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Summary

Van den Broek and Bakema

A Contribution to the History of Architecture

Our readers know the work of the two Dutchmen and are conscious of their importance. But this fact alone does not suffice to justify the sub-title "A Contribution to the History of Architecture," for history has to do with the past, and their work is contemporary, pointing largely towards the future. The Rotterdam team, however, expresses in its thoughts and strivings an intellectual standpoint which has been developed over a period of four generations and which is suffused with all the significant cultural tendencies to be found in Dutch and European architecture of this century. The external data point to a continuous personal development within the van den Broek and Bakema office from the commencement of modern architecture. Their predecessors were Brinkmann the Elder and then Brinkmann the Younger and van der Vlugt, the architect of the van Nello factory in Schiedam (III. 17-24).

In 1920 Michiel Brinkmann built a residential block in Spangen, a working-class suburb of Rotterdam with endless rows of streets and houses, devoid of any touch of green. Brinkmann's residential block, which can only be found with difficulty is one of the first examples of collective design and basic features of van Broek's and Bakema's work are already apparent: the continuous spatial flux and the attention paid not only to the isolated functions but also their mutual relationships.

Michiel Brinkmann died in 1925 but his son, Johannes Andreas carried on the work with Leendert van der Vlugt. Up to the death of the latter (1936) a large number of buildings were produced which were milestones in the history of modern architecture. A theological viewpoint similar to that found in the writings of Berlage and the unity of sentiment and intellect as advanced by van Doesburg were the bases of their work. Like the perhaps even more brilliant Duiker, van der Vlugt, however, extended the ideas of van Doesburg and the Stijl movement to the point where architecture became a comprehensive portrayal of human society. (This intellectual background to Dutch Functionalism between 1924 and 1936 has so far been only cursorily examined.)

In 1938 J. A. Brinkmann merged with J. H. van den Broek. The latter was born in Rotterdam in 1886. He was at first a high-school teacher and finished his studies as a construction engineer at Delft Technical College in 1924. For the second time in the history of the architectural office, the work of a forerunner was taken up and developed — not merely copied, but infused, widened and enriched by means of personal touches. The roots, however, remained the same: architecture was to come from the new societal patterns and modern constructional techniques. A striking external feature of van den Broek's buildings is that their design is unequivocally integrated with the properties of the materials employed and the corresponding building methods (III. 41 and 52). This exteriority is in no way autonomous, for it is always used to order the house and general treatment of space in such a way that they do not simply provide suitable surroundings for human beings, but stimulate them to positive activities.

Van den Broek says that the physical and psychological character of human society is displayed in architecture. Architecture is a phenomenon in which creative energy with the help of constructional techniques expresses the functions and ideas of a building project. Van den Broek did not think of functionalism as being nothing more than a system of organized movement realized in a construction. A building is more than a monument, and an archi-

tectural problem is only solved when, in addition to the individual wishes of the future owner, the conditions for human cooperative life are fulfilled. "This way of looking at things renders necessary the detailed examination of an architectural assignment, so that one can get to know the organic structure and ascertain the place and importance of the communal factors in it." This is the "new objectivity."

"For what is new in the 'new objectivity' lies just in the fact that objectivity alone is not satisfactory, for the more profound idea of the building as organism requires expression; this idea comes from a more deeply understood purpose, with the emphasis on 'more deeply.' These are the finest words I can find to characterize the demands made by contemporary architecture, and I am rather ashamed of myself at having to confess that they were not coined by an architect but by a German pastor in 1906." Modern architecture does not grow out of the material side of life, but tries "nobly and lovingly" to satisfy ordinary human needs. It's a matter of a "training project which rests on the concepts of cosmic relationships and experiences. . . . In essence, architecture, too, is a discussion with the infinite which strives to achieve harmony with the latter. In the last analysis, this is the end and essence of all the arts."

These intellectual fundamentals, on which van den Broek's work rests, were subsequently enlarged and complemented by those of the temperamental Bakema, who became a partner of Brinkmann and van den Broek in the office in 1948 (Brinkmann died in 1949). Bakema, who was born in 1914, is a Frisian. From 1931 to 1936 he went to Groningen Technical College and there came into contact with van der Vlugt's architecture. He finished his studies at Amsterdam Academy for Architecture. Rietveld and van Tijen were his teachers and van Eesteren (1942) his tutor.

If the Dutch literature on architecture of the last 15 years is examined, a series of "explosions" will be noticed, and wherever these are Bakema is always nearby. This began before 1945, during the Occupation when it was generally supposed that he was a prisoner in France. Bakema, however, had escaped and was living in Groningen with the Underground movement. He knew that architects came together in the Amsterdam municipal museum for evening discussions. Bakema went there, in spite of the danger of being recognized. He intended to remain in the background and refrain from entering into the conversation. His temperament was too strong for him, however; he could not remain silent. "I hear and see Bakema," shouted Merkelbach to the astonished company. And just as in Amsterdam, so Bakema has plunged passionately into discussion again and again elsewhere whenever fundamental questions in architecture were under consideration: against Dudok when modern blocks had to be sited in a street of classicist buildings in Velsen designed by him; against Oud and the aestheticians during their classicist period; against van Tijen when he opposed his thesis of form as function to pure functionalism; arguing with van Tijen, Oud, Merkelbach and others when, after the war was over, the supremacy of the Traditionalists, especially the Delft School with Prof. Granpré Molière at their head, had to be demolished and the possibility opened up of town reconstruction in accordance with the ideals of modern architecture; and, finally, with Granpré Molière when he, Bakema, took up the valuable aspects latent in the national style. The discussions were sometimes extremely fierce, especially with the defenders of traditionalism. Granpré Molière did not spare the modernists, who fought back sharply. The arguments, however, were always conducted on a high intellectual level and never degenerated into personal squabbles. The contestants never lost their dignity as men and architects in one another's eyes and were all taken seriously. Granpré Molière's attack compelled the modernists to undertake a thorough and searching re-examination of their own position before they climbed into the ring: an exclusively polemical assault on the others with their nimble wits would never have been successful. The form and level of these discussions not only point to characteristic Dutch attributes, but, above all, to the fact that within the country's small area there are a great number of architects to be found, whose abilities and integrity is so esteemed that even an adversary compels respect.

What was Bakema's essential contribution to these discussions? He tried to preserve that equilibrium of intellect and emotion so much furthered by the Stijl

movement and to express in his work the simultaneity of objects. His thoughts were inclined to the philosophy of life of Bergson: "First of all, I have no choice but to be aware that I pass from one state of being to another. . . ." Here is no guide-image where the universe is seen as a hierarchical and immutable construct, but rather a constantly changing view of the world. Therefore the architect's plan does not determine the functional modalities alone of a house or town, but also the relational nexus of the various functions. What obtains between things is as important as the things themselves. The architect must attempt "to incorporate the totality of life in his work—this applies, too, when he is seated at the table with other specialists." "It is no longer simply valid that one and one are two; more important are the circumstances which lead to the choice of the number." "The desire for interdependence is innate in human nature to ensure protection from what is chance. For this reason, it is not a luxury but a necessity to inquire after a thing's background, external relations and after unity generally." "We arrive at architecture in so far as we personally experience the general events of men and nature." The relationships existing in the "total life" can be made visible in architecture with the help of "total space," space that is ever mobile, and with the concomitance of every building material and every construction (glass, wall, pillar, switch, lift, ceiling) with functional form and the experiential capacity of men. In architectural design something of the relation between mankind and the cosmos will in this way be expressed. A house, it is true, is built to dwell in, to work in and to sleep in, but its design can accord dwelling, working and sleeping a significance which goes beyond the merely functional. It is thus that the art of architecture can acquire an ethical and religious background; the position of the architect must basically be ethical and religious, and with the help of this factor, "technique, which is endangered by the economic and social conditions prevailing on the earth," can be reinforced.

If architecture is so designed that it expresses the "total life", it is protected from declassification and ornamentation. The architectonic form no longer expresses functions alone, is no longer purely functional, but becomes itself function. What does this mean? The architectonic no longer simply fulfills human needs, functional demands and ways of life, but has become a stimulus and a factor for the promotion of them. Form no longer fulfills just the function demanded in an architectural assignment, but leads men and human society beyond the functional and allows for a life based on "ideas" as well as functions.

This metamorphosis of the form of the function to the function of the form is the decisive theoretical and practical contribution of van den Broek and Bakema to modern architecture. The Lijnbaan is a striking example and so are the surprising individual design elements to be found in all their buildings. These elements always serve to set up relationships, from the interior to the exterior, from top to bottom, from the single to the whole, from the small to the large.

The building construction is always related to the architectural design, but it is not blatant. The formal qualities, too, of the work are rarely the outstanding characteristics; but always there is a relational richness of volumes, parts and design elements in the foreground.

It is not by chance that this conception of architecture was only first fully realized in townplanning projects. Their multifariousness is apparently grasped within a systematic which seems simple and which cloaks the variety:

The dwelling on the earth,
the dwelling on the horizon
and the various in-between forms;
the individual dwelling,
the collective dwelling;
all set in mutual spatial relationship
from lowdown, halfway up and on high
in one-family houses and
multi-family houses (horizontal housing-units)
and in vertical housing-units
all repeatable
as the ordering principle of unity in variety
and in order to design the building process rationally;
the equilibrium of built-up areas and natural zones;
the articulation of all housing-types
and all social levels into "visual groups;"
the articulation of housing-units with traffic-free centres
to form a neighbourhood centre
and town core;

the articulation of all services and activities:

schools—work-plants,
public services—parochial centres,
agricultural centres—residential district
et al.;
separation of the various categories from traffic flow.

In this way architecture becomes illustrative of democracy, of democracy as "the right of man to experience the relationship between mankind and the cosmos."

The work of van den Broek and Bakema is free of avant garde allure. Their work is no longer supported by any manifesto, for its sources are not only from our own times but also from the broad stream of western tradition. This is the sign that modern architecture has fitted into the flow of history. Avant garde works now strike us as comic; the "Louvre" is no longer in danger from arsonists. The danger today lies in the unpredictable nature of things, in the speedy and continual alteration to the world's patterns of experience and in the resultant uncertainty felt by people. This is why we find necessary architects who are forceful enough to order the chaotic significantly according to the desire felt for clarity and simplicity in the concerns of communal life. This is the principle, this is the road to take! Simplification and clarity, and in art the symbol of love and truth!" Franz Füg

¹ J. H. van den Broek, Creatieve krachten in de architectonische conceptie (Creative Forces in Architecture). Inaugural address at the Delft Institute of Technology, Delft 1942, p. 8.

² op. cit. p. 12.

³ op. cit. p. 15.

⁴ Weederwood (Reply to W. van Tijen in a special issue on the van den Broek and Bakema office). Forum, Amsterdam 1957, p. 191.

⁵ op. cit. p. 151.

⁶ Het Tweede Vrij.-Christ. Lyzeum van Oud gezien in verband met de architectuurontwikkeling (The Second Liberal-Christian high school in Oud . . .), in Forum, Amsterdam 1956, p. 230.

⁷ Jan Publiek en de architect (John Smith and the architect) in Lezingencyclus over stedeboew, Utrecht 1946.

⁸ J. B. Bakema, Architectuur der toekomst (Architecture of the Future) in De vrije kunstenaar, Groningen 1945, No. 2.