the architecture, we proposed taking a trip to Den Bosch with all the parties involved. There we showed our first project, 3UP2DOWN, and then we viewed the Study Villa. We lunched in Zaltbommel and then we visited a Brede School in Barendrecht, primarily to demonstrate how a Brede School should not be realized.

The first official meeting with the clients followed in Vleuten shortly after the excursion. We sat at the table with an enormous group of people, and the project manager asked everyone to introduce themselves and to identify which 'bears on the path' they saw in the KC-Noord project. I did not know this term

in Dutch, but when I heard what various people predicted, I realized we were being invited to declare our possible problems.

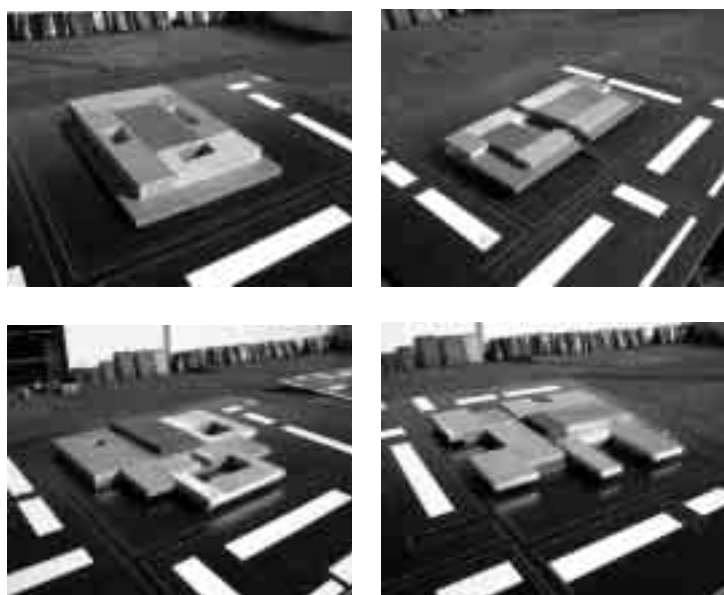
I was astonished; this did not seem to me to be the proper manner to forge co-operative links. I then introduced myself as the architect for the school who wished to try to solve the problems, to drive the bear away, or at least tame it. After covering the potential problems, we discussed the options we had proposed. In our presentation for the selection committee, we had deliberately not mentioned a fifth option: a compact model. In view of our experiences, it seemed a better idea to explain this model only at the first meeting. Although we were aware of the fact that, as a result of the extensive brief, a compact model like that in Hoofddorp would not lead to a small building in Leidsche Rijn, there were nevertheless advantages in concentrating the programme. We discussed a compact block with all facilities, which resembled a university building rather than a traditional school building in terms of dimensions. We emphasized that this large scale would be a necessary alternative among the sea of houses in the Leidsche Rijn estate.

In our view, the programme also demanded a strong grouping around communal areas such as the auditorium, the play areas, and the sports facilities. The idea of individual school buildings produced the well-known image of a constellation of small objects with, at the rear of the parcel, a colossal sports hall that always looked as if it didn't belong anywhere. On the basis of this idea, and in the knowledge that Brede Schools essentially arise from co-operation, we proposed organizing all the small areas in the programme around the large sports hall and thus designing a building that would stand alone on the parcel. It would have a different appearance when viewed from different angles.

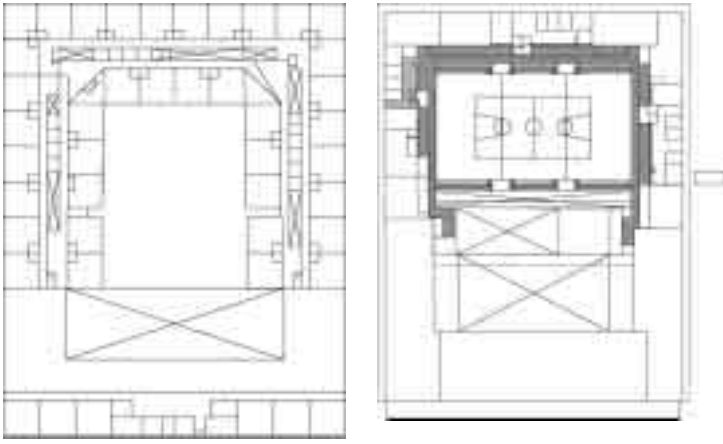
To ensure that the building would not be too bombastic, we proposed combining the apartments with the sports fields rather than with the school. In this way, there would be a clear division between the public and private domains. The meeting was im-



Discussing our compact block, which almost resembled a university building, with the clients by referring to a model. In the right hand corner, there is a cruciform block that would contain the houses.



First variations for a compact block.



mediately enthusiastic. No one asked whether or not the 'children's format' would be guaranteed, people only asked how it would be possible to make distinctive layers in this kind of building. Our response was that we could show examples of this if we again went on an excursion.

With the most important involved parties, we went to visit the school designed by Herman Hertzberger, where split-level floors were used to divide a large space into smaller workplaces without neutralizing the spatial experience.<sup>(89)</sup> The outcome of the excursion was that clients became convinced that a large area could be divided in such a way that the required spatial conditions could be created. What also became clear was that they wanted to keep the school and the sports functions completely separate without requiring individual buildings for the different functions. At the next meeting, we outlined our response to these demands: we ought to design a sandwich building! In line with the regulations, the nurseries and the care centre for handicapped children would have to be situated on the ground floor, around a communal sports hall that would comply with Olympic specifications. On the first floor, the communal areas of the schools would be combined on a *bel-etage*. The level above this would contain three schools in a U-shaped series, with outdoor space generated by designing the roof of the sports hall as a school playground. Once more, the entire meeting was enthusiastic, but people had one last question: shouldn't this kind of building have a distinctive heart? At the next meeting, we said that the school actually needed a head instead of a heart — which it already had in the form of a gigantic sports hall: an athlete's heart actually. By regarding the community centre and the auditorium as the head of the building, the volume could become more lucid and compact, and a kind of public head for the building arose. The reactions were again extremely positive. It was overwhelming to see how, by using simple terminology we could appeal to the imagination of these clients much more

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(89) The Montessori school on the Apollolaan in Amsterdam.

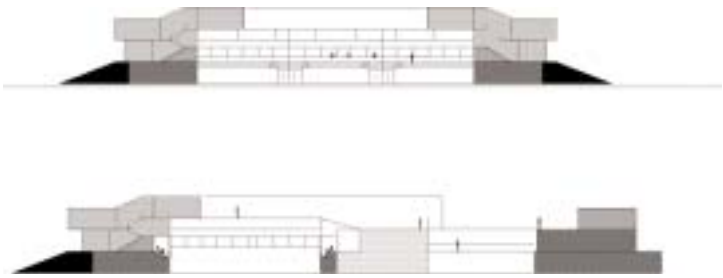
than when we spoke in abstract terms. It was certainly not the case that the people with whom we had to deal were simple, it was rather that concrete proposals and statements evoked much useful response so that the design gradually progressed. By means of clear concepts, the group process and the forming of a collective opinion also turned out to advance better.

We tried to generate a simple design for the façade. Due to the low budget, we had the choice between horizontal or vertical strip windows — round windows or anything more exotic was completely out of the question. In order to allow as much incidence of daylight as possible, we opted for horizontal windows. All the architecture in the direct vicinity of the school consists of red brick, roof tiles and wood. However, for our sculptural school volume, with its large glass surfaces and overhangs, we sought a material — a skin — that would emphasize the monolithic character of the design and the distinctive form of the building. A (cheap) stucco-work façade would abase the building, generate a flat picture, so we went looking for an affordable pixel-like structure. White tiles, 5 centimetres by 5, turned out to be a substantial part of the answer. But we believed that a completely white building would not appeal to children, some colour would have to be added.<sup>(90)</sup> To turn the school into a strange but irresistible toy-like object for the children, we proposed using a bright pink colour on the interior and on the glass *bel-etage*. As a reference image, we used liquorice allsorts: a brightly coloured filling between two white layers above and below. This image was apparently irresistible to adults as well, because everyone was again extremely enthusiastic. In line with what had become a habit, people asked for examples of white-tiled buildings. Therefore, the last excursion for KC-Noord paid a visit to the Maaskant Rivierstaete building on the Amstel. This impressive stacking of white tiled volumes truly convinced them.

After the decision had been taken that the houses and sports fields would not be part of the school building, we conceived

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(90) My own experience has shown me that children like bright colours. If they can choose, they always opt for brightly coloured toys whereas parents tend to go for normal and reserved wooden toys.



First plans and sections of the compact block.



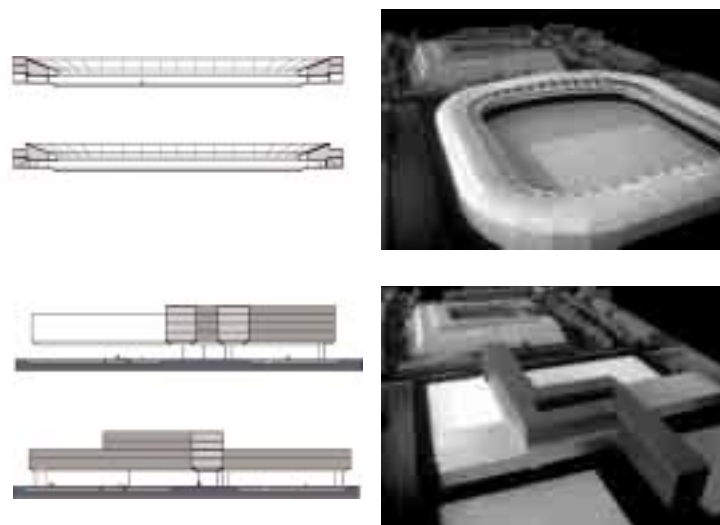
Early model of the compact block showing a façade that would lean backwards.



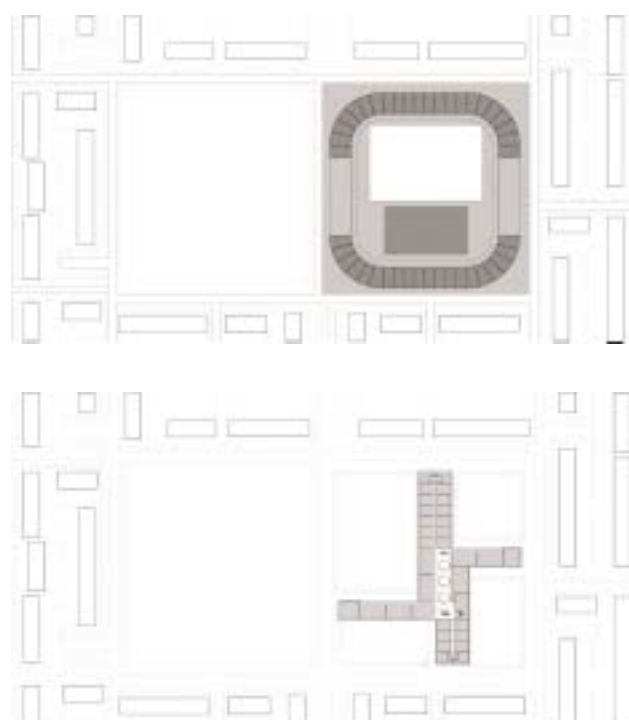
Collages showing the school block, the U-shaped roof square, the first floor, and the spiral ramp that would lead up to it.







Section and model of the arena houses.  
Section and model of the cruciform housing.



Plan of the arena houses.  
Plan of the cruciform houses.

two extreme models for this part of the programme: one had the shape of an arena with houses around the sports field and the other was a cruciform model with the four sports fields in the corners of the parcel. I found the first model especially spectacular, living in a stadium brought back memories of our study for the Olympic Stadium. Unfortunately, the urban planner was not enthusiastic about either of the models, he found both much too large and too emphatically present in combination with the gigantic school. He had imagined a park-like character for the rest of the parcel.

Then we conceived a new type: three identical blocks that we referred to as 'sports houses' and that bordered on the sports fields in an orthogonal composition. This suggestion did meet with the approval of the urban planner. After the idea for the houses had arisen, it turned out that the intended target group for the houses had changed. Originally, houses for the elderly were to have been built, but when the market collapsed, the municipality proposed making houses for people just starting out on the housing market. Market research indicated that this group did not enjoy gardening but did like to have a good outdoor area. Almost simultaneously with the change of plans for the KC-Noord houses, our project for IJburg 17 came rather abruptly to a halt. Without much hesitation, we then opted to re-use the housing type that we had developed for IJburg 17 — with exactly the same target group: 'copy and paste'!<sup>(91)</sup>

It worked excellently. The interlocking houses from IJburg 17 produced in KC-Noord a broad and pleasant living floor while the bedroom storey was much more compact and secluded. We used the same façade elements as we had developed for the Sarphatistraat, but blue glass was used this time instead of basalt. The shape of the window that was inserted in the façade panels came from DNZ. In short, it was a collage of our own work that seemed to work very well. Thanks to the enthusiasm of Edwin Oostmeijer — the developer — the houses have all been sold.

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(91) The success of copy / paste is not an isolated incidence. Rem Koolhaas used a previous design the Y2K villa for his design of the concert hall in Porto. At the end of the nineties, he designed a villa for an extremely rich client who attached great value to the view of the traditional polder landscape near Rotterdam. The heart of the villa was formed by an empty area around which all the programme components were arranged. When the client withdrew, OMA received a hasty assignment to design a music theatre in Porto within three weeks. The design process was started up from the ruins of the villa design. The stage for the communal living activities now became a stage and lodge for the theatre, and the Casa da Musica seems to be an enlarged translation of the villa. The design method ensured that the theatre was allocated an unconventional layout with exceptional connections and unusual perspectives. Source: Rodermond, Janny, *De Architect* no.1, pp. 30-33 (2000).



The new occupants of the KC-Noord houses are invited to attend the making of a test panel for the blue glass façades of their houses.

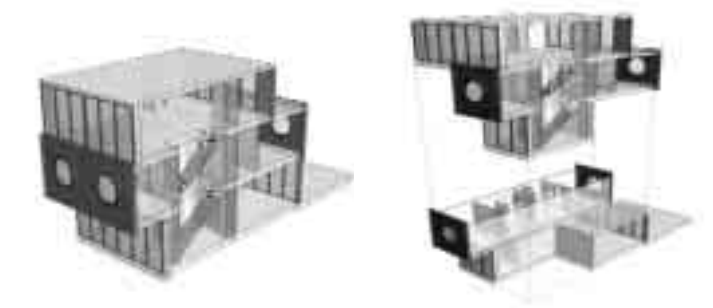


Pink colored glass at the *bel-etage* of the KC-Noord school.

A turning point in the euphoria came when fatigue began to take its toll. The funding of the project also seemed to run into difficulties. To make matters worse, new school directors arrived just when the specifications were being formulated. The people with whom we had developed the concept withdrew and new people took over, people who had been completely uninvolved with the design. All these factors caused great problems. Our initial anxiety about an unruly large number of involved parties appeared to be materializing. Besides the various users, there were now so many organizations concerned with the project that differences of opinion arose over almost everything.

The entire design was threatened. Several times, the design was even literally shifted from position and orientation on the parcel to meet the changing demands. All kinds of small alterations, very small things in our view, turned out to be unacceptable to certain users, so that the process was frustrated and the planning schedule hopelessly delayed. In August 2004, the project even ground to a halt as a result of all the interference, but at the end of the year we finally concluded the specification stage, which had lasted more than a year.

Ultimately we regarded it as a mistake of the management to allow the building to be altered after the users had been intensively involved with the plans. We realize that this contradicts the democratic principles of many school boards, but the exaggerated involvement and input that we experienced in this project tended to impair the desired 'custom-made solutions' rather than stimulate them. It is not easy to hold a conference every week with at least eight different users, to consistently generate new solutions, and to remain enthusiastic. Of course, we were also to blame for the difficult situation. We always adopted a service-oriented approach and perhaps other architects would have abandoned this attitude earlier. And perhaps it might have been simpler if we had opted for the campus model with various buildings for the various functions. However, the decision not to do so was based on the longing to create a building that the



Exploded view of the interlocking houses.



The making of the KC-Noord school.

users could take pleasure in, as well as having architectonic value. I still very much like the idea of allowing the school to function as one large public space in a context in which no other significant public space can be found.



The making of the KC-Noord houses.

## RECENT WORK

### Community architecture

As we have mentioned, 2003 was a difficult year. It was a year in which we did not obtain any substantial new assignments. It was also the year in which dissatisfaction arose within the office concerning internal communication, and the staff complained about a lack of information. The main complaint was that people only knew about the project(s) they worked on and not about the rest. In terms of assignments, the situation changed when, at the beginning of 2004, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (dienst Stedenbouw en Volkshuisvesting, dS+V) of the Municipality of Rotterdam asked us to participate in a selection procedure for a project in Hoogvliet.<sup>(92)</sup> After we had provided the usual information on the size, turnover and vision of our office, we turned out to be one of five offices that were in the race for the design of a housing project and an adjoining neighbourhood facility (shopping centre) on the Alverstraat. The second round of the selection consisted of a meeting in which the selected architects could ask the selection committee questions. The committee consisted of future clients of the project: Vestia housing association, Ambap project developers, and the Municipality.

In the preparation for this questions round, we improved our knowledge of the problems around Hoogvliet. Until that moment, we knew this satellite town of Rotterdam primarily as it was presented in the media: the post-war housing estates were synonymous with multicultural tension, crime, and noise and smell nuisance from the motorway and Shell refinery in the vicinity. When we studied the context of Hoogvliet at the beginning of 2004, there also turned out to be positive developments in progress. "Hoogvliet has been through the worst" was the headline in the *Volkscrant* daily newspaper in January 2003.<sup>(93)</sup> And Hoogvliet also received a positive evaluation in the 'Grote Verbouwing' (large-scale reconstruction) exhibition and publication of the same name organized by the Architecture Institute. The curator, Jacqueline Tellinga, spoke of Hoogvliet as the

(92) The reason why dS+V proposed us is unknown, we do not know anyone in this department. They did propose us for a previous selection in Hoogvliet, but we did not make it through the first round then. We had probably been on a municipal list for some time, and people may have known our work from the media.

(93) Koper, Arnold, in the *Volkscrant* daily newspaper of 6 January 2003, taken from: 'WIMBY!, Welcome into My Backyard' in *De Grote Verbouwing*, pp. 113-119, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers (2004).

exception in the series of priority areas drawn up by the Ministry of Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM).<sup>(94)</sup> Whereas architectural units created by Dudok, Van Tijen, Van den Broek and Bakema, and Van Embden threatened to become patchwork blankets as a result of well-intended but drastic and short-sighted interventions in other post-war neighbourhoods, the temporary cultural initiative 'WIMBY!' (Welcome In My Backyard) was set up in Hoogvliet to guide the restructuring operation in the right direction. Based on the example of the successful German Internationale Bauausstellung, applied in the restructuring of neighbourhoods in Berlin and in a part of the Ruhr district, among others, people in Rotterdam had also adopted the idea of approaching Hoogvliet as an 'International Reconstruction Exhibition' (IRE). Wouter Vanstiphout and Michelle Provoost of the Crimson architectural research agency, in conjunction with the politician Felix Rottenberg, are the mainspring of the IRE project in Rotterdam. In an attempt to give Hoogvliet new élan, they aim to gather together and transform initiatives that have often already been launched. The goal is to give the currently maligned Hoogvliet a new image by reinforcing the existing qualities of the district. WIMBY! differs from other initiatives in that the authorities are not engaged in giving prestigious architectural assignments to renowned architects, but prefer to occupy a practical and socially inspired position. According to its founders, WIMBY! is a form of cultural entrepreneurship in which careful deliberations are made concerning an integral issue. Instead of generating new plans that evoke endless discussions before disappearing into the archives, WIMBY! proposes concrete interventions that ought to function as catalysts for the entire district. One of these catalysts is the 'Logica' project, for which the Max1 architectural office was asked to formulate an urban planning manual on Hoogvliet rather than a plan. The book elaborates on 24 possible scenarios in which residents can choose their ideal scenario by voting via a website.<sup>(95)</sup>

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(94) The restructuring of the post-war neighbourhoods — around 2 million houses — is currently the most comprehensive construction assignment in the Netherlands. In 2003, VROM designated 56 neighbourhoods as priority zones, whose renovation should be accelerated by government support.

(95) Besides the Logica project, there is also the 'Heerlijkheid Hoogvliet' (Wonderful Hoogvliet) project, a new accommodation for the thriving association activities. In the 'Scholenparasieten' (School Para-sites) project, the missing functions are added to existing schools by means of small temporary buildings in the school grounds.

We went to the meeting for the questions round fully expecting to encounter something of the WIMBY! attitude among the selection committee. However, as soon as we entered, it was clear that it would be a meeting of the well-known caricatures who are always present at architecture selections. Hilders and Hulshof of Ambap looked like the prototypical developers, in dark-blue suits and with suntanned appearances — they later turned out to drive Jaguars too. The landscape architect and the municipal urban planner were dressed in T-shirts and jeans, the outfit for cultural and socially engaged people. Martine te Velde of Vestia was the classic example of a young and ambitious project manager, and we were clearly the architects, in suits but without ties.<sup>(96)</sup>

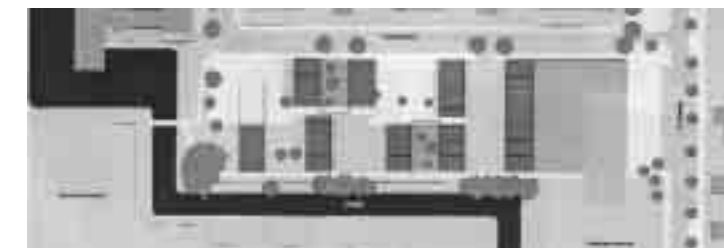
Because Max1 was one of the selected offices but was also responsible for the Hoogvliet scenario within the Logica project, our key question to the committee was what the position of this office might be?<sup>(97)</sup> The committee's answer was that this office did not occupy a privileged position and would have to meet all the selection demands just as the other offices. We were satisfied with this response and concentrated on the actual assignment. After the question round, all the offices were given 10 days to design a proposal for 80 low-rise houses and 40 high-rise apartments for families and elderly people. Normally, one would expect that, in a plan with high-rise and low-rise construction, the family houses would be situated in the low-rise section because they would have gardens, and that the apartments for the elderly would be in the high-rise part. Now the selection committee asked us to do exactly the opposite.

For our design, we looked into aspects of Hoogvliet once more, but this time we went to the Meeuwenplaat neighbourhood where the project was to be realized. The neighbourhood turned out to be a typical example of post-war construction with much green and poor-quality maisonettes: small, noisy, and the upper apartments were only accessible via a staircase. This resulted

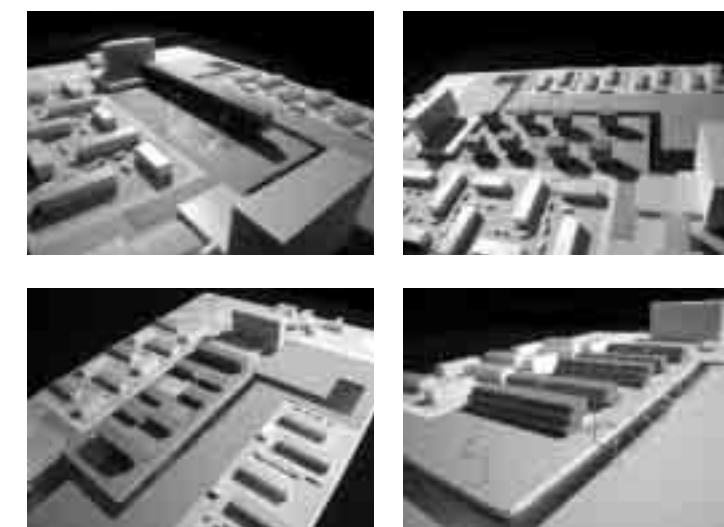
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(96) On the basis of announcements in the media, we had expected to feel the influence of the IRE in Hoogvliet right from the outset, but up to the present — the specifications stage — we have not observed anything of this initiative.

(97) In the preparations for the Nine+One exhibition, we had first become acquainted with the erstwhile Max1, see also the description in the 'Nine+One', in the 'All about Space' episode of this book.



Max1's plan.



Testing different variations for Hoogvliet, ranging from one single strip, via a configuration of detached blocks, to series of stepped blocks.



Top view of meandering terraced housing strip, allowing long sightlines to the existing park.



Early renderings of the design for Hoogvliet, showing that low-rise and high-rise are designed as one project.

in a severe lack of occupancy so that in 2000 the Vestia housing association — the owner of the houses — had decided that a plan would have to be drawn up for the area: the so-called 'Maasranden provisional master plan'.

At the end of 2003, this plan was used in the formulation of plans for Meeuwenplaat. The restructuring of Meeuwenplaat was seen by dS+V as: "A transformation of the original garden city concept into a present-day variant. In this transformation, the good elements from the garden city concept ought to be retained or reinforced (collectivism, green layout), the bad elements removed (small living areas, poor access to the houses, noise nuisance), and new facilities added (parking requirements, water management)."<sup>(98)</sup> The starting point was that the existing houses had to be demolished and replaced by better and larger houses. However, the number of houses had to remain the same. There should also be more differentiation in the neighbourhood. This means that one ought to aim at creating differentiation in price, ownership, and typology. The project was primarily oriented toward families and the elderly because this target group would most appreciate the spacious green structure of the neighbourhood.

The project on the Alverstraat was a component of the Meeuwenplaat restructuring project. In consultation with the municipality, Vestia had suggested realizing rented housing here for tenants elsewhere in Hoogvliet who were being compelled to move as a result of restructuring. The Municipality agreed to this plan on the condition that a neighbourhood facility with apartments would be realized adjoining the housing project. Moreover, both projects should be designed as a single unit.<sup>(99)</sup> The subplan that Max1 formulated for the Alverstraat enumerated a number of qualities of the current situation that ought to be retained. The various mature trees at the location, the long sightlines between the buildings, and the amount of public greenery ought to be respected in the new plan. According to Max1, the qualities that could be improved were: the connection

(98) dS+V Gemeente Rotterdam, *Stedenbouwkundig Programma van Eisen Alverstraat*, p. 13, November 2003.

(99) Accordingly, the municipality states in its PVE: "The worsening situation for the retail trade in Hoogvliet, which has been going on for years, has forced the district council to take action. In January 1999, the *Uitgangspunten voor de ontwikkeling van de detailhandelstructuur in Maasranden* (Starting points for the development of the retail trade structure in Maasranden) memo was published." dS+V Gemeente Rotterdam, *Stedenbouwkundig Programma van Eisen Buurtsteunpunt Meeuwenplaat* (Urban planning brief for the Meeuwenplaat community facility), p.7, November 2003. The conclusion of this memo is that a new shopping centre must be realized in Meeuwenplaat to replace the two existing smaller centres. The development of the new community facility (as the municipality calls the shopping centre) should be designed as a coherent unit with houses for Vestia housing association.

to the park, the lack of variation in the exterior spaces, the social insecurity, the parking problems, and the limited number of housing typologies.<sup>(100)</sup>

For this reason, the new plan ought to realize an interlock of the park and the construction by building groups of houses along terraced streets with flower and vegetable gardens. The groups of houses could be mutually linked with galleries that would have a dual function as access and as balconies. In addition to spatial variation, another effect of the grouping of houses and connection via galleries would be the better social cohesion. Although Max1's starting points sounded promising, the elaboration of their plan at parcel level was little different from the original situation. Max1 also created a configuration with small detached blocks between which public space was left over, as it were. The only real difference with the original plan was that two inner courts were allocated the function of a communal garden, with the aim of creating a form of collectivism.<sup>(101)</sup> The influence of these gardens seemed limited, so that dS+V described the spatial structure of the project in their brief with: "Participation in collectivism is a free choice."<sup>(102)</sup>

Taking this plan as the basis, we imposed supplementary demands on our own design for the houses in the Alverstraat. First of all, we found that each house should have an exterior space with the same quality — a basic idea for post-war housing construction which had been poorly elaborated in the original plan for Meeuwenplaat.<sup>(103)</sup> With the notion of equivalent exterior space, we wished to avoid the idea of front and rear sides.

The parking norms applied meant, to us, that everyone should be able to park at least one car in front of the house. But the image of a car parked at the door clashed with the requirement of mingling the existing park landscape with the new construction, so that a multi-level car park seemed inevitable. The solution to this problem came when we no longer saw the low-rise housing as detached groups but as strips of terraced housing. The strips of terraced houses could be linked in a meandering

(100) Max1, *Deelgebied Alverstraat, zorg en comfort*, p. 3, December 2003.

(101) Analyses, recommendations and parcelling plan, from: *Deelgebied Alverstraat, zorg en comfort*, Max1 Architects and Urbanists, 2003.

(102) dS+V Gemeente Rotterdam, *Stedenbouwkundig Programma van Eisen Alverstraat*, p. 15, November 2003.

(103) In the case of the Alverstraat, there were houses with gardens on the park and houses with gardens on collective parking places, so that there was certainly no mention of equivalent exterior spaces.

line and combined with the community facility that consisted of a narrow volume — ten storeys high — on a pedestal of shops with a parking deck on top.

The idea of terraced houses was a breakthrough. With this typology for the low-rise construction, it turned out that car-parking at ground level under the houses could be combined with high-quality exterior space for everyone. In addition, the strip housing made parcelling and interlocking with the park a realizable option. Enthusiastic about the possibilities, we conceived three housing typologies. At ground level, there would be drive-in houses with a garden, on the first floor there would be narrow, deep apartments, and on the second floor there would be broad shallow apartments, both of which would have a large terrace adjoining the gallery. Besides the dual function as access and terrace, the galleries would also link the different strips to one another. By situating the access to the strips between the blocks rather than in the blocks themselves — on the connecting galleries — the galleries would function as a bridge to and between the various strips of terraced housing. For the high-rise construction, we thought up a hybrid typology between a portico flat and a gallery flat, in which maisonettes would be combined with dwellings on one level.

In our opinion, the design that we presented to the selection committee was very good. It was a plan, as we only later observed, that displayed a remarkable similarity to the projects with which we launched our office ten years previously. In fact, our design for the Alverstraat is a simple design, just like our first projects, but in the best sense of the word. With simple resources we designed a great spatial structure in Hoogvliet that accommodates changes in society. It is based on a typology for a new target group, and it encourages the development of new forms of collectivism and sense of community. I am convinced that various committee members recognized these qualities in the design, but I also believe that we did not win the selection purely on the basis of the design.

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Reference explaining our idea about high-quality outdoor space. The image we used shows the south elevation of the Bailey house, by Pierre Koenig (1959).



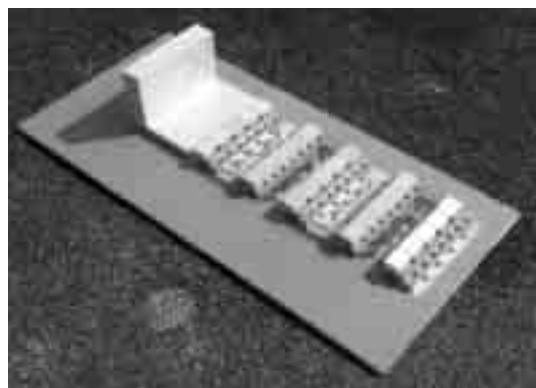
Reference explaining our idea of parking cars on the ground floor yet under the houses. The image we used shows the carport and entrance of the Oberman house, by Pierre Koenig (1962).

We had deliberately chosen not to present the plan with a beamer but on panels because this is a less distant medium and thus appeals to most people. During the questions round this first meeting, it became apparent that various people in the committee already had their own preferences. For example when Vera Yanovshtchinsky asked a question that had been answered shortly before and she said that she had not heard the answer because she had actually been 'daydreaming', after the reaction on this from the selection committee it was obvious that her chances had evaporated. During the presentation of our design, however, I had the feeling that our idea, our method of working, and our manner of presentation contained something that appealed to everyone. In addition to the design, our capability to build bridges at personal level between caricatures such as a commerce-driven developer, a socially oriented housing association, and a municipality that thinks in terms of livability and security ensured that we received the assignment.<sup>(104)</sup>

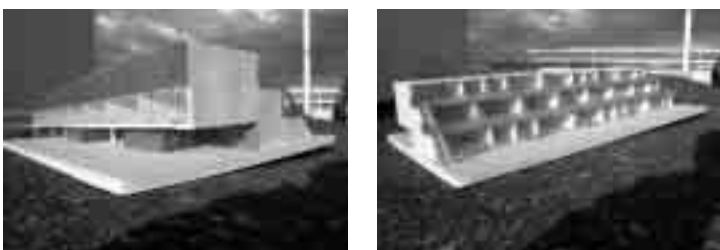
The evening after the second presentation Leon received a call from Hulshof who said that he wanted to go ahead the project with us. Hulshof also mentioned that he and Hilders would like to visit a few of our buildings. We had two days to organize an excursion. We went with them to see 3UP2DOWN and the Study Villa in Den Bosch. Then we went to Amsterdam to show our housing project on Sarphatistraat. This project did not make a particularly good impression. The building had been largely empty since its completion, and construction debris still lay on several of the galleries. After the excursion, we had lunch with Hulshof and Hilders. During the lunch there was a barely tangible feeling of doubt. It was clear that Hulshof and Hilders appreciated us as people, but the buildings we had shown them had provoked some hesitation. Both housing projects were black and neither had brick façades, although H&H envisaged red brick for the project in Hoogvliet. We even thought that the assignment might still slip away from us, but Hulshof and Hil-

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<sup>(104)</sup> In this respect, too, the plan displays parallels with our first ideas of an office. We had a passionate desire to start up an office that would appeal to both the cultural and commercial world in a heroic manner. See also 'Flirt with commerce' in the 'Vague ideas' episode of this book.



Early model showing the total design.



Models of low-rise showing the car park at ground floor level and the wide terraces that function as access to the houses and serve as outdoor space.

ders turned out to regard personality as being at least as important as realized work. To them, it was important that they would have to be able to co-operate with an architect for at least two years. As they said: "It has to remain pleasant."

The co-operation with Vestia for the low-rise construction went smoothly. In fact, the design that we are going to build has changed very little in comparison to what we presented during the selection process. Since then, we have primarily devoted attention to optimizing the floor plans in unprecedented close consultations with the future residents. We thought that participation architecture no longer existed, but the Vestia project proved the opposite. After some time, the people from Vestia asked us to present the design for the low-rise construction to a 'sounding board': a group of 44 tenants who would have priority to live in this project. The presentation took place in a kind of community centre where around 50 people (some of the 44 tenants came with their partners) gathered together to hear our story. Martine introduced our plan by talking about the context and the history of Hoogvliet. Then she introduced me and mentioned hurriedly that the architect did not speak Dutch and would explain the plan in English. Hoogvliet is not renowned for the high educational level of its residents and I could almost hear their jaws falling open in surprise in the silence that descended after Martine's announcement. When I actually began my outline in English I saw only frowning foreheads. I talked enthusiastically about the design, showed pictures and made sweeping gestures, and I noticed how the public slowly thawed. At the end of my presentation they were just as enthusiastic as I was and the explanation in English turned out to have been no problem at all.

Various people told me afterwards that they had even understood every word I said. Besides an outline of the plan, another central point in my presentation had been the question of whether people could imagine that the private outdoor space

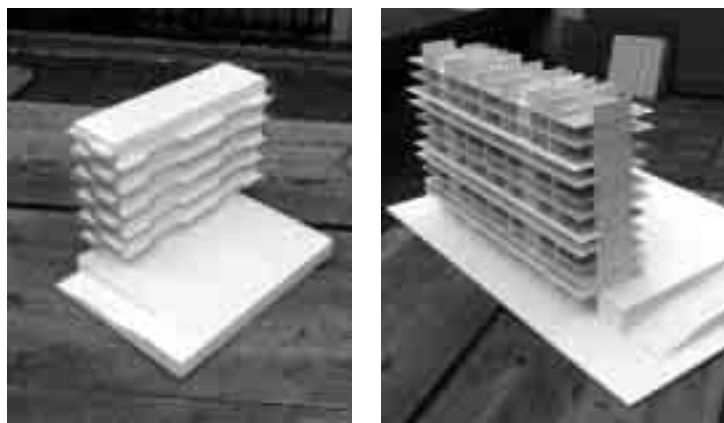
and the gallery would be mutually connected. No one seemed to object to this.

After the first successful consultation with the tenants, Vestia asked us to give presentations at several other moments during the development process and we immediately agreed. In contrast to what one might expect when listening to public opinion on Hoogvliet, the soundboard group turned out to consist of extremely pleasant, open and concerned people, and working with them has been a tremendous experience. Their enthusiasm encouraged Vestia to suggest that not only drawings and scale models of the plan should be created but also various types of houses should be constructed at true size so that the sounding board group could be able to give their views on these. This meeting, too, was very memorable. It was very nice to discuss with the residents about why we thought the houses ought to be as they were and to explain how they could partition their own houses. The social aspect that emerged in this project is extremely unusual in housing projects. After various meetings we have acquired the feeling that we know the people in the sounding board group almost personally. At the last meeting, in which the houses were distributed by means of a lottery, I helped various people with making their choice. The feeling of being able to provide these people with a house that suits them gave me an enormous feeling of satisfaction. It was as if now, after having had an architectural office for ten years, we finally had the opportunity to do what we attempted to do with the T-House or the 3UP2DOWN project: design houses that formulated a response to social issues.

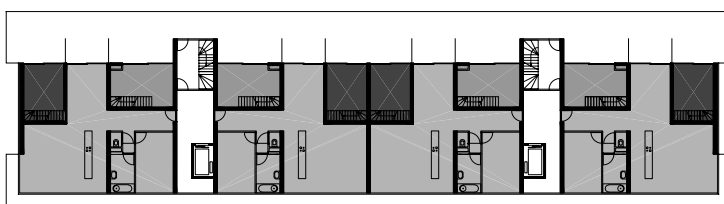
After signing the contract, the first discussions we had with Hilders and Hulshof on the high-rise construction were less straightforward than those we had had with Vestia. Hilders and Hulshof wanted to begin immediately with the plan as we had presented it during the selection procedure, but we were not completely convinced about the design and proposed exami-



Sounding board presentation.



Early model for high-rise in Hoogvliet.



Early plan for high-rise in Hoogvliet.

ing other possibilities for the high-rise construction first. We wanted to investigate whether or not the volume could perhaps be turned and the apartments organized differently. Hilders and Hulshof wanted, however, to get going with the idea of the hybrid gallery and portico flats but only with houses on one storey: no duplexes. They had done some market research and this indicated that a hybrid apartment would appeal to both senior citizens and starters. But we had a completely different basic idea for these houses. With the introduction of the gallery in the traditional porch flat, there arose the possibility to create a communal exterior space so that the high-rise construction would be akin to the low-rise. Hilders and Hulshof did not recognize this quality, they did not understand why we were so fascinated by communal exterior space. Just like most project developers, they believed that exterior space ought to be private and they simply wanted houses that would do well on the open market. We had to explain our experiments, geared to producing an interesting series of maisonnettes and apartments, in terms of cost savings in the light of the reduction in the number of fire escapes. For instance, two staircases are necessary for each portico in a traditional flat. What we tried to do was to create six apartments on each storey — where normally two portico entrances and therefore four fire escapes would be needed — with two fire escapes and two emergency exits via the gallery.

Hilders and Hulshof listened to our ideas for a while but when the definitive design had to be drawn up, they resolutely stated that they did not believe in maisonnettes, and therefore not in our series of houses! In reality, it turned out that they had a potential buyer for the block — we never found out who — who was not interested in maisonnettes. By coincidence Huub Smeets came to visit our office shortly afterwards.<sup>(105)</sup> I knew that he was 'out shopping' and I presented our design to him. I told him that we had formulated a interesting design with a kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedroom on one level and a 'garden

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(105) I know Huub Smeets — director of Vesteda, a property fund — from the jury of European 6, of which we were both members.

room' and extra bedroom in the storey below. I emphasized how exceptional it would be to have a 'garden room' in a flat. What I was actually trying to do was to sell our design to Vesteda — the market leader in rented accommodation — so that we would be liberated from the doubts of Hilders and Hulshof who had never built a housing project and in our view allowed themselves to be led too eagerly by potential purchasers of the block.

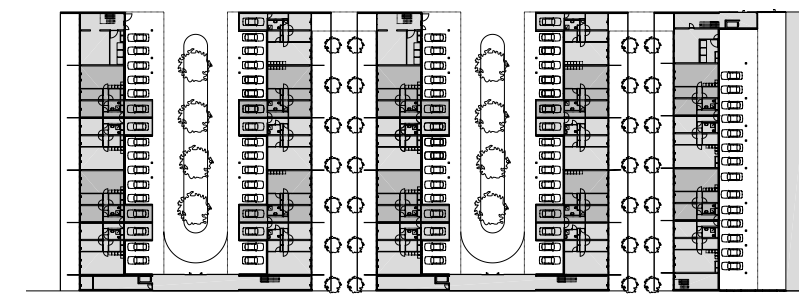
However, Smeets was very clear in his judgement. Although he agreed that the design was interesting, he said: "First of all, I would never buy anything in Hoogvliet and second, I never buy maisonnettes!" At that point it became clear to us that the houses we had designed were a no-go option. So we had to redesign the apartments in the high-rise section.

It was an enormous struggle to create good houses with the idea of the gallery as an emergency exit and as a communal and private exterior space, but this was the backbone of the project. Finally we succeeded in creating more conventional but quality houses. Hilders and Hulshof also came round a little. They realized that the shared galleries were of great importance to us and they agreed to the new design.

The materialization of the plan followed. Just as in many other post-war neighbourhoods, the materializing of new projects in Hoogvliet had little relationship with the historical context. Instead of a Le Corbusian — read modernist — architecture in which buildings have a clear division between floors and façades most new buildings were conceived as monolithic blocks: box-shaped volumes with a stone-like shell that stretched like a skin all around the building. In view of the fact that our assignment was to design suitable architecture, it seemed to us to be more sensible not to follow this trend but to link up with the modernist tradition. Therefore we proposed using glass and aluminium and a few concrete bricks.

During the period in which we were considering the materialization of our design, I was teaching at the Academy of Archi-

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Definitive section and plan for low-rise in Hoogvliet.





Exterior and interior views of the perforated metal that hides the glass emergency exit at the Academy in Rotterdam.

ecture in Rotterdam. The Academy is housed in a new building in which various components of the school are interconnected. While I was walking through one of the connecting passages, I noticed that there was a strange shadow across the glass. When I looked more closely, I saw that there was not only glass but, on the outside, perforated metal had been mounted in front of the glass. On the outside, I had not observed the glass at all, the connections seemed to have closed sides, but from the inside, one could nevertheless look outward. I immediately realized that this would be an ideal solution to the situation in Hoogvliet. The upper apartments of the low-rise section are so shallow that, if we used glass here as in the rest of the project, we would have to do something to prevent people feeling as if they were living in a fish bowl. Perforated corrugated plate, mounted as an external curtain in front of the glass façades, offered the chance to combine a feeling of openness with a certain degree of seclusion. This corrugated plate also allowed the opportunity to create more open or more closed façades. We proposed coloured glass for the many square metres of balustrade needed for the project: green in the low-rise section and alternating green and orange in the high-rise section. In short, the materials that we conceived harmonized with the idiom of the surrounding architecture but simultaneously radiated a certain wealth and optimism that is lacking in post-war architecture. Both Vestia and Hilders and Hulshof were positively surprised by our choice, except for the perforated aluminium, which they both thought was awful!

To convince Martine, we showed her the example at the Academy, after which she could agree to the idea.<sup>(106)</sup> Hilders and Hulshof were less easily convinced. They could not understand why we thought it so important to create qualitative and innovative houses. They were interested in realizing a profit-making project and they regarded experimentation with materials and access as taking unnecessary risks. Nevertheless, they did not completely reject our proposals.

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(106) The people in the sounding board group were also initially against the perforated corrugated façades. To convince them, we covered the community centre in which the meetings took place with the material in question after which they became convinced.

In a certain way they felt a common bond. They see that we, too, always wear neat suits and that we drive in acceptable cars. They sometimes appear to think that we are one of them when they say: "When this project is finished, we can treat ourselves to a new Jaguar!" On several occasions I have tried to explain that what we are making in Hoogvliet is not a Jaguar but a Volkswagen. I do not know whether or not they understand my comparison, but anyway they finally agreed to the perforated façades, perhaps based on personal appreciation of us.

Besides presentations for residents committees, we had to present the project to professionals. For example, there was a presentation for the Hoogvliet steering group, a body that guarantees the quality of the new plans. The presentation went smoothly because people were immediately enthusiastic about our attempts to forge collectivism. After our presentation for the Welstand (Building Inspectorate), the reactions were also very positive. They appreciated our attempts to accentuate solidarity in the design instead of individualization.<sup>(107)</sup> The people behind WIMBY! — whom we had only seen once — also thought our plan was good and the city councillor even applauded it, something that Hilders and Hulshof had never previously experienced.

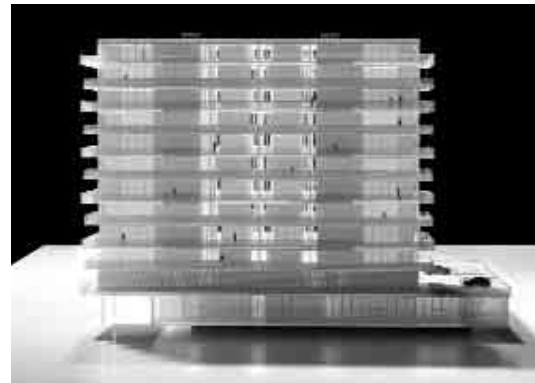
However Peter Hoogvliet, Martine's boss, turned out to be rather troublesome. The co-operation with Martine was going excellently and we had never had contact with Peter until he wanted an alteration in the plan. He had great problems with the entrances to the galleries and wanted them to be situated on the street side. However, we had deliberately chosen to place the galleries on the park side so that a foyer facing the park would be created. After I had defended our plan, Peter suggested a compromise: the entrance to the last block — which is exceptional inasmuch as it has no block opposite — would lie on the street side. Hoping that this would solve the impasse, I agreed. Everything went smoothly until the specifications stage, when

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(107) The appreciation of our plan even went as far that one of the younger members of the Building Inspectorate — architect Jeroen Schippers, who first spoke of solidarity during the presentation — also appears to have used terraces in a study assignment for Vestia.



Presentation model of the low-rise in Hoogvliet, by Douwe den Hertog, Model & Object.



Presentation model of the high-rise in Hoogvliet, by Douwe den Hertog, Model & Object.

Peter again raised objections. After seeing the presentation model, he decided that the closed end façades in the low-rise were unacceptable.<sup>(108)</sup> He wanted ‘friendly end walls’ with windows! To us, it was inconceivable that we could compromise on this. It was not a question of being stubborn, we did investigate other possibilities, but regardless of what we tried, windows in the end façades spoiled the entire design. The closed end façades were an important feature of the design and we were determined not to change them. Our attitude put Martine in a difficult position. She had to implement Peter’s requirements but, in doing so, blighted the co-operation with us. In an attempt to solve the problem, we outlined our considerations and arguments in a letter, and we stated that we were not prepared to meet his demands. Shortly after the letter had been sent, Martine called us, relieved: Peter had agreed to the closed façades!

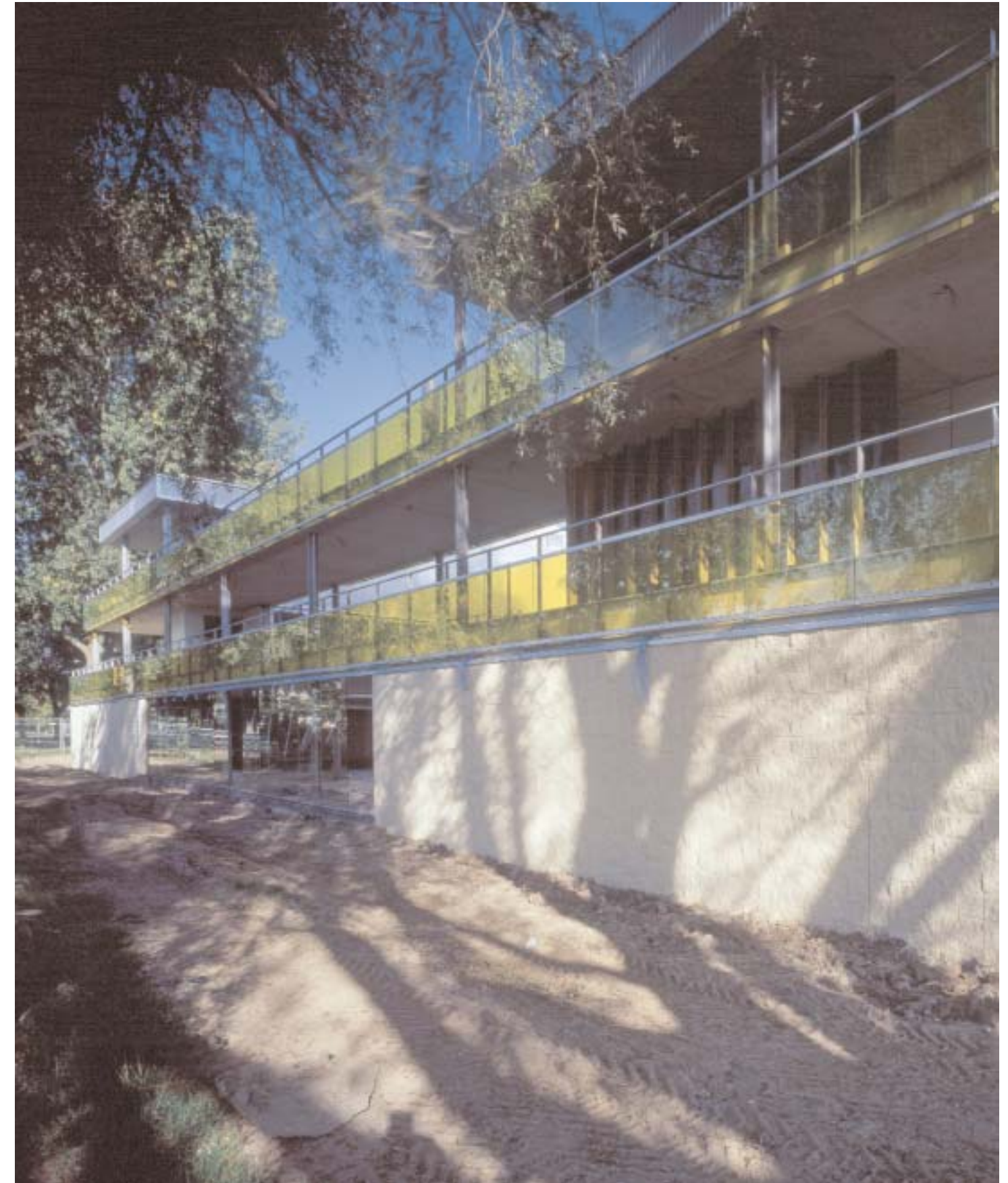
As mentioned, our project in Hoogvliet has parallels with our first projects in terms of the social aspects of architecture. After ten years, Hoogvliet is again clearly a project in which we are trying to react to social developments by applying spatial resources. The relationship with the early days of our office and this project also lies at another level: the market.

When we founded VMX in the mid-nineties, we had great expectations of the market, just like many others. The retreating government allowed scope for architects to link cultural aspects to economic demands. In Hoogvliet, however, we experienced the situation that the architect’s position has become more diverse rather than more clear-cut. He or she must be capable, to an ever-increasing degree, of uniting various parties and apparently irreconcilable positions.

We have experienced just how great the difference is between a project such as IJburg 23, which was implemented by a commercial developer — Matser — and the Vestia housing association project. Matser is without doubt a good developer, but in

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(108) Another point of friction that played up until the tendering stage of the project was the connecting bridges between the galleries. Although Vestia was enthusiastic about the social aspect of the plan, they resisted the connecting bridges for quite some time. Although the bridges are not necessary, they form the crucial links that create coherence in the project. By giving the bridges an extra function as emergency exits, we managed to keep them in the design.



Hoogvliet, the connecting bridges between two of the housing blocks, under construction.



The wide terraces of Hoogvliet have a dual function. They provide access to the houses and a degree of collectivism.

comparison to Vestia it is much more self-oriented. In our opinion, the prime aim to Matser still is to make money, whereas Vestia also appears to be interested in the wishes of its tenants. All the extra options that were expressed in the meetings with tenants were seriously examined by Vestia and various supplementary amenities have now been included in the plan.

At the purchasers' evening organized by Matser for IJburg 23, the mood was completely different. Here, the answer to questions about modifications to the plan was always: "If it's not in the contract it will cost more." The general view in the nineties was that housing associations in particular would react this way. After all, they had lost contact with the market and with their tenants, and they provided houses that did not conform to the market. Privatization was the only answer and market-working would do the rest.

In Hoogvliet, however, we observed that the party that could have been expected to listen — the developer — actually had little interest in the customer. It was Vestia and not Ambap that devoted attention to the residents. The people from Achmea, a concern that can be regarded as a serious purchaser for the high-rise construction, are not interested in the spatial qualities of the construction. They rely on tradition and are worried that every deviation from the norm will directly threaten the saleability of the project.

To us, Hoogvliet has confirmed that the market will not automatically generate all the answers to spatial and social problems. Besides the market, what is further necessary is a socially engaged architect who must also be an entrepreneur in a certain respect, or at least must have these instincts. In addition to our aim to design a better future, we have always seen it as our goal that a client should not lose money. While we think that exaggerated profit is despicable, loss is unhealthy and disastrous for the working atmosphere. In Hoogvliet, we consistently took the maximum permitted number of houses as our starting point, not the minimum. Even during the selection procedure this goal

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The making of Hoogvliet (low-rise).

made us conspicuous because other architects were apparently inclined to propose a number that was easier to fit into the area. Our first sketch indicated that we wanted to combine the economic maximum with the social theme of coherence. Our capacity to combine such diverse starting points in a single plan has led to us being attractive to many completely different parties. Although the boundary between a healthy form of competition and the absence of respect for one another's motives and interests can be very thin, it is exactly on this boundary that we come into our own.

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#### A good school

Around seven years ago, Ruby van den Munckhof worked at our office. She was a typical Delft female student of architecture, self-willed and loud-mouthed. She only worked with us for two months, after which she decided to swap VMX for West 8. During those weeks, she told us that her father was the headmaster of a school near Sittard and that, in the future, he would require the services of an architect for new school building. Ruby said that, if VMX was interested, we ought to approach her father. At that moment, I did not take her remark seriously. Of course, you never know how things can develop, but when a new member of staff suggests that he or she can organize a commission, I tend to be rather sceptical.

Seven years later, Ruby suddenly phoned and asked to speak to Leon. It turned out that she now had her own office in Rotterdam and that her father, Wim, wanted to place her on the list of architects for his school. However, the financial criteria that one had to meet in order to be placed on the list were so severe that Ruby could not fulfil these.<sup>(109)</sup> We, in contrast, could meet these criteria so we enrolled for the new construction of the Bisschoppelijk College in Echt. Winning an architectural selection is an art in itself. We have never been very successful in that department.

Actually, we have rarely directly won a selection. For example, we owed our selection for the Kinder Cluster Noord (2001) primarily to the fact that Edwin Oostmeijer — who knew our work — championed our work. Our selection for DNZ (the office building in Rijswijk) probably was our first successful selection. A few months prior to the selection in Echt, we thought that we might have a good chance with another project when Kees Christiaanse advanced our name for a selection for Science City in Amsterdam. But we were eliminated in the first round.

When Leon phoned to gather information about our exclusion, it turned out that one of the people in the selection committee had been an acquaintance of ours. We had met her (Marjon van

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(109) Although the procedure of European tenders was created to combat nepotism, the conditions in terms of turnover in previous years and experience with relevant projects are often so severe that only a handful of offices can register for these projects, which means that a form of selection has already taken place in advance.

Wijs) during our study for the Olympic Stadium a few years previously, so Leon dared to ask her why exactly we had been eliminated. That was obvious, she said, we were not genuinely interested in the assignment! “You sent the enrolment material but you did not perform any lobbying work to try to get the assignment.” That was what we had been doing wrong all these years. Suddenly it all became apparent. The formal requirements for enrolment are important, of course, but the work behind the scenes to make one’s candidature known is at least just as important. We resolved to test this theory at the next possible opportunity and to take the lobbying work much more seriously. Of course, Ruby knew nothing about our history with regard to selection procedures. Her phone call was an alert and sociable gesture. To us, however, it meant the first opportunity to try out the new strategy in real-life practice. This time, we not only sent in the registration documents, but Leon also phoned Wim van den Munckhof to make our interest clear to him. Then we simply had to wait. The selection was organized as follows. Of those who fulfilled the criteria imposed, five offices would be selected. These would have an individual discussion with the client and the user on 4 March. The discussion would have the form of a question round in which the initiative would lie with the architect. Eight days later, on 11 March, an individual presentation would take place in which each office would present its ‘accommodation vision’ for the school. In addition to the school itself, the Hevo project management agency from Den Bosch would also be involved in the selection process. They would actually be the formal client in a turnkey-like structure; at least, that was the way it was set down in the description.

Our new approach seemed to be successful. Shortly after our enrolment, we received a message that we were one of the five selected offices. We were invited to an interview to become acquainted with the selection committee. Prior to this discussion, Leon again phoned Van den Munckhof, this time in an at-

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tempt to estimate our chances in comparison to other offices. From this conversation, Leon concluded that VMX was the odd-man-out, but that Van den Munckhof would do his best to defend our candidature against those of offices such as Jeanne Dekkers, DP6, and Bollen & Bollen.

We regarded the fact that we were the underdog as a stimulus to prepare thoroughly for the first round. So we not only trusted our own experience with the design of schools, but we also specifically examined the demands and problems around lower secondary schools (in Dutch: VMBO schools). In the context of this preparation, we visited the VMBO school in Amsterdam Oost, which was designed by Herman Hertzberger. Our investigation indicated that a VMBO school places very specific demands on the design. Therefore this building would form a supplement to the type of schools with which we had already worked. Besides a grammar school In Den Bosch and a Brede School (community school) in Leidsche Rijn, Echt presented the opportunity to create a school for practical education with workplace-like classrooms.

However, around two weeks before our first interview in Echt, the situation changed dramatically. A teacher was shot dead at the Terra College in The Hague and VMBO schools were front-page news.<sup>(110)</sup> A passionate public debate broke out concerning safety in these schools. Although the incident in The Hague turned out to have had its omens, and increasingly serious problems had been occurring since the introduction of this educational form in 1999, the real issue was whether or not the gap between the pupils and the teachers could ever be narrowed. The concept of VMBO schools seemed to have become practically synonymous with an educational system without perspective.

Although the incident in The Hague was very distant from the people in Echt, the image of VMBO education declined here too. Because the intended plans indicated that the VMBO school

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Reference we used explaining our idea about split levels in a (VMBO) school. The image shows the heart of the Montessori College in Amsterdam Oost, designed by Herman Hertzberger (1993-1999).

(110) The teacher Hans van Wieren was shot dead by Murat D. in the canteen of the Terra College in The Hague on 13 January 2004.

would be linked to an existing building for HAVO/VWO education (higher secondary school education / pre-university education), we regarded it as our responsibility to discuss the desirability of this connection. We decided to formulate a multiple-choice list of questions and to get the committee members to answer these. The first question was: how did one see the image of the VMBO in the perspective of the intended new construction. To us, there were three possible answers: the merger was good for both, the merger was good for the VMBO, or the merger was good for neither.

Much against our custom, we arrived half an hour late for our first appointment. Printing out the lists had cost a substantial amount of time and we had also underestimated the journey from Amsterdam to Echt (in the province of Limburg). To save time, we decided not to have the committee fill in the lists themselves but rather to discuss the questions orally. Fortunately, the answer to our first question about the image of the VMBO was positive. According to most committee members, the intended merger would be positive for all the schools. After this encouraging response, we discussed the areas that the schools would share, the proposed character of the new construction, the layout of the new construction, and the way in which the issues of safety and supervision ought to be dealt with.

We asked the people from Hevo whether or not we could have direct contact with the users. They replied that we should not have any contact without informing Hevo of this. Ine van der Aa — the headmistress of the HAVO/VWO school — assured us that we would be involved with her in the design process and not only with Hevo.

At the conclusion of the first meeting, we had the feeling that our chances had diminished rather than increased. Particularly the fact that we had been late could easily be interpreted as a form of arrogance. However, when Leon phoned Van den Munckhof that evening to gauge his reaction, the opposite

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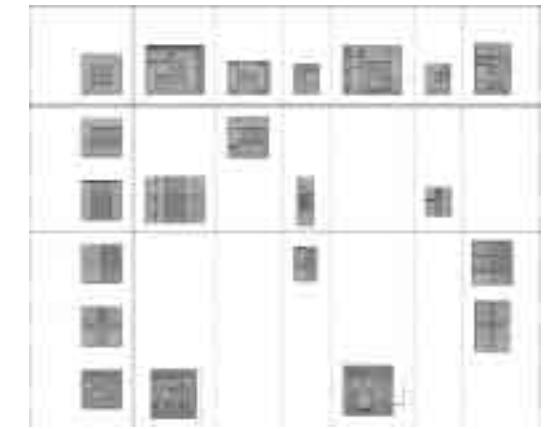
turned out to be the case. VMX had risen in esteem. People appreciated the fact that we had taken so much trouble to compile the list of questions, and they could understand the causes of the delay.

In the preparation for the second interview — the presentation of our ‘accommodation vision’ — we put all our faith in the presentation of a good plan. Although we had only been asked to develop a vision, we had already created the main contours of our design. We formulated all the school’s accommodation demands in a matrix. We also inventoried and visualized the various options for the positioning of the building and the links to the exiting schools. Building elsewhere than in the ‘Randstad’ (the urban conglomeration in the west of the Netherlands) has the great advantage that one has a relatively large amount of space at one’s disposal, and we developed the idea for a low, elongated building. It would be a building only two storeys high, but nevertheless it would be conspicuous due to its dimensions and would profit from its situation in the field directly adjoining the motorway.

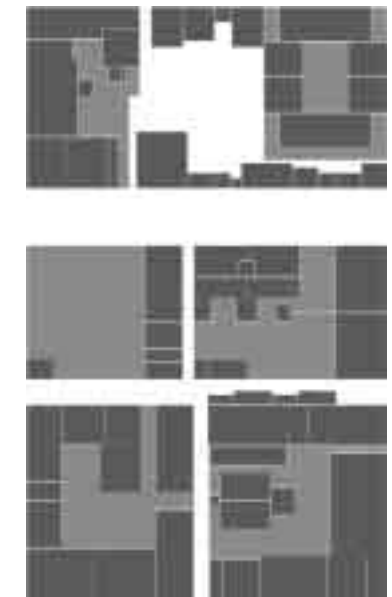
We had expected that we would sit around the table with the committee at the second presentation, but we were mistaken. On our arrival in Echt, it turned out that around forty people had gathered together: teachers, local civil servants, people from Hevo, and the complete board of trustees of the school. In the first interview, I was able to more or less conceal the fact that I did not speak fluent Dutch, but now there was no way of hiding my shortcoming. I began my presentation by excusing the fact that I would speak in English. “No problem,” was the reaction from the hall.

Having taught for then years, I had built up a lot of experience in giving lectures. I have a good sense of mood and can notice immediately when people are no longer interested in my story or when they are following my every word. Giving a presentation for an architectural selection is quite different.

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Different organizations of the programme creating different types of residual space.



Early plans, basic organizations of the programme.

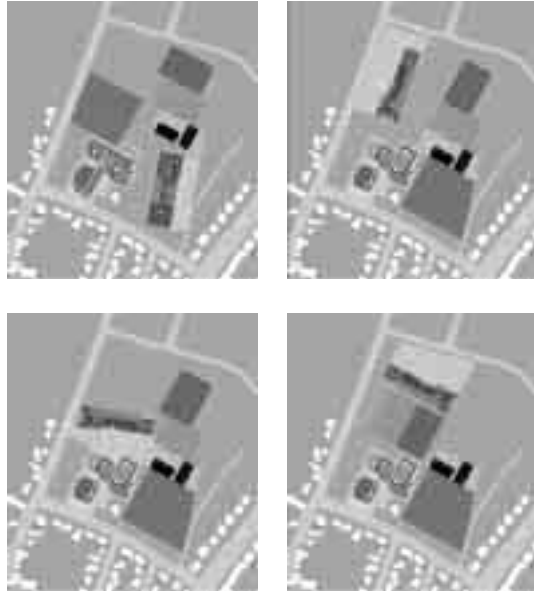


The old workshop-like accommodation of the VMBO school in Echt.

I have observed that when the members of the selection committee nod or smile in agreement, it is easy to believe that you will be chosen. However, on a few occasions I have experienced that a committee became less and less talkative and increasingly serious. At the conclusion of this kind of presentation, I was always convinced that people thought little of VMX, or had not understood much of my presentation. On a few occasions, however, it turned out that people were particularly impressed by VMX and regarded us as a serious candidate. Something similar happened in Echt.

I began my presentation by mentioning that I thought the current accommodation for the VMBO school was a beautiful building. It was a factory-like building with high ceilings and an industrial appearance. My opening remarks were not intended to get the committee on my side, it was simply my true opinion. Some of the committee members looked up from their papers, somewhat shocked, and I realized that I ought to have kept my opinions to myself. Accordingly, I quickly followed by saying that the existing school was fine but that I also immediately understood why one wanted a new building. After all, the present-day VMBO pupil no longer wants to attend school in a factory. I used the rest of my time to explain that we wanted to 'elevate' the VMBO school as an institution, so that this type of school would rise in general esteem. The idea of elevation was not only a conceptual notion but also had a physical aspect. We would literally place the school on a pedestal. At the end of the presentation it was silent in the hall. After some time only Willem Jan Adriaansse (from Hevo) posed some difficult questions about the distance between Amsterdam and Echt, and about the tight planning schedule of the project. Leon agreed that the planning schedule and the budget were tight, but on that point we had always completed our projects within a parsimonious budget and a rigid planning schedule and we had no reason to believe that it would now be any different.

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Different options for positioning the new school in relation to the existing school buildings.



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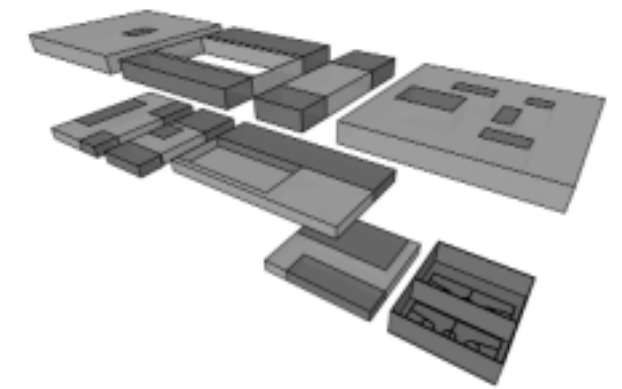
The transition between the one and the two story part of the school in Echt, under construction.



The school in Echt, under construction.

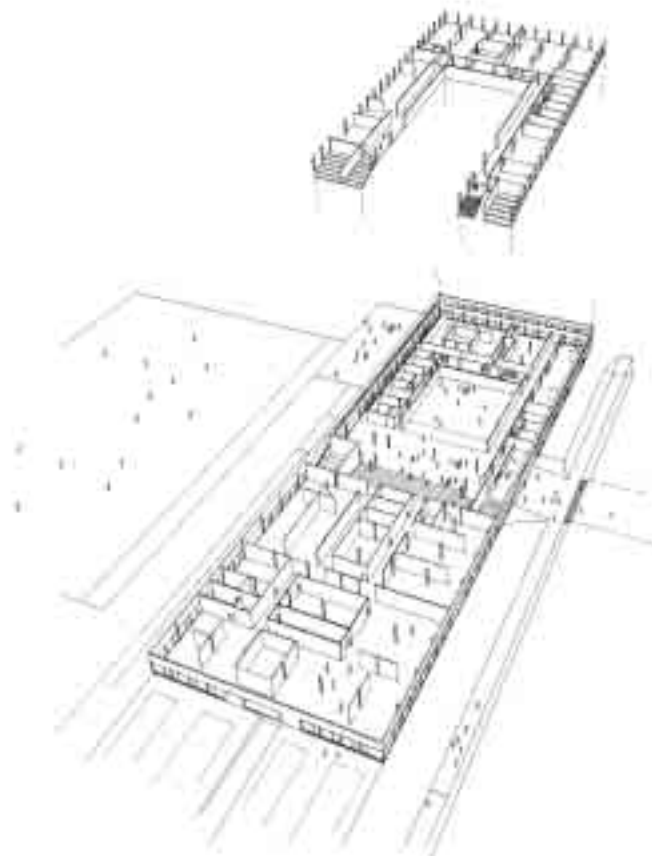
We were lightly positive in the car on our way back home, we thought we might just have a small chance. Just before we reached Eindhoven Willem Jan phoned with the announcement: “You’ve got the assignment!” This was tremendous. Often one has to wait days or even weeks for the result but now, long before Amsterdam, we knew that we had obtained a new assignment. Our new approach to the selection process had been successful! We called the office to open the champagne.

As in almost all of our projects, we also began this project with an excursion for our clients. In Den Bosch we visited 3UP2-DOWN and the Study Villa, as we regarded these as good projects. In the next presentation in Echt, we elucidated our draft design for the school. We proposed creating a two-storey building in which the most prominent element in the brief — the techno square — would be realized on the first floor. The idea behind this was that by ‘elevating’ the techno square, the technical subjects, which were often neglected, would become clearly visible. This turned out to be a mistake. According to the school it was impossible to situate the techno square on the first floor because heavy trucks would have to be able to unload goods there. In the subsequent discussions, it gradually became evident that the problem with the techno square was actually only the tip of the iceberg. The board of trustees of the VMBO school had very clear ideas about what the new construction should look like. What they wanted was an L-shaped brick building that was completely introvert and almost functioned like a fort. In anticipation of this form, the zoning plan for the location had been formulated around this idea. Because we had discussed the design with people from the VMBO school and with people from the HAVO/VWO (secondary schools) in the initial stages of the project, we had received the impression that there was a need to consider other alternatives. For example, Wim van der Munckhof, Ine van der Aa, and Jac Heijthuisen — the representatives of the HAVO/ VWO school —

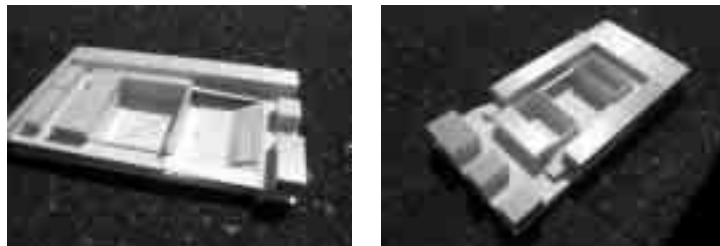


Exploded view indicating open space (in light grey).





Exploded view showing the one-story part and the two-story part of the school linked at the central hall of the school, and directly connected to the sports hall.



Early models for combining the sports hall and the meeting hall.

had indicated that they would be willing to think about new opportunities for the techno square.

In our second design, we proposed to make the building a combination of two storeys at one part and one storey at another. The two storey part would accommodate all the classrooms and teachers' rooms, while the single-storey part would house the techno square. This storey would lie one metre higher than the ground floor of the other part of the school. The difference in height between the two parts would ensure that the technical subjects would be placed in a 'shop window', as it were.

For the internal organization, we also proposed that the important sports hall ought to be positioned centrally in the two-storey part of the school. At the transition between the parts, an assembly hall directly adjoining the sports hall should bridge the split levels in the school. Moreover, by keeping open the possibility of combining the assembly hall and the sports hall, the assembly hall could also be a component of a much larger space for events, besides being an entrance and meeting place. The reaction from Van den Munckhof and his colleagues was that, if the elevated floor could be reached via a slope, our design would be a marvellously innovative solution for the school.

After a rapid design process, we have now begun on the much slower process of elaboration. Consultations no longer take place between all the involved parties but only between ourselves, Hevo, René Jacobs — headmaster of the VMBO — and Robert Aarts — a teacher. The last-mentioned group are quite the opposite of Van der Munckhof, Van der Aa, and Heijthuisen. Jacobs, for example, is extremely careful and reserved in his opinions. This means that we again have to defend many of the design decisions made in the initial stages of the project just to keep them in the design. New adjustments cost an equal amount of effort. When it became apparent that a large multi-functional area could only be realized when this space was used not only by the school but also by the local brass band and the

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carnival association, we did our very best to give the design process a new impulse. We lobbied intensively to obtain a municipal grant and we have come quite far. Local administrators and citizens were convinced of the usefulness of the sports / assembly / events hall, but at the last moment the municipality withdrew from the idea. It is certainly not the case that these developments have made the project in Echt no longer interesting to us, but there is no further narrative to this design with the exception of the selection procedure.<sup>(111)</sup>

To many young architects, this is probably an inconceivable situation. When we started up our office we also thought that designing a school would be a great assignment. However, the more schools we make, the more we observe just how difficult the assignment is. The problem is not architectonic in its nature but generally has to do with the extremely low budgets that are available for this type of building in the Netherlands. The teachers form an extra problem. They are without doubt difficult clients because they are very outspoken and often have contradictory ideas about what is good or bad for children.

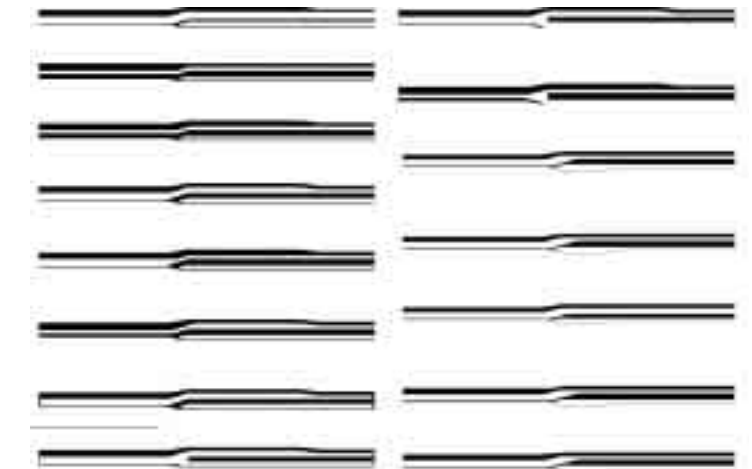
Although all clients think that their assignment — their 'problem', as they tend to call it — is unique, and that you have to be a specialist to bring the project to a good conclusion, schools and hospitals are perhaps the only buildings to which this truly applies. It is probably the case that it costs more time — and thus more money — to have us design a school than it would cost to hire in an office that designs only schools. Before we started on the project in Echt, I was convinced that because we were not specialists in any particular domain we could come up with unconventional solutions that would eventually generate new spatial qualities that could not be expressed in terms of money. In our design for the school in Echt, I began to question this idea for the first time. Because I heard, time after time, that certain solutions were not possible, I believe that I would be less inclined to propose such solutions in future projects.

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(111) Perhaps not interesting in terms of content, but in practical terms it is worth mentioning the co-operation with Hevo in this project. Hevo works differently than other project managers. Because they take a limited risk and act as a kind of project developer their input is more significant than that of normal project managers, and this generated a certain amount of frustration on our part. Hevo wants to control absolutely everything, especially in the domain of costs. Fortunately we received some leeway from the people at Hevo with whom we co-operated, but unfortunately we also experienced that these people were occasionally cautioned by their superiors.



Collage: school seen from the highway.



Studies for different elevations.



Collages showing the multiple uses of the sports / assembly / events hall.





Studies for the use of colour in the interior.

This is the beginning of the standardization and specialization that we have always tried to avoid. I am still convinced that specialization among architects has led to mediocre results, such as the EGM hospitals and the Wiegerink schools. Although many of these buildings are not bad in themselves, they do not help to advance the profession. But in Echt, we notice that it is extremely fatiguing to keep on reinventing the wheel. I don't quite know which conclusion can be drawn from these two poles. At present, I tend to think that the only remedy is for architects to resist specialization, but this has cost us a great deal of energy in the project in Echt. Without wishing to anticipate the built result, there is a large chance that the school in Echt will not be the fantastic addition to our oeuvre that we had hoped it would be. But it will be a good school.

Architecture doesn't always have to be made in pain

At the beginning of 2004, Leon received a phone call from a colleague of his wife Mary. He asked whether or not we might be interested in designing a house for one of his business partners, Menno van der Steen, an account manager at Schiphol airport. Surprised, but always ready to accept a new challenge, Leon said that we would be willing to assess in an interview whether we could be of any use to Van der Steen. Curious, Leon decided to phone Van der Steen himself. Menno seemed to be somewhat overwhelmed. He and his wife Astrid had bought a parcel of land at IJburg a few days previously but they had not yet seriously looked for an architect. Menno appreciated Leon's initiative and requested documentation of our work so that he could contact us himself if he wanted. Menno called back at the beginning of the summer.

He invited us to come to his house in the north of Amsterdam to make acquaintance with himself and his wife. They turned out to be a young couple, both in their early thirties, with a son of 10 months old. The house they lived in was small and full, but they did have a sizeable garden. The garden had been the most important reason for buying the house. In the summer, Menno and Astrid preferred to be outside rather than in. Because it was a pleasant summer evening, we sat in the garden. Astrid offered us some rosé, but Leon and I opted for water. Then a gigantic book appeared on the table: The Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture. Dozens of yellow stickers protruded from the book to indicate what Menno and Astrid liked. With a great deal of enthusiasm they showed us their choices and talked about their dream house. There was certainly nothing wrong with their preferences, but they were not the buildings that we would have chosen. They had selected houses mainly built with much wood, natural stone, and Tadao Ando-like concrete. I did not respond directly to their selection but said that our own experience had taught us that it is of the utmost importance to be able to get along well with one another during the design process.

Although 'pleasant' is perhaps not the best word in this context, I said: "In order to build a good house you have to find us pleasant and we have to find you pleasant. Designing a house is not a project that will enable us to earn money, although you will have to invest a lot of money. It will only be a success if we want to join forces to create something." I followed by saying that we could certainly be able to design a good house for them, a house based on their ideas on exterior space and sun — the most important elements in a house to Menno and Astrid — but we would not use the materials they had shown us. Untreated wood and natural stone were not materials that we enjoyed working with, I said. We prefer to build a house with modern materials: synthetic and composite materials.

The bottle of rosé had been emptied in the meantime, and the plans Astrid and Menno concocted for their new house were becoming increasingly alluring. We were also enthusiastic but cautious at the same time. Having previously built two houses, the pressure for us was not so great on this occasion. We knew how much energy and time this kind of project would demand, and we wanted to have Menno and Astrid make a deliberate choice for an architect. So we advised them to speak to other architects apart from us, to see if someone else could perhaps give them more confidence about the realization of their dream house.

On the way back home, I had a good feeling about the discussion. We did not think that we had more or less obtained the assignment, but we were contented about the way we had been able to express ourselves. For the first time, we did not have the uncontrollable urge to design a house (again). It was not because we were not interested in designing a house — on the contrary — but this time we paid more attention to reality. We only wanted to obtain the assignment if we had the idea that there would be mutual respect. A few weeks after the discussion in the garden, Menno phoned us. He said that they had decided to build the house with us!

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It turned out that Menno and Astrid had bought a parcel with a garden facing the north-west.<sup>(112)</sup> The challenge was, therefore, to create a design in which sunlight penetrated deep into the house and perhaps even into the garden.

In the first draft design for the house, we conceived a void that would allow sun to enter through the front façade at a high point, shine through the house diagonally, and even stretch as far as the garden. It was an interesting idea in which the disadvantageous position of the house was transformed into a spectacular internal spatial organization. Menno and Astrid were fascinated and surprised by our design, but the considerable costs and Astrid's fear of heights — which made her somewhat frightened of a void three stories high — convinced us that we would have to modify the design.

We then used a more typological approach. The patio villa is a typology that has fascinated us for some time. It is a classical form; it is introvert but in the U-shaped house of Toyo Ito, for example, the protective character of a private exterior space is combined with a view of the exterior world.<sup>(113)</sup> For the design of the S-House, we wondered how the *insula* — as the Romans called the patio villa — could be combined with the typology of the town house, the *domus*. We arrived at a design that can be regarded as a patio house on its side, with the patio as an open space on the first floor.

When we elaborated this typological hybrid, the overwhelming possibilities to realize the wishes of Menno and Astrid became clear. An upturned patio — thus a kind of loggia — in the front façade offers various possibilities to profit from the sun, both inside and out. We proposed regarding the ground floor as a kind of basement, with the entrance to the house, the storage space, and a large play and hobby room adjoining the garden. On the first floor, there was a double-high in-house exterior space across the full width of the house on the south side, separated by a sliding panel from the kitchen which forms the heart of the house. The sitting room, or lounge with a view of the gar-

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(112) Opting for a parcel with a garden facing north-west does not seem logical when you attach much importance to exterior space. However, buying a parcel on IJburg rather resembles a lottery. As a potential buyer, you can be happy that you even get the opportunity to purchase a parcel at all, let alone the parcel you would like to have.

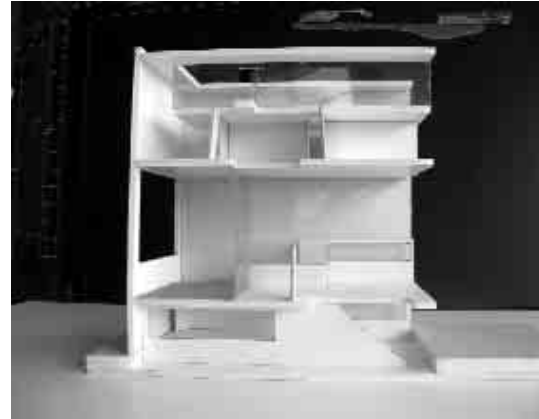
(113) Toyo Ito, White U, Tokyo 1976.



Early models for the S-house.



One of the few introvert houses that still offers a view to the world out-side: U-House by Toyo Ito, 1976.



Presentation model of the S-house.

den and the street, was situated above the kitchen. The top floor of the house was reserved for the bedrooms and bathroom. Menno and Astrid were delighted with the design. Although we examined various layouts for the house at their request, they were directly convinced of the power of our hybrid solution. However, the budget also remained an obstacle in the second design. Although the amount of money they could spend on the house was substantial, by far the greatest part had gone to purchasing the parcel. The prices of ground on IJburg are so high that they have great consequences for the architecture that is subsequently possible. In our case, our clients are determined to build the house just as we designed it. They are even so resolute that they have sold their second car to save money. They also intend to change their lifestyle totally in their new house. From a cottage-like house where they now live, they want to move to a very abstract home — a house with a front façade without windows and only a large hole for the loggia. In their new house they want bare walls, concrete floors, and black ceilings. They want to create true architecture and are prepared to make concessions.

The S-House is not only spatially the opposite of the B-House that we designed in Den Bosch. The co-operation with the client is also completely different from what we experienced with Bouman.<sup>(114)</sup>

Just as in the B-House, the relationship with our client is again an emotional one, but not in an absurd manner this time. There are no ridiculous demands or threats as occurred with Bouman, there is only a strong urge to create something together. And although I could not describe Menno and Astrid as personal friends, a strong feeling of union has arisen, which differs greatly from the situation with Bouman. Perhaps this is not only due to Menno and Astrid being good clients, but also due to the fact that we as architects have become more mature. We tackled the design of the S-House in a very realistic manner. We have

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(114) In spatial terms, the contrast lies in the fact that the B-House is a very transparent house, surrounded by glass façades, whereas the S-House, at the front façade, gives a very closed impression.



S-House, exterior.



S-House, interior.

always taken into consideration the limited budget in relation to the demands made. Moreover, there is a feeling of mutual understanding between the clients and ourselves. Leon and I are only a few years older than Menno and Astrid and we recognize many of their problems and questions. Because our own lives are just ahead of theirs, we can give them advice on the decisions to be made in the coming years of their lives.

For example, we could inform them that a house need not be completely finished when you receive the keys. You can easily do a number of things yourself in the first few years, so that you can save on the construction costs. Of course, these are only small savings, but every little bit helps in this case. Furthermore, this kind of advice creates a very personal ambience in which we architects do not say what is good for our clients; we merely give them advice based on our way of life. Nevertheless, the S-House is not a sum of our own experiences, it certainly contains new experiments, such as the colour of the façades, for example.

Proposing a yellow house was an intuitive choice.<sup>(115)</sup> When we suggested yellow, Menno immediately asked if the façade couldn't be grey. I had rather anticipated this question from him so I had taken with me both a yellow model and a grey model of the house. When we placed the models side by side, Astrid exclaimed resolutely: "I prefer yellow. I think it would be great to say to people that I live in the yellow house." After this remark, Menno was also convinced.

Originally I wanted a rubber façade so that the house would look like a large toy. To see what that would look like, we organized an excursion with Menno and Astrid. We visited MVRDV's building for Thonik, which was still orange at that time. When I had seen that building, I abandoned the idea of a rubber façade. Although we wished to use yellow instead of orange, our house would resemble the MVRDV house too much. That may not have been a bad thing in itself, but unfortunately the current appreciation of architecture is such that when one

(115) It was only when we had opted for yellow that I discovered that various architects had already created yellow houses, such as the Beires House (1973-1976) by Alvaro Siza and the Yellow House (1976) by Alison & Peter Smithson.



Yellow tiles covering the façade of the S-house.



Beires House by Alvaro Siza, 1973-1976.

## THE EVOLUTION OF AN OFFICE OR HOW TO SURVIVE

office has used a material in a conspicuous manner, attention fades for everyone who also uses the same material. A reaction such as “We’ve already seen that” is then inevitable. I regarded the fact that MVRDV had coloured a façade by painting it as a challenge to search for a different material. I believe we have found a good alternative. Given the fact that our façade is completely regular and orthogonal, a skin of small (5 x 5 cm) square tiles is the perfect cladding for this house.

After the first two houses we designed, we had the idea that a house was simultaneously the ultimate and the most emotional assignment for an architect. We had a period in which we had no desire to design private houses, especially after our experiences with Bouman, ignoring for the moment the fact that we were never asked.

The S-House came at a good moment. We had just enough work not to have to accept the assignment, but we deliberately chose to do it. Right from the outset, it clicked between Menno and Astrid and ourselves. During the design process, it often felt like we were designing our own house and we said to ourselves several times that we would be pleased to live in the S-House ourselves. The S-House certainly was not easy to construct, but the satisfaction of working for people who value you as architects is indescribable. If you believe the stories of other architects, as well as our own first experiences, you sometimes wonder why architects take all the trouble. But the S-House has irrefutably proved that architecture doesn’t always have to be made in pain.



S-House exterior.

Everyone always thought that I had made a clever move when choosing Leon as a partner. Actually, there was no mention of a deliberate choice, it was more a question of intuition.

In the meantime, it is obvious that our co-operation has turned out to be fruitful; even more so, the co-operation is the basis of VMX. An important part of the explanation why this co-operation works lies in the fact that we are two completely different personalities with different interests and skills. This means that we do not compete within the office for the same attention. We have developed a strict division of roles.

I assume this is different for architectural offices that arose from a co-operation between architects. An office such as S333 — which was set up after winning Europan 3, just like VMX — consists of four striking personalities, all being major egos who want to do everything alone. Although I sometimes think it might be exciting to work in this kind of situation — in which design ideas are discussed extremely comprehensively — the chance that the co-operation will sooner or later burst asunder or grow apart is greater than in a co-operation based on supplementary qualities.

In Rem Koolhaas’s book *Content*, I read a text that accurately sketches a similar situation but this time in relation to a client. The text in question provides an explanation of the failure of the co-operation between OMA and Herzog & de Meuron in the design of a hotel in New York: the client never knew whom to call. This recalls Henry Kissinger, who never knew how to contact Europe: France or England? The other way around was obvious: Europe calls Washington. “Perhaps Schrager (client of the joint venture of OMA/H&deM) didn’t know the number of his European architects. When he got fed up, the commission ended up in the predictable hands of Frank Gehry — a serial killer waiting for a victim in Manhattan!” (116)

The co-operation between Leon and myself being as it is, it is always crystal clear whom clients and outsiders ought to call for

(116) Fernandez-Galiano, Luis, ‘The Butterfly’s Fate: In Praise of Oxymoron’, in *Content*, p. 210, Taschen (2004).

certain questions. Leon is the contact man when it is a matter of finance and building management, I cover programmatic and architectonic issues.

This division of roles means that we are seldom insulted if someone calls and asks specifically for one of us. But although the division of roles toward the outside world has always been obvious, our co-operation has undergone a long evolution in formal terms. Although when Leon began as a partner at VMX — which was still VMG at that time — he was actually employed by Ed Veenendaal, the silent partner in Veenendaal, Murphy de Graaf. VMX did not have enough work for him so he worked for Ed for 90% of the time and 10% for VMX. In the second year, this relationship was inverted. Leon worked mainly for VMX and hired himself to Ed as a freelance employee. After the abrupt departure of Reinier, a vacuum arose and it was not clear exactly how we would continue. The issue of how the co-operation could formally gain shape concentrated primarily on the question of whether or not Leon was prepared to take over Reinier's shares.

After winning Europan, I had set up a partnership with Reinier and we had had the feeling that we had laid a solid basis for our own office. After Reinier's departure, I said that Leon ought to take over Reinier's shares and thus become a full partner.

The issue of the division of shares was not important in the sense that we were making money and it had to be shared, it was important because it was symbolic of the division of power within the office. Eventually we arrived at a division of 70/30. At my initiative, this was later adjusted to 60/40 because this seemed better in psychological terms and also because I was not interested in owning as much as possible.

Besides the developments in the mutual co-operation between ourselves, various other stages could be distinguished in the co-operation with people who worked for us. Just like other new

offices, we also began with the help of friends, people whom I knew from the Berlage Institute. As a result, the period in which we worked on the German Wettbewerbe resembled a prolongation of our student days rather than a time of professional devotion. We often worked the whole weekend and felt almost guilty if we went home on time during the week. The freelance workers made their entrance with the assignment for 3UP2DOWN. With them, we could hire in specialist technical knowledge. After 3UP2DOWN we began to employ people. Peter Stokkermans was our first real employee. The last step in this development is that staff are offered a permanent contract after three years; Angelique Haver and Skafta Aymo-Boot now have fixed employment.

The changing relationships at work also demanded a change in the way in which we dealt with our staff. Because the office transformed from a team of friends to an organization with employees in a series of natural developments, the necessary changes in our approach were not always clear. I remember Pepijn Nolet — a member of staff — once saying: "You should stop regarding everyone in the office as your friends, there should be a clear distinction between you as employers and the rest as employees." He was right. From that moment on, we began to pay more attention to our role as employers.

Of course, it was great that friends helped us, but working with them was not easy. To Leon, for example, it was a problem that many of the foreign (former) Berlage students had a different working rhythm. They arrived late in the morning and worked late in the evening. In Leon's view, this was a very unproductive schedule. With the advent of 'real' employees, our rhythm gradually changed to normal office hours. Our roles within the office have also altered since then. Nowadays I am the one who becomes frustrated if people arrive too late, talk a lot during working hours, or take too many breaks.

Our aim was always to generate as much productivity as possi-

ble in the office. However, this cannot be achieved by only (positively) criticizing the employees. The organization of social occasions such as excursions, Christmas dinners and barbecues was also an important component in the development of our office. Such events allow you the opportunity, as the 'boss', to display your appreciation of the people with whom you are working. The problem of organizing these events is that they cost lots of time and energy and that you do not always receive the anticipated feedback. In fact, we are in a very difficult position as an architectural office. We do not wish to become a 'normal' firm in which matters such as teambuilding etc. are common occurrences, but we do hope that the employees work for VMX with devotion and pleasure.

We doubt how to reinforce the social bonds within VMX. We even differ about the issue of whether or not reinforcement is necessary. Leon finds the social side of the office more important than I do, but I also have my doubts about how we ought to behave as bosses. Ignoring for the moment the issue of how you want to stimulate people, there is also the problem of the relatively high turnover of employees within an architectural office. Although I am convinced that regular interviews with, and the coaching of, the employees do bear fruit, experience has taught us that when you have trained people they often decide to return to Switzerland, Germany, England, etc. As a result, the desire to keep on investing in people can diminish. However, when the employees organize activities themselves I do regain hope and faith that we are developing along the right lines. These may be activities that have nothing to do with architecture but are very valuable for the working atmosphere. Unfortunately, this tends to happen too little.

Office meetings have indicated that the employees have a great need to be informed about the state of affairs in other projects. I think that it should not be too difficult to organize this. It is merely a matter of taking the initiative. If a project has arrived at

a stage in which it would be particularly interesting to show it to all colleagues, one could organize a simple presentation in the office.

It was not that we had little work in 2003, but we received no new assignments at all. It was also a year of illness. At first we had members of staff who were ill for a lengthy period, so that we were obliged to deal with this type of problem. 2003 was also the first time we realized that we were no longer the young office that we had been when we started out. We no longer saw absolute commitment among our employees; we too had become less dynamic, had become more established, and no longer aimed at creating a workplace-like ambience in the office. We had acquired a more stable lifestyle, each with his own family, and we can understand that members of staff also have other priorities. These changing circumstances have irrevocably turned VMX into a more mature company instead of a creative conspiracy. As a result, we have to deal with more commercial problems.

The internal discontent and our tight financial position certainly goaded us into reflection. We realized that we had regarded the functioning of our office as self-evident for too long.

After almost ten years of running the office, we had obtained a reasonably clear idea of what we wanted to achieve with our architecture, what we wanted to do with VMX. As a result, the total experiment as in the early years had taken on a different dimension. We realized that we were no longer interested in everything and that not all experiments are valuable or lead to new insight. When we obtained new assignments at the beginning of 2004, I suddenly realized that the process had become less important to me than the result. I simply wanted to get the work done! I know that Leon has a different opinion of the criticism from the employees. He is more inclined to agree with them, and thinks that better internal communication will eventu-



ally advance our office further. Although I still cannot banish the idea that too much time is lost in talking, we decided in 2004 to follow Leon's strategy.

Because we are always a year behind, this meant that a poor 2003 was only felt in 2004. When new work arrived, the internal discontent had not yet been solved. In contrast to my expectations, the employees continued to complain about the lack of communication and too little willingness to undertake experiments. After a year with chronically ill employees and dissatisfaction, 2004 was a year filled with tension. There were external tensions due to the new projects having strict planning schedules, there were internal tensions because we had to achieve a new balance between experiment, communication and production. The internal tension was increased by the fact that, due to our tight financial situation, we were not immediately able to replace the people who left our office of their own accord in 2003. It was only in the course of 2004 that we could take on reinforcements.

I can imagine that it is pleasant to work for VMX, but it seems as if new employees have to pass through a kind of 'net' to be able to participate in the culture of this office. Everyone has to find his or her own way, but what I observe — and what disappoints me — is that the people who are 'in' do not help those who are trying to get in. I see new employees really struggling in the first few months until they eventually find a hole in the net.

Although I would prefer this not to be the case, I must acknowledge that it is so. But I do not understand why the established employees do not educate the new ones. As the boss, I cannot do this, nor would I wish to.

On the basis of this realization and the criticism of our communication, we deliberately employed people with a good deal of experience when we began to receive new assignments. We also realized that, besides experienced employees, we require an intermediate layer in our office. I refer to a group of people

who can occupy a position between us and the new employees and can guide and inform them. The introduction of this intermediate layer will thus alter the horizontal organizational structure with which we launched VMX. The issue of whether or not this change will take place is not only an organizational one but also covers the theme of how much responsibility we wish to allocate to others.

The current critical concern covers the way in which we can move from an office that evolved almost organically to a more established type of firm. We have always claimed that we did not wish to grow too much, the quality of the projects remains the key factor. However, this quality will have to develop and we must deliberately steer that process by, for example, finding better clients and thus creating more opportunities to make better architecture.

In the past few years, besides bringing architects and technologists together within one office, we have also attempted to introduce other disciplines. For example, we now employ an interior architect and we have been looking for a good urban designer for some time. The long-term aim is to find better clients.

2004 — 2005/ THE MAKING OF...

Wanting to make a new book on architecture is one thing, but making it is another.

## THE NINETIES

VMX Architects was founded in the mid-nineties, a period that is currently regarded as the arrogant years. Thanks to many publications, the main contours of this period have become common knowledge among the general public. The personal stories of architects about what it meant to acquire one's own position in these years are much less well-known. Because we believe that these personal narratives are valuable in obtaining a good understanding of recent history, we have tried to describe our own recollections in as much detail as possible in a book. At the end of this personal history, we have only one more story: the story of the production of the book itself.

Before entering the subject of the considerations we saw as decisive, the problems we encountered, and the envisaged aims of the book, we also find it important to take one last look at the period we are discussing. After a concise, general description of the major developments of the last ten years, we present a description of the rise and — if we believe the media — fall of the architectural climate in the Netherlands. Our own story then follows against the background of the general developments described.

In the long nineties — the period from 1989 to 2001 — the world was complete. At least, that was the opinion of many people, although some improvements could be made here and there. After hundreds of thousands exuberant citizens of East Berlin had pulled down the Wall, there was an almost euphoric mood: liberalism and the free market had definitively conquered the Soviet Empire. Furthermore the introduction of a new communication medium — internet — seemed to announce a new period of Enlightenment.<sup>(1)</sup> Nevertheless, there was also hesitancy at the beginning of the nineties. Shortly before *die Wende* (fall of the Wall), Francis Fukuyama and others questioned the supremacy of liberalism. In his polemical essay *The End of History*, Fukuyama maintained that Western civilization had come to the “the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution: liberal democ-

(1) René Boomkens observed that the demise of communist regimes did not feel like progress but rather like a return to the lap of democracy. In addition, the internet seemed above all to be a commercially lucrative development. See: ‘Engagement na de vooruitgang’, Reflect # 01, *Nieuw engagement*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2003).

racy, the final form of human government and as such the end of history.”<sup>(2)</sup> Between the lines, it could be read that this endpoint was not particularly exciting. After all, it was an endpoint characterized by feelings of tedium. The writer Douglas Coupland pointed in the same direction when he referred to the generation that grew up in the 1980s as the Generation X (in the Netherlands bastardized to Generatie Nix: the Nothing Generation).<sup>(3)</sup>

With this term, Coupland did not mean the alleged resignation of his generation but rather the limited prospects of young people in comparison to those of the baby-boomers under whom he and people like him had to acquire a position in society. After the dreams of the sixties, a fragmented cultural landscape at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties provided few footholds. The attitude to life that offered some kind of outcome was post-modernism. Life was put into perspective on the basis of the philosophical movement of the same name, which had announced the end of all major ideologies in the seventies. The combination of Generation X, the run-up to a period of economic prosperity, and the rapidly evolving process of internationalization as a result of new communications technology ensured that there was a sense of the arrival of a new economy in the mid-nineties. The faith in the new possibilities of internet was so great that the most important criterion for obtaining capital in the era of the internet bubble seemed to be one’s own domain name. After the dualism of the sixties and seventies and the no-nonsense approach of the eighties, the nineties were the years of consumption and free-market views. In this period, the typical Dutch dilemma of how to combine wealth and morals was resolved by a remarkable model in which almost all contrasts seemed to be soluble.<sup>(4)</sup> The attitude by means of which life in the Netherlands was given substance was ideally typified by the advertising slogan of the country’s largest multinational: ‘Let’s make things better’.<sup>(5)</sup> In this case, making things better was understood as a better arrangement of one’s personal life, the creation of one’s own lifestyle.

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(2) Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, Free Press (1992).

(3) Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*, St. Martin’s Press (1992).

(4) This model of consultancy between the parties became known under the term ‘Polder model’ and was successfully applied by two consecutive cabinets under Prime Minister Kok.

(5) The Philips slogan was previously said to be applicable to the Dutch attitude in the nineties. See: ‘Altijd en overal hip’, Joeri Boom & Sander Pleij, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 20 July 2002. In 2005 Philips adapted its slogan to a new spirit of the times which demanded certainty and simplicity: Sense and Simplicity.

The *Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport 1998* by the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, (Social and Cultural Planning Office) confirmed that an increasingly tangible focus on individuality was visible in society. The Report even referred to the process of individualization as the general description of the changes in Dutch society in the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>(6)</sup>

In 2000, the internet bubble burst when the American technology markets collapsed after years of expansion. Even in the Netherlands, companies such as World Online — Nina Brink — and Neweconomy — Maurice de Hond — suddenly turned out to be little more than ‘castles in the air.’ In 2001, the terrorist attacks in New York made it clear to everyone that, in ideological terms, a new era had arrived: the era of anxiety.

In that same year, considerable cases of fraud were revealed both in the USA and in the Netherlands.<sup>(7)</sup> The individualization of the previous decade seemed to have resulted in a culture of ‘taking what you can get’ and an increasing intolerance toward minorities. Senseless violence, lack of norms, hedonism, and the decline of the traditional family were subsequently and successfully deployed by conservative groups to announce their own chauvinistically tinted message.

A few people regarded these developments as a change of paradigm. For example, Okwui Enwezor, the curator of the prestigious Documenta XI, stated that the destruction of the WTC should not be seen as the apotheosis of the struggle between the West and the rest of the world, but the event fitted in with a much broader process of post-colonial homogenization of the world. In his view, the date of 11 September marked the moment at which peripheral population groups arrived at the centre of power, and also the moment of a new world era. In the Netherlands, the predictions are currently less lofty. Under two successive cabinets led by Prime Minister Balkenende, work is being performed on ‘elucidation and effectiveness’ and ‘participation, employment and fewer regulations’.<sup>(8)</sup> Dreams are

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(6) See also the contribution of the director Paul Schnabel, *Individualisering en sociale integratie*, SCP 2004.

(7) For instance the Public Works fraud and at the Ahold company.

(8) The slogans of the first and second cabinets under Prime Minister Balkenende.

making way for a sense of reality in architecture too. Not a vision of, but rather a passion for, reality is becoming the standard.<sup>(9)</sup>

#### Super Dutch: lost in paradise

As mentioned, there was a remarkable upsurge in Dutch architecture. The role of Rem Koolhaas in this revitalization can hardly be overestimated. Although Koolhaas had been active as an architect and teacher since the end of the seventies, his concepts were only recognized by the general public toward the end of the eighties. With the fall of the Wall and the advent of all-embracing capitalism, the society of individualism and congestion that he described seemed to become reality. But Koolhaas was not single-handedly responsible for the architectural climate in the Netherlands. In the spring of 1991, there was also mention of a strong policy impulse when the government presented its first architectural memo entitled *Ruimte voor Architectuur* (Space for Architecture).<sup>(10)</sup> The main aim of this memo and the successive reports was to create conditions for the realization of architectonic quality.<sup>(11)</sup>

In addition to memos, the government also decided to set up a number of important institutions: the Nederlands Architectuur instituut (1989), the Berlage Instituut (1990), the Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur (1993), and Architectuur Lokaal (1993). The combined effect of all these initiatives was that the influence of the government on Dutch architecture and urban planning acquired an indirect character and was exerted mainly by means of stimulation, education, and debate.

Although it is impossible to determine exactly which role this policy has played, it is obvious that, since the end of the eighties, Dutch architecture has again become an international force to be reckoned with. Aroused by Koolhaas and stimulated by the government, a new generation of architects has arisen — strikingly many former staff members of OMA — that profits from a more liberal government, economic growth, and clients who are interested in innovative and radical architectonic

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(9) See also Toorn van, Roemer, 'No more dreams' in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2003-'04*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2004).

(10) The basis for the current Dutch architectural policy was the *Ruimte voor Architectuur* (Space for Architecture) memo. With this first architectural memo, the Ministries of Welfare, Health & Culture and of Housing, Spatial Planning & Environment wished to reinforce the coherence between the construction and cultural policies. In the memo, architectonic quality was divided into three coherent values: the cultural value, the user value, and the future value of architecture. In 1996 the second memo, *De architectuur van de ruimte*, was presented. The existing field of policy was expanded to higher scale levels. From that moment onward, disciplines such as landscape architecture, urban planning, physical planning, and the construction of infrastructural works came under the auspices of architectural policy. These two memos have formed the conceptual basis for policy up to the present. The *Ontwerpen aan Nederland* (Designing the Netherlands) memo was presented in

2001. The primary aim of this memo is to reinforce the input of designing disciplines in spatial and architectonic assignments by means of custom-made government participation in nine large projects. With the incorporation of the higher scale levels mentioned in the architectural policy, the successive memos have become increasingly important to spatial planning and the new act on spatial planning.

(11) Free rendering of Vollaard, Piet, 'Architectuur als vlag van de natie' in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2002-'03*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2003).

ideas.<sup>(12)</sup> A final important aspect in the success of young architects is that, since the eighties, the construction production method in the Netherlands has been set up in such a way that young inexperienced architects can cause little 'damage'. Or, as Aaron Betsky articulated it: "The system turned out to be infinitely flexible, and its application gives developers the freedom to hire young architects without experience, as they can experiment with the system without breaking it."<sup>(13)</sup> As a consequence, the nineties could develop to a golden age of Dutch architecture.

Not only the built architecture increased spectacularly but also the publicity around the plans, regardless of whether or not they were actually realized. After it had become possible to apply for a grant for publications in the eighties, a Dutch publisher dealing exclusively in architectural books was set up for the first time in 1983: 010 Publishers in Rotterdam.

With the establishment of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) at the beginning of the nineties, a second one followed: NAi Publishers.<sup>(14)</sup> The result of the new possibilities was so overwhelming that the critic Hans Ibelings observed that there had never been so much work published on the work of Dutch architects as in the nineties.<sup>(15)</sup> There are various explanations on why so much attention was devoted to this theme.

Critic Hans van Dijk believed that there was mention of an information overload — a stream of publications and manifestations so torrential that Dutch architecture could not remain unnoticed.<sup>(16)</sup> However, his colleague Bart Lootsma emphasized that the combination of a rapidly developing process of internationalization, a pragmatic attitude, and the relatively young age of Dutch architects attracted attention at both home and abroad until deep in the nineties.<sup>(17)</sup> According to Lootsma, a new generation of architects could be distinguished, going under the term *SuperDutch*. The new super-generation was championed as if they were sporting heroes or rock legends, and criticism

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(12) See also *Referentie OMA: de sublieme start van een architectengeneratie*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (1995).

(13) Betsky, Aaron, 'The Dutch Tale: a Fortuyn-ate tale', in *Archis* #4, p.11 (2002).

(14) Free rendering of Vollaard, Piet, 'Architectuur als vlag van de natie' in *Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2002-'03*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2003).

(15) The critic Hans Ibelings observed that there had never been so many books on Dutch architecture as in the nineties. He also discerned the advent of a new type of architectural book: the Automonograph. See also Ibelings, Hans, 'De automonografie', in *Het kunstmatig landschap*, p. 217, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2000).

(16) Hans van Dijk, 'De Nederlandse delta', in *Archis* no.11 (1997).

(17) Bart Lootsma, 'De tweede moderniteit van de Nederlandse architectuur', in *Superdutch*, SUN (2000).

was seldom heard. The Netherlands was regarded as an architectural guide in which the twenty-first century already began in the nineties.

Once the twenty-first century really began, the exalted mood turned sour, just as it did in many other sectors. The moment at which Koolhaas sharply criticized the idea of a successful Dutch generation was a remarkable one. During the closing meeting of INDESEM 2001 — A Critical Judgement — he and Herman Hertzberger were asked to respond to a series of slides. When the Villa VPRO by MVRDV appeared, Koolhaas replied to a question by Hertzberger if he knew what it was: “Yes I know what this is: (...) It is an energetic effort by architects who split off from OMA to pursue separately what we had been doing together.” Koolhaas followed by saying: “What I think is shocking about the VPRO building, and shocking about the Dutch situation at this moment is that no writer or critic has gone to the trouble to point out not so much the similarities but the differences. (...) I do not criticize the architects — they tried what we’re all trying: to build. I criticize the critics for allowing this ‘reduction’ to become the initial symbol of a ‘new’ Dutch architecture...” As the apex of this misrepresentation, Koolhaas referred to Super Dutch in which Dutch architecture is erroneously linked to a national identity. “The Dutch have done nothing to deserve the ‘super’. Dutch architecture is still colourful, still cheap, still modern, still frivolous. But nothing more.”<sup>(18)</sup> Criticism also came from Roemer van Toorn, who describes the celebrated generation of Dutch architects as being lost in paradise. Van Toorn says: “Dutch architecture seems to suffer from a pragmatism virus. The overfull agenda apparently does not allow critical reflection on the consequences of action. There is the imminent danger of architects and urban planners tamely accepting that we live in an era in which there is no more scope for ideology.”<sup>(19)</sup>

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(18) ‘Rem, do you know what this is?’ in Hunch no. 3, pp. 32-33, 2001.

(19) Toorn van, Roemer, ‘Verdwaald in het paradijs’ in Jaarboek Architectuur in Nederland 2001-’02, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2002).

Fatigue was abruptly tangible in the publicity around Dutch architecture. Wouter Vanstiphout described the mood as follows: “The atmosphere of disenchantment is palpable; the SuperDutch generation is spreading over the world, building, teaching, lecturing, publishing, distancing themselves from each other and from Dutchness and becoming famous in their own right.”<sup>(20)</sup>

#### Book Two

Although I understand why architecture — and architects — cannot do without media attention, it is certainly an important cause of the current negative disposition. The overwhelming attention received in the nineties has effected a feeling of saturation. The picture of the Dutch architect that has been formed greatly resembles a media-addict who is primarily concerned with promoting his own interests instead of creating architecture.<sup>(21)</sup> I have always cherished the idea that the task of an architect reaches further than designing a building. I think that an architect must also attempt to steer the path of the future. Perhaps other architects think that they are accepting their responsibility by demanding an exaggerated amount of attention, but I have always regarded it as my responsibility to share my ideas with others, by giving lessons for example, or by publishing.

Our book VMX '95 was our first expression of the broad responsibility of an architect. Although this book is often regarded as a monograph, this is not really the case. The idea for the book was quite simple. Because, in the first year of our existence as an architectural office, we did not have the opportunity to build, we thought it important to present our view of architecture. So VMX '95 was nothing more than an overview of the production in our first year. With the aid of scale-model photos, minimalist drawings, and concise descriptions, we managed to build up our own world consisting of essential and pragmatic architecture.<sup>(22)</sup> When the book finally lay in the shops, it turned out

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(20) Vanstiphout, Wouter, ‘Dirty Minimalism’, Archis no. 5, pp. 76-79, 2004. This is the issue of Archis in which people announced their departure from the Netherlands because the climate no longer offered scope for this magazine.

(21) In his lecture ‘Selling Architecture’, on the occasion of the exhibition Ads & Architects, Aaron Betsky speaks of a new type of architect, a person whose unique selling points do not lie in the mastery of the craft but rather in the capacity to think in images and to mediate in complex situations and, not least, to be hip; 5 April 2005 at the Berlage Institute, Rotterdam.

(22) Compare the title of the review of VMX '95 by Tom Maas: VMX Architectural office wishes to make the world Cartesian, Cobouw, February 1996.

that there was interest in our work on paper. Although almost no one knew us, the first edition was sold out within a year. Nevertheless, *VMX '95* did not make us famous at a stroke. There was little attention for the book in the official press. It was probably mainly architects and students who looked at our book.

In the second year of our existence, we began on a sequel, but when we obtained more work and could really get on with building, we shelved the idea of this book. In contrast to many architectural colleagues, the subsequent years witnessed a gradual decline in the need to publish on our work. From the moment that we realized our first projects, we began to experience a feeling of disappointment. It was not that every building we produced made us unhappier, on the contrary, but regardless of how intensively we did our best, we observed that imperfections always crept into the finished results and we were not capable of concealing these personal disappointments. Reserve seemed to us to be the most suitable reaction.<sup>(23)</sup>

Our attitude did not mean that our work was not noticed or that people did not write about it. On the contrary, projects like 3UP-2DOWN and the office building in Zaltbommel were positively reviewed in a number of newspapers and magazines. However, the attention given to our work was modest, certainly in comparison to the attention devoted to the work of other offices that had participated in the Nine+One exhibition.<sup>(24)</sup>

When we realized the Bicycle hotel at the Central Station in Amsterdam, we suddenly received a great deal more attention. Although this project can hardly be called a building, everyone wanted to publish it. Due to the fact that the parking facility was constructed on the basis of slopes, the project seemed to combine seamlessly with the erstwhile new concept of a building as a landscape of folded floor areas. In reality, our design had little to do with this idea, but the images did tend to correspond. Although it was a great experience to see our own work in Italian, Spanish, English and even Japanese magazines, we also

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(23) Our reserve was reinforced by the absurd experience that we had with public opinion concerning our Twister project in Den Bosch. For details, see the 'Success that kills' in the 'Discovering materials' episode in this book.

(24) See also the description of the role of VMX in this exhibition in the 'All about space' episode in this book.

observed how much emphasis was placed on the image and not on the content or background.

After our experience with the Bicycle hotel, I began to wonder whether the increased attention for Dutch architecture was perhaps a consequence of changing views on publicity on the part of the architect himself. I could not ignore the impression that to some fellow architects publishing seemed to become a goal on its own.<sup>(25)</sup> The statement by Walter van Dijk of NL Architects in an interview when winning the NAI award in 2005 confirmed my hunch. Speculating on the success of his office, Van Dijk said: "Our strength is that we manage to focus a disproportional amount of attention on what we are doing. And in a certain way, publishing is almost just as pleasant as building."<sup>(26)</sup> We saw it differently. Formed by a combination of disappointment and modesty, we felt the need to be engaged primarily with the projects themselves and not with the image-forming around our work. Thus, we have never actively gone looking for publicity, we have never formulated press releases, and have never sent project documentation to magazine editors on our own initiative. It was only when people came to us with questions or suggestions concerning our work that we have tried as comprehensively as possible to provide an answer.

As a result of this self-chosen position, I have always regarded myself as more of an observer than a participant in a process in which attention for Dutch architecture shifted from normal interest to a situation of over-exposure. We saw how architects began to make increasingly mediagenic work, devoted more and more attention to exceptional one-of-a-kind buildings, while we became increasingly interested in everyday buildings on the basis of our own practice: houses, schools, offices, and hospitals.

Not only did we gradually become less interested in the topics that were discussed and reviewed, we were also dissatisfied with the way in which the information was conveyed. Thanks to

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(25) We know that architecture is media, partly due to the architectural historian Beatriz Colomina. Colomina fascinatingly described how Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos developed their own media strategies. The critic Hilde Heynen also claims that: 'Architecture includes all those buildings that are spoken and written about; buildings about which people say nothing are not part of architecture', in *Archis* no. 8, pp.14-52, 1992. But publishing for publishing's sake is a step further and seems to be more akin to that to which Aaron Betsky refers in his lecture 'Selling Architecture', in which he argues that the success of the architect has become *extra-architectural*; 5 April 2005 at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam.

(26) Lucas Verweij in an interview with Walter van Dijk of NL Architects, in *Fresher Facts*, p. 15, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers (2004).

Arjen Oosterman, everyone now knows that the magazine editors in the nineties seldom went looking for buildings to write about. Instead, they preferred to wait until the work appeared of its own accord, as it were, in ready-to-consume press folders. Oosterman clarifies his (undesired) image of the magazine as a media-architect serving hatch with the example of Ben van Berkel who thought out a sophisticated strategy for the publication of a villa. "He (Van Berkel) sends a double report of his Möbius house, in which the sequence and mutual relationships of the pictures are neatly indicated by colour codes. From Amsterdam to South Africa, the lover of architecture is given a report of this masterly design in a controlled and identical manner, at least in imagery. The standard human figure and furniture-free pictures of the construction are accompanied by fashionable lifestyle pictures in which the interior is populated by models and trendy furniture. It seems to be an ingenious move to present two visions of the building in a single controlled series. The picture direction has been optimized, the critical moment internationalized." (27) A few years later, Ole Bouman stated that the media hurricane also had a clear influence on architecture books as well as magazines. The nineties were the period in which an almost content-free type of architectural book appeared under the influence of the media: the salon table book. Bouman wrote: "There are (...) coffee table monographs aplenty on individual architects. What is more, there are books on single projects; on single aspects of certain projects; and even on nothing at all. After all, it isn't the content that matters. The main thing is that there is a book. There it lies, a monument to fame." (28)

Although we concur with the criticism of Oosterman and Bouman, it took quite some time before we ourselves could formulate a solution to the problem. The tip of the solution came in 2002 when we made an excursion to Copenhagen. There I visited a church built by the Danish architect Jørn Utzon and I suddenly remembered what Kenneth Frampton had said about this



Section of the model of Bagsvaerd Church, by Jørn Utzon (1976).

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(27) Oosterman, Arjen, 'Möbiushuis: plaatjes maken de man', in *Archis* no. 4, p. 64-65 (1999).

(28) Bouman, Ole, 'Star Style: the evolution of the coffee table', in *Archis* no. 4 (2004).

church at the Berlage Institute. Frampton had not only praised the contrast between the interior and the exterior, but also spoke of the building as an experience.<sup>(29)</sup> Until the moment that I visited Utzon's church myself, I had never understood why Frampton had been so enthusiastic, but then everything became clear. The impression that this building made was indeed impossible to convey even with drawings and photographs. You have to experience the building. As a result of this experience, I realized how limited the publicity around architecture actually was in the current culture based on image. Architecture books and magazines (certainly in the Netherlands) deal with pictures and to a limited extent with concepts, but not with the issue of how designs really arose, how buildings are created, how buildings are received, and what took place behind the scenes, although these are certainly matters about which one can write.

When it became evident to us that there was a major shortage of background information in the publicity around the creation of architecture, we (again) felt the urge to publish a new book.

It would not be a brochure in book form — a coffee table book — but a book that would express the everyday goings-on at our work. To make our plan concrete, we sought someone who would be able to work with us on this idea and we came into contact with Olv Klijn. As we began to work on it, the idea of a diary, a personal review of everyday practice in our office, arose. In addition to retrospection, we also wanted to explain and outline how we went to work over the past ten years.

Olv then suggested no longer referring to a diary but rather an agenda. The difference between these is the aspect of time. The concept of 'agenda' not only refers to the past but also to the present and even the future. Furthermore, the concept has an ideological undertone.

Enthusiastic about this ambiguous approach to our own history, we made an appointment with Peter de Winter of O10 Publishers

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(29) In the description of Utzon's entire oeuvre, Frampton uses the words of Phillip Drew, who describes Utzon's work as 'a trance-like quality of ascension and cosmic awareness', see also Frampton, Kenneth, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, MIT Press (1995).



to test our idea. I began my story by saying that, in our opinion, architecture criticism is dead. If you look at the books that architects have produced in the past few years, you must conclude that they almost always involve brochures of their own work rather than content-related reflections. Because we have often been asked in the past few years to talk about how we set up our office, we believe that this story is much more relevant than the umpteenth brochure-book. We wish to give an open and sincere description of the events that have led to VMX as it is today, not only the highlights but also the surprising and occasionally banal concurrence of circumstances that have determined this development. With the image of an agenda in front of us, we want to place the most important happenings in context. We wish to apply the agenda concept in its ideological sense. In other words, our description of history should also clarify what we are trying to achieve by means of architecture. Peter was immediately enthusiastic. The idea of providing an informal description of the evolution of an architectural office fitted in perfectly with the spirit of the times. He mentioned that he was very interested in the outcome of this kind of initiative but warned about the inconceivable amount of work it would entail. To encourage us, he added that it would be possible to request a research grant from the Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur (the Netherlands Architecture Fund). He said: "Your proposal is exactly something for which the research grants were set up, so I would certainly try to get one. I would only apply for a grant for publication after getting a research grant. In fact, a manuscript that is as attractive as possible should roll out of the research, so that it would be impossible not to publish it."<sup>(30)</sup>

#### Publishers and designers

We followed Peter's advice without hesitation and submitted our application at the end of March 2004. We articulated our idea in the application as follows: "By means of historical research on our own professional practice, VMX wishes to allow the gen-

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<sup>(30)</sup> Notes of the discussion with Peter de Winter, Don Murphy, and Olv Klijn, Wednesday 21 January 2004, VMX archives.

eral public access to the knowledge and experience we have gained, while simultaneously wishing to place architectural considerations in a broader perspective. Our own experience has taught VMX Architects that the question most posed in real-life practice is the one least answered. A complete answer to the question: "How did you succeed in setting up an office and how have you realized your ideas?" is something that VMX has not yet formulated. VMX is not the only one. In general, the everyday reality is that little information is available on architectural offices that were young in the nineties. What there is consists of shards, recollections of those who played a role in the currently renowned architectural climate. However, a detailed and personal answer to the question about the reality of an architectural office offers the opportunity to disclose important supplementary information on the work of architects in the period mentioned."

The response from the Stimuleringsfonds came in June. The advisory committee of the Fund was positive. In the outline of its assessment, it wrote: "The committee is enthusiastic about the initiative of the applicant to perform research on the comings and goings of its own professional practice in the nineties. This was an important period in which Dutch architects acquired much recognition abroad. It is very enthusiastic about the innovative concept of the 'agenda' — a personal narrative, which discusses, by means of an agenda, what it meant for a young architect to launch an office in the Netherlands. (...) In the opinion of the committee, the historiography of ten years of professional practice with VMX as a cog in the wheel of the profession is interesting, certainly in international terms."<sup>(31)</sup>

Supported by this confidence and a financial contribution from the Stimuleringsfonds, we began on our research. In addition to Olv as a researcher and ghost writer, we also employed Angela Sondervan as an internee for the project. The first appointment with Peter to discuss our results was mid-October. We agreed to discuss the study in our office and then go out for a meal.

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<sup>(31)</sup> Justification of the advice, Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur, 23 June 2004, VMX archives.

Much to our surprise, Peter gave us a real dressing down during this meeting. The material we had sent him was completely different from what he had expected. Instead of a biographic narrative, we had produced a polite chronological summary. Peter emphasized that we should take a much bolder approach. "You should write an honest and open book in which you recount how and why you design things and in which facts and personal backgrounds are completely intermingled. It ought to be a story in which the reader empathizes with the main figures and in which he or she is immersed in the depiction of an age," according to Peter. We listened in shock, and realized he was right! At the beginning of the project we had thought about all the points he had mentioned, but we had strayed from the plan. The meal after the discussion was not as relaxed as it might have been and, squirming with impatience, we sat brooding on a new approach.

The new approach consisted of the agreement that we would generate a Dutch text on the basis of notes made in discussions and material from research into the archives.

It was only when we were satisfied with this text that it would be translated into English, in view of the fact we wanted to make an English-language book. We also agreed that we would completely cut ourselves off from normal office activities for a few days until the end of 2004 in order to generate material for the research.

The new approach seemed to work. At the end of December 2004 we had gathered so much material that it became necessary to expand the team. We then asked Jeroen Visschers to check external source material. At the beginning of 2005, we hoped to receive the first responses to our new approach, as we had to submit a report on our research to the Stimuleringsfonds. However, we did not receive a content-related reaction from them, we only received a formal approval of our report. As a result, the real test only arrived in March of that year when we again had an appointment with Peter. This time he was enthusi-

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astic! The text was excellent, it was only a question of finishing it, and Peter proposed that we should work on the application for a publication grant.

Until that moment, we had only written text for the book. We had a text almost 100 pages long, and we felt an increasing need to add another information layer. Because Peter had proposed applying for the publication grant, we thought it was time to involve a graphic designer in the project. We therefore formulated a list of designers. Olv and Angela visited the designers and suggested making further acquaintance with two of them: Coppens & Alberts and Mevis & Van Deursen. The discussions with both duos were fine but in the discussion with Armand Mevis and Linda van Deursen it was clear that it clicked.

When we informed Peter of our choice, he was not aflame with excitement. In his view, we could better wait, first the idea of the book should be completed and then he himself had ideas about suitable designers. But to us, working on that book, which had already taken more than a year, had become so abstract that we regarded the contribution of graphic designers as absolutely necessary. Peter ultimately respected our preference, but urged us first to complete the book and only then to discuss it with Armand and Linda once more.

We submitted the application for a publication subsidy in April and the response arrived two months later. They were again positive, but there were minor remarks. "The advisory committee is struck by the force of recognition in the text of the dummy. By taking the office agendas as the starting point, a unique picture is recorded of the founding and work of an architectural office of the SuperDutch generation. The committee greatly appreciates the openness and courage displayed in the text. Nevertheless, the committee has its doubts about processing the dummy into a book (...) In the view of the committee, the dummy is interesting enough, in terms of content, for publication."<sup>(32)</sup> When the approval from the Stimuleringsfonds came through, we asked Armand and Linda to create a design

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(32) Justification of the advice, Stimuleringsfonds voor Architectuur, 01 June 2005, VMX archives.



The making of the VMX Agenda.

for the book. While talking about our ideas and wishes, Armand and Linda mentioned that they had just published an overview of their own work that resembled our book. When, shortly afterwards, we received a copy of this book, we had to admit that the idea behind their book surprisingly resembled ours. We never asked them explicitly but when we asked about their book during our next meeting, they said that in retrospect they were not completely contented with it, it had been realized too quickly, and they seemed a bit envious of our approach.

In September, Armand and Linda presented their design. They produced a great response to our request to combine text and image. By giving the text shape like a traditional novel, but giving the book the format of an atlas, there was a very wide margin in which supplementary material — illustrations, sketches, photographs, notes, and references — could be added as notes. We were extremely enthusiastic, the book had ultimately acquired a form. Peter did not attend the presentation due to various circumstances, and when we sent it to him later with an explanation, his reaction was rather reserved. He thought the format was much too large and reminded us that we did not want to produce a coffee table book but an architectural pocket book that you could read in bed, in the train, the plane, the car, or on the toilet. Peter was right inasmuch as we had once said so, but during the process we had become convinced that the image should occupy an important position in our book.

However, Peter's firmness evoked some doubt in my mind until I chanced to come across a great book: [Malaparte, a house like me](#). In contrast to the pocket editions that I had discussed with Peter, the book on Malaparte is big and heavy and contains an overwhelming amount of illustrative material and much diversity of text. Although you have to sit at a table to read the book, and I could only read it in the office, I devoured it from cover to cover. This was what I wanted to make and the book on Malaparte was the corroboration that we had to make the book just like Armand and Linda had designed it.

For a while, it looked like we wanted a different book from the one Peter wanted. Besides content-related arguments, Peter also produced practical objections. In view of the fact we wanted to make an English-language book, a large part of the budget will have to be spent on translation and thus there was no money for a book of atlas format. However, after a few discussions, Peter seemed to be less steadfast. He suggested making a pocket edition in which an image would oppose every text page. Because we did not plan to seek sponsors for our book, but did not (yet) wish to discard the existing design, we decided to submit a new grant application, this time to the Fonds Beeldende Kunsten, Vormgeving en Bouwkunst (the Netherlands Foundation for the Visual Arts, Design, and Architecture). At the end of October, this grant was also approved. So, at the beginning of November, we could organize a meeting with all the parties: VMX, Peter, and Mevis & Van Deursen all gathered around the table for the first time. The outcome of the discussion was that Peter seemed to be convinced of the quality of the design by Armand and Linda. Although the budget was still not exorbitant, it would be possible to create the book that VMX envisaged.

The difficult process of converting the study into a book has evoked frequent doubt. Although all the committees that assessed the material were enthusiastic about it, we often wonder whether or not we still want to make this book. Being inquisitive, we allowed the manuscript to be read to someone with whom we have co-operated since the foundation of VMX: Douwe den Hertog — our model maker (Model & Object). I know that he is a real reader and I wanted to receive his response. However, instead of clarity, his comments only brought more doubt. Douwe remarked that the reader gains the impression that we regard every project as a struggle. In addition, in Douwe's opinion, we are very critical about our clients but tend

to shy away from self-criticism. This last remark was particularly deadly.

Not so long ago, Henk Bouman — one of the clients about whom we are critical — had again sought contact with us. He could not sell his house and asked if we could design an extension for it so that he can sell the house more easy. It is more than five years since we worked for Bouman and at that time we had the idea that he had little appreciation of our work. In the intervening years it seems as if Bouman had changed, had become more understanding, more appreciative. Or perhaps we are the ones who have changed, was our appraisal of him too severe at that time? More or less the same occurred when I met Ed Veenendaal — whom we also criticized sharply in our narrative — at a party recently. I noticed how much I still appreciated him as a person and I doubt whether we did him justice in our book. To make things worse, after the application for a grant from the BKVB, Anne Hoogewoning<sup>(33)</sup> called.

She had read our story but had strong doubts about whether or not we should publish it in this form. She wonders where this book will bring VMX. I could not provide an answer. I could only tell her that we have a strong urge to tell our story. We think that the only way forward for us in architecture is by reflection.

Therefore we think it is important to try and answer the question “What it is that constitutes VMX”, even if it is impossible to predict what the result of this answer will be.

(33) I know Anne Hoogewoning from the European competition, for which she worked. In the past few years she has worked at BKVB and she advised us on our application for a grant.

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