Rats Turn Architecture Around

Harm Tilman

Office Winhov: sheltered housing Maisbaai in Middelburg

Rats Turn Architecture Around

Portrait of Four Architects as an Auspicious Group

The orignal text appeared in
De Architect, October 2015
Translation from Dutch by Mike Ritchie
Portraits by Maarten Kools

Harm Tilman

The nineteen nineties are marked by the emergence of Superdutch, a movement that revolved around the concept and the materialization thereof. In visual terms, this trend competed with traditionalism: Silodam versus Zaanse Huisjes. Under the name Rats, four architects have united who present themselves emphatically as a new generation, which adopts a distinct position relative to previous approaches. The Rats focus expressly on the conceptualization of the material, coupled with renewed attention for the city, whereby no part is excluded. The innovation in this case stems from architecture itself.

I meet the Rats on a lazy, rainy late-summer afternoon in Rotterdam. The previous evening I'd seen Rem Koolhaas give a fascinating lecture on the first ten years of his development as architect in the Kunsthal Rotterdam. What struck me there was how conscious he was of the adjacent positions in architecture at that time and the question of how to distinguish yourself therein. I found it a wonderful story, similar to what David Byrne, frontman of Talking Heads, once said about the early days of the band.[1]

The Rats are also aware of their position. According to Job Floris of Monadnock, the youngest and most agile member of the group, this can be summarized as a strong preference for traditions and precedents in architecture. They are also vigorously engaged in the realization process and in studying and integrating the materiality of architecture. Another distinctive characteristic, he says, is reflecting on the city and the question of how architecture can be positioned therein. Urbanism is a constant factor for the members of the group, says Floris.

So who are these Rats? Initially, no more than a group of architect friends who met at a lecture and after a while began seeing each other more regularly. It is actually due to the relaxed nature of their meeting that the architects feel mutually connected. According to Job Floris, these are informal discussions that focus on showing and discussing each other's projects and the mutual exchange of knowledge and interests. Floris says it should not be regarded as a collective or, worse in his opinion, an ideological movement.

Nevertheless, the Rats constitute more than a cosy men's reading club that convenes once every three months to discuss an interesting topic. This is already apparent from the name that the group of friends give to their endeavour: Rats. The word is not a reference to the wonderful rat film 'Willard' from 1972, in which an entirely new conception of human evolution is outlined; nor do the architects revert to the celebrated 1981 pamphlet 'Rats, Posts and Other Pests' by Aldo van Eyck. For those engaged in the discussions, the name Rats is above all connected to rationalism in architecture.

I spoke to the group in various configurations in recent months. In response to the repeated question of what rationalism means to them exactly, I never actually received a unanimous answer.[2] But I did get an idea on the basis of these discussions. The main thing that connects the friends, or so it seems to me, is the desire to discuss in strictly architectural terms what can be done in the current conditions. The discussions appear to consist mainly of a search for a real alternative that architecture today, at this moment, can offer.

The members are reminiscent of a group of architects that met regularly in the 1980s and 90s and which was later dubbed the

Left to right: Jan Peter Wingender, Hans van der Heijden, Floris Cornelisse, Job Floris

Whisperers. This loose association included architects such as Tony Fretton, Florian Beigel, Caruso St John and Sergison Bates. The mutual connection of these architects was their aversion to the then-supreme high-tech architecture of Rogers and Foster, and to the historicism promoted by Prince Charles. The stumbling block for the Rats is the conceptualism that emerged in the Netherlands in the nineties and has since strongly determined the architectural culture.

Conceptualism and Materialism

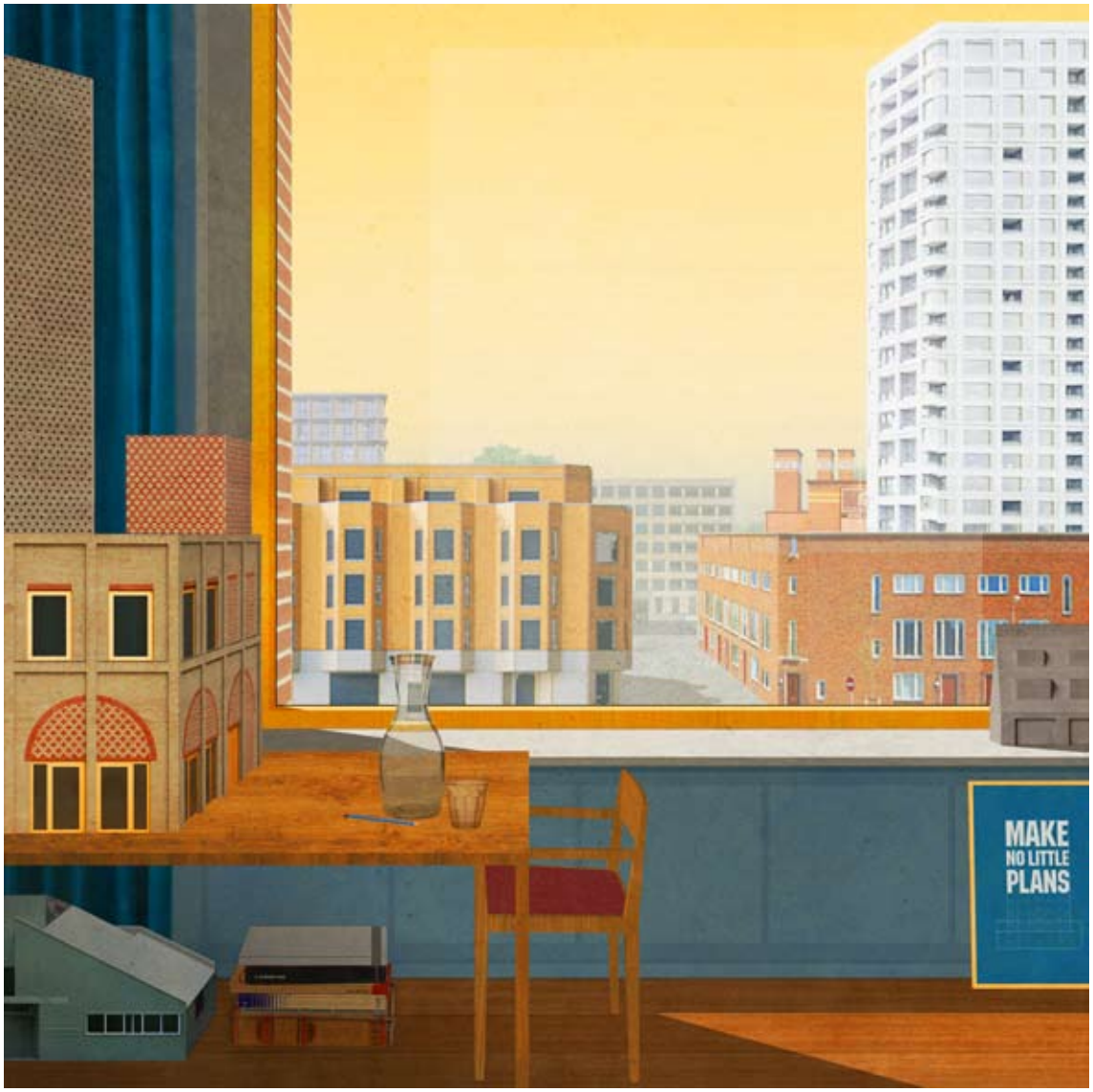
In conceptualism there is a misguided understanding of the relationship to realization. The latter is erroneously assigned a passive status, as something that does not matter, a phase in the building process that the design can effortlessly 'pass on' to the following phase without having to undergo any transformation. If, for example, we take the iconic plans of the nineteen thirties, from the Ville Radieuse by Le Corbusier to the General Extension Plan by Cornelis van Eesteren, it is conspicuous that virtually nothing is said about the realization. It is a passive phase that follows the part of the process in which primarily idealistic ideas are formed.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. The realization can indeed change and in very different ways. Materials may become outdated, contractors can throw in the towel, etc. So, as an architect you must actively relate to the realization, by linking, translating and mediating with this world. That also seems to be at the heart of the views that have crystalized in the bosom of the Rats. The idea that a concept can create a sound building and that

you need not act in the realization is in any case entirely foreign to this group.
Jan Peter Wingender of Office Winhov, the architect who very assertively advances the architectural tradition in building practice, describes this incisively: 'We don't materialize the concept, we conceptualize the material. So we turn it around. Architecture does not exist outside the construction process. If you remove the latter from architecture, there is nothing left over. Ideas are then directionless and can no longer find a form in a meaningful whole. Our position was formed in practice and blossomed out of the discontent we felt towards the world of images and ideas'.
For Floris Cornelisse of Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven, perhaps the most talented architect of the Rats, again the material is immediately on the table from the outset of a project. 'That's because we work from the context or surroundings of the place where we are building. We design with a strong sense of reality, we constantly ask ourselves how it will be built. A building is always part of a city and will respond to it in terms of material, texture and tactility. We have this interest rather than a predetermined spatial idea'.
Jan Peter Wingender speaks of an autonomous line that cuts through the work of his office. 'When I'm working on a project, a broad undercurrent of material applications and associations begins immediately. There are also ideas that well up and have yet to find a project. I personally experience this as a fertile method of working that is not only pragmatic, but also poetic and with a theoretical side'.
For the Rats, building is not a necessary evil. They thus adopt a different attitude to the construction process than many of their contemporaries. They do not rule out conflicts with contractors, but there is always the understanding that they need each other.

The Ambition of the Maker

Hans van der Heijden also places the distance that the group maintains vis-à-vis conceptualism in the context of the struggle necessary to become an architect. Conceptualism functioned well in a time when architects were visually competing with each other and with other 'imagineers'. That occurred mainly in the context of major projects with which ambitious municipalities attempted to redevelop certain areas of the city in collaboration with the market. However, this didn't work in the urban renewal in which Van der Heijden developed a practice together with his former partner Rick Wessels. At that time, Rem Koolhaas understood better than anyone that thanks to the rise of the recreational economy, the conditions had changed. The objection of Van der Heijden to Koolhaas' position is that although he indeed embraced the altered conditions, he was unable to use them to his benefit.
'As an architect, I want to work on urban problems. On something that matters, on the bulk of the city. When we started working on urban renewal, we asked ourselves which architectural language would be appropriate. We found inspiration for this mainly in other European cities. In our practice, our primary concern was not the visual issues, but the operational aspect. For us, the pressing questions were how to approach a client, how to negotiate with a seething community hall and how to control manufacturing processes remotely, given that as an architect you were no longer on site to provide instructions. That was a lonely struggle, particularly in the early years.'
The quest for inspiration is important to avoid getting bogged down in what Jan Peter Wingender calls 'dull pragmatism'. After all, if you want to acquire a position in the building process, you must at least speak and preferably master the language of the implementing



Vedute

parties. By not claiming a position as autonomous architect and by rejecting idealism whereby you withdraw into a world of pure ideas, you take a considerable risk as an architect. Wingender is acutely aware of that. 'To avoid slipping away in the construction process, writing and teaching are very important'. In 1996, biq, the then office of Hans van der Heijden, won the Europan-4 competition in England which included a commission. Van der Heijden still clearly recalls his first meeting with Stephen Bates and Jonathan Sergison. 'They talked and wrote about how to make drywall buildings. I learned a great deal from their plasterboard theory. In a drywall house, a room can have any shape, because they don't need to follow the outer shell. This is a fundamental architectural theme that can be traced back to Semper. But it is also pure pragmatism and here & now. For them, it was also about affordability. With this story they made something visible in a broader social field. So if you ask me what you need to become an architect, then it is stories such as this'.

Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven: school in Mechelen

Architecture and Tradition

The Rats aim to actively relate to the construction process by connecting to this world, through mediation and translation. It is therefore no surprise that they seek an entirely different relationship to tradition. After all, traditions only have a right to exist if they are able to emancipate themselves. This can lead to the disappearance of a tradition, but also to a revival thereof by developing a new vision and way of using it.

In the Netherlands, traditionalism emerged in the first decade of this century and can be regarded as the dominant trend of this period, according to some critics.[3] That may be something of an overstatement, but it is certain that this building style best typifies the era of speculation and overproduction. Characteristic of this approach is that the image aims to return an idea of a tradition to the public, or retroactively create one. But a more fertile relationship with the past is also conceivable. One in which the past consists of objects with various opinions that initiate and guide discussion. This transforms meanings instead of anchoring them in a notional past. The Rats' interest in references also points in this direction.

To some extent, this is linked to the Rats' interest in language. Or rather in rediscovering a forgotten language. According to Job Floris, the Rats seek to reformulate and apply nuances to the ideas with which they grew up. One of those ideas is the word experiment. 'Experiment is readily interpreted in the Netherlands as an acrobatic number, while experiments with brick or concrete also have a completely different dimension. That does not mean that things like society and context are less important. The redefinition of entrenched principles in which the concept is canonized is very important. That initially seems like a narrowing of the profession, but actually creates a huge wealth of opportunities. We tap into those by going forward and looking back. That is the way of an evolution instead of a revolution'.

Because the Rats seek legitimacy for their architecture mainly within architecture and not outside it, the tendency towards introspection is strong. Moreover, they treat references in a different way than was the norm in the nineteen eighties. Rem Koolhaas, for example, entered the profession with many references, but was mainly concerned with getting rid of those references during his development as an architect. The Rats, by contrast, take into account what came before them, precisely to make something contemporary from it. Nothing is thereby excluded; it may be something they saw on a trip, something they read in a book or came across in a magazine. In that sense, everything is architecture. They form references that otherwise only exist by virtue of the fact that you cultivate them. Architecture is an eminently collective enterprise in which you share and propagate elements with each other.

'Architecture is an eminently collective enterprise in which you can share elements with each other.'

Job Floris discerns two lines in the Rats' use of references. 'When we decided that the visitors' centre in the Veluwe would be a coun-

Left to right: Job Floris, Jan Peter Wingender, Hans van der Heijden, Floris Cornelisse

try house, we also studied these. If we build towers, we examine that tradition. We do, however, develop our preferences, coupled with our interest in material and mass'. But there is also another line, described by Floris as 'fascinations that come out of the blue, that appeal to you and are not directly operational. A very slender tower that resembles a house. Strange hybrids that are hugely intriguing. Sometimes these references reappear in your work, often they don't.'

Hans van der Heijden identifies with this image. 'What I do on my vacations is take pictures, for instance of a church that was built in five different styles. Then I see all kinds of crazy clashes that are extremely interesting to me. These have always occurred throughout history, but simultaneously inhabit a continuum of materials and structures. It is not so that this no longer exists, but it does require you to adopt an ethical position. You have to ask yourself how to deal with it. Do we accept it or do we seek a new continuum?'

At this point, a new architectural conception begins to crystalize. Floris Cornelisse advocates a one-piece architecture, an architecture that does not fall apart and which eliminates the fragmentation that is so characteristic of current architecture. 'We seek an architecture of one piece initially by means of material and the autonomy of the building. Our school in Mechelen is emblematic of this. Often a solution is also nicely contained in the typology and proves to work so well that any other spatial solution misses the mark'.

The question is whether this is noticed, in the first place by the professional community which is still for the most part conceptually

oriented. Jan Peter Wingender points out the instant recognisability of his buildings, in the way that they are received and utilized. ‘For this we use a difficult concept such as self-evidence. The ease with which the users make a building their own is closely related to this. Inspiration is important for both the maker and the observer. It is no different in painting. That also makes our work tedious’.
Floris Cornelisse compares it to the practice of jazz music. ‘Someone like Miles Davis plays with enormous discipline. But also with dissonances, with things that don’t quite fit. As a listener it is easy to miss that. This is also the case with our architecture. I see the rounded edges of the entrance to the school building as a dissonant in an otherwise rational system. Free jazz in staccato is fun and offers me a little joy as an architect’.

Fascination with the City

The book ‘The architecture of the city’ by Italian architect Aldo Rossi was published in 1966.[4] In the 1970s a rather poor German translation was available, published in the legendary series Bauwelt Fundamente by Ulrich Conrads. Only in the 1980s were architects able to get acquainted with this tract through the English translation that was published by the ANY Institute of Peter Eisenman. A good translation for Dutch architects became available later through the efforts of Umberto Barbieri.
The architecture of the city is a remarkable book, in the sense that it has little structure, certain ar-guments are repeated numerous times and the architect does not arrive at any clear conclusions. The French critic Francoise Choay once characterised the book as an anthology, a collection of elements brought together in a rather unsystematic way. Unsurprisingly the book does not formulate a theory. It is rather the case that the author reveals a new practice for the architect. In The architecture of the city, Rossi appears mainly to outline a new future perspective or horizon regarding modern architecture.[5]
The Rats seem virtually unaware of the impact that Rossi had with this book. When asked, the group says they feel more affinity with the Swiss architect Roger Diener, who paid many fruitful visits to the Netherlands in the 1980s, when he also made many buildings here. The Rats consider him one of the few architects who manages to link the construction with a theory of the architecture of the city. One factor in their admiration for his work is that his office is a commercial machine with a huge production, but uses a vocabulary with a highly experimental character. They regret that this position did not have a greater resonance in the architectural culture at that time.
Apart from a social product, the Rats also regard the city as a built product. In addition to Diener, Jan Peter Wingender also names architects such as Jo Coenen, Francine Houben and Bob van Reeth as shining examples. Furthermore, the group has worked on a shadow canon with architects who continue the tradition with a great sense of individuality and modernity. Architects such as Kay Fisker, Hartmut Frank, Fernand Pouillon, Giovanni Muzio and Fritz Höger, but also the Rotterdam architect Adrianus van der Steur are included in this. Finally, from Luigi Snozzi they take the idea that a building is part of a city and derives its power from the place where it stands.
To discover this potential of the city, together we visited some recent buildings by the Rats in the periphery of the Netherlands and the Dutch city. According to Jan Peter Wingender, all four buildings refer very strongly to the place where they stand. ‘Now that I’ve seen, for instance, Nieuwe Bergen in situ, I understand why it is the way it is. Monadnock always

shows it with a certain abstraction, but the building can only actually be understood as part of the village. The project is highly contextual, while simultaneously being autonomous in its appearance'.
In preparation for this article, Hans van der Heijden wrote to me that architecture does well to not exclude whole sections of the city. 'The world is urbanizing. The village, the suburb and the city centre are becoming interconnected in large-scale networks. All those parts of the city deserve to be included as equal design problems in the architectural domain. Contemporary architecture is produced with a multitude of techniques. These are again all equal, but are always evaluated for their specific physical effect in the building'.

'Architecture does well to not exclude whole sections of the city.'

For the Rats, this inclusive city, therefore, excludes nothing and that means they see their field of operation as larger than simply repairing the city itself. Floris Cornelisse: 'We also think about the public interior of the city as an architectural task, about the silhouette from the environs and the civic artworks and, last but not least, about the autonomy of the surrounding rural buildings'. In close mutual consultation, the group of friends made a vedute that shows that interaction especially for this article (p. 7).
In this area the Rats feel a strong affinity with the architects and urban planners who appear to have made the English 'Catch and Steer' their own.[6] Jan Peter Wingender: 'They consider everything for its future value and thereby exclude nothing, whether a Victorian town hall or a skyscraper from the seventies. They accept the city in all its facets and look at it unconstrained. Thus they are able to formulate an answer to the most diverse conditions and do not need to exclude anything'. The Rats also want that.
If you see the city as an object of intervention, then there are many dimensions you have to take into account. The Rats mention a multi-coloured city. Hans van der Heijden explains this notion on the basis of the post-war city. 'Many architects flirt with the city, but the question is which city it concerns. In Zaandam, architects such as Sjoed Soeters, Wilfried van Winden and Winy Maas work on an ideal representation of the city. My programme, however, has a strong activist side. Fifty percent of all homes were built after the Second World War. So the post-war city is extensive, but we don't know it well. In the post-war city there is a different idea of scale, there is more repetition and the units are larger. I am very concerned about this city. The way in which you can intervene, for instance, is heavily dependent on the portfolio of a corporation. This city works differently, as does the method of intervention. You don't understand Ommoord by walking through it one afternoon. It requires a long-term commitment'.

From Addition to Reduction

It is only possible to know the city by accepting its materiality and indeed 'excluding nothing'. The aim here is to trace the structure that

Monadnock: landmark in Nieuw Bergen

Hans van der Heijden: social housing Oranjeboomstraat in Rotterdam

gives meaning to the elements. Thereby, the Rats work from the general to the specific. Arriving at this point, the indebtedness to Rossi seems almost undeniable. Job Floris at least explains that the Rats 'choose a very clear limitation regarding the material they want to use. We use reduction to avoid retro architecture, traditionalism and arbitrariness of form. Only in this way can we be part of the now'. According to Wingender, this intention to achieve maximum expressiveness with limited resources also has a strong operational side: 'As an architect, you have to remain standing in the game of construction. The architects of the previous generation work precisely the other way round. They add ever more ideas to the construction and will never try to solve a building with two details. That makes them vulnerable in the construction process. Our attention to material and typology and the research into the essence thereof is certainly a way to remain intact in the building process'. Wingender finds the way that Hans van der Heijden gives a masonry façade to his project in Oranjeboomstraat a good example. 'He makes bay windows simply by turning the brick. With such an operational attitude you can get things done on the building site. It is a method of working but also a modus operandi in order to survive in the construction process'.

According to the Rats, the future of architecture lies in the ability of the architect to integrate. Hans van der Heijden, undoubtedly the thinker and catalyst of the group of friends, says: 'What an architect does is integrate. No one else in the construction industry does or can do that. Architects are the only ones that can simultaneously talk about the programme, construction, typology, materiality and history. An architect can switch between many fields concurrently. So the question is mainly how the discipline can turn this ability to his advantage, while the pressure at this moment is actually to abandon this'.

'By limiting ourselves in the material we use, we avoid retro architecture, traditionalism and arbitrariness of form.'

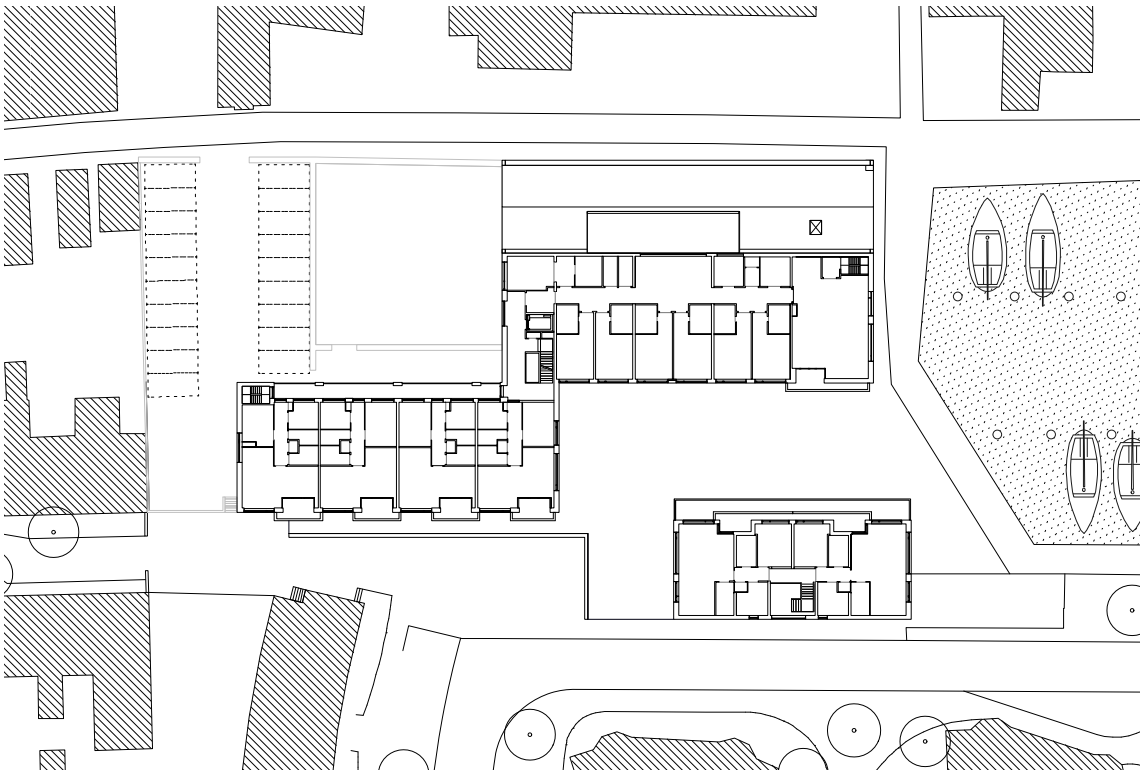
Notes

1. David Byrne, *How Music Works* (2013), 2014.
2. Of the four Rats, Hans van der Heijden is the only one who has actively incorporated rationalism. See his essay 'The Heroism of Rationalism?', included in: Andrew Peckham and Torsten Schmiedeknecht (Eds), *The Rationalist Reader*, 2013. This view, however, appears to play no role for the Rats.
3. Bernard Hulsman, Double Dutch. *Nederlandse architectuur na 1985*, 2013.
4. Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, 1966.
5. baukuh, *Due saggi sull' architettura*, Sagep Editori, p 64.
6. 'Catch and steer' is the motto of a design approach based on existing investment flows and build-ing initiatives. It attempts to combine and strengthen these and thus to use them for attracting new investments. See Hans van der Heijden, *Catch and Steer*, typescript, 2014.

Sheltered Housing Maisbaai in Middelburg (NL)

At the Dokhaven harbour in Middelburg hundreds of trade vessels were constructed by the VOC trade company in the 17th and 18th century. Now this area forms a border between two different urban patterns. At one side runs Kinderdjk with its historic mansions and warehouses. At the other side the Maisbaai domestic estate was built in the 1980s to the design of Aldo van Eyck.

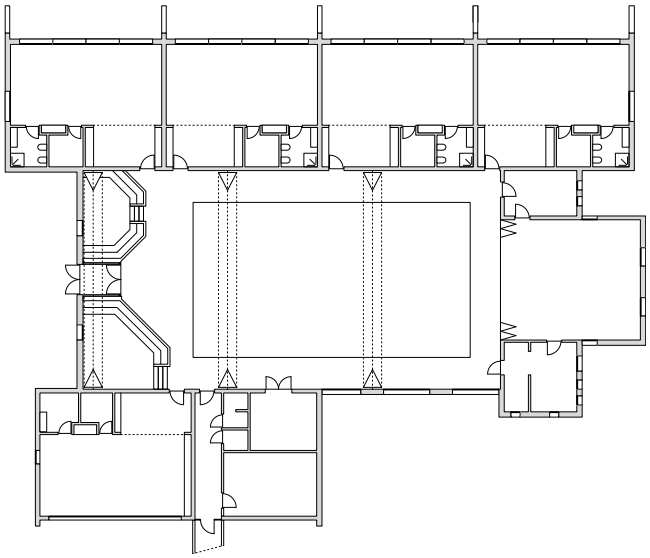
Design: Office Winhov, Amsterdam
Project architect: Joost Hovenier
Client design competition: Middelburg City Council, Middelburg
Client construction: Woongoed Middelburg, Middelburg
Contractor: Heijmans Woningbouw, Grijpskerke
Programme: Sheltered housing with 27 apartments
Photographer: Stefan Müller, Berlin

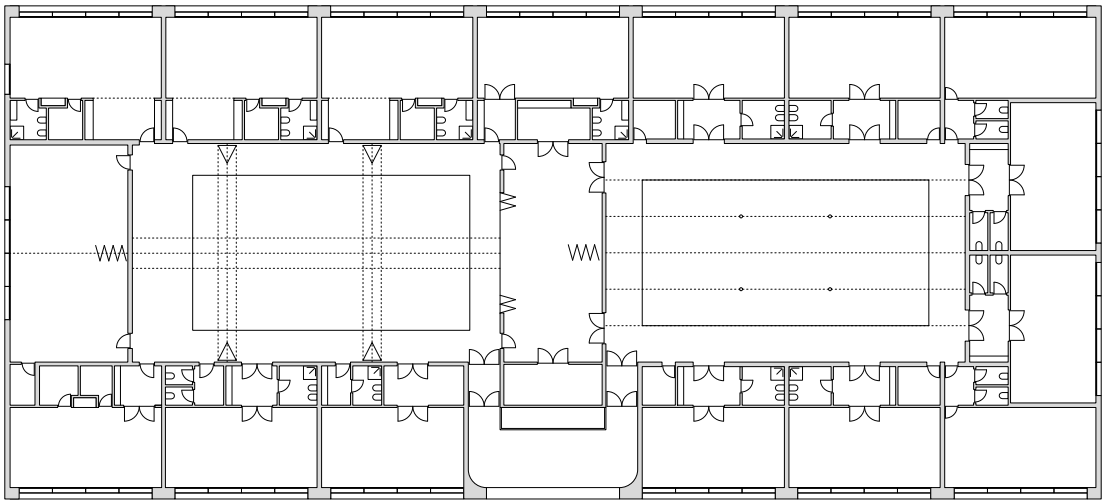


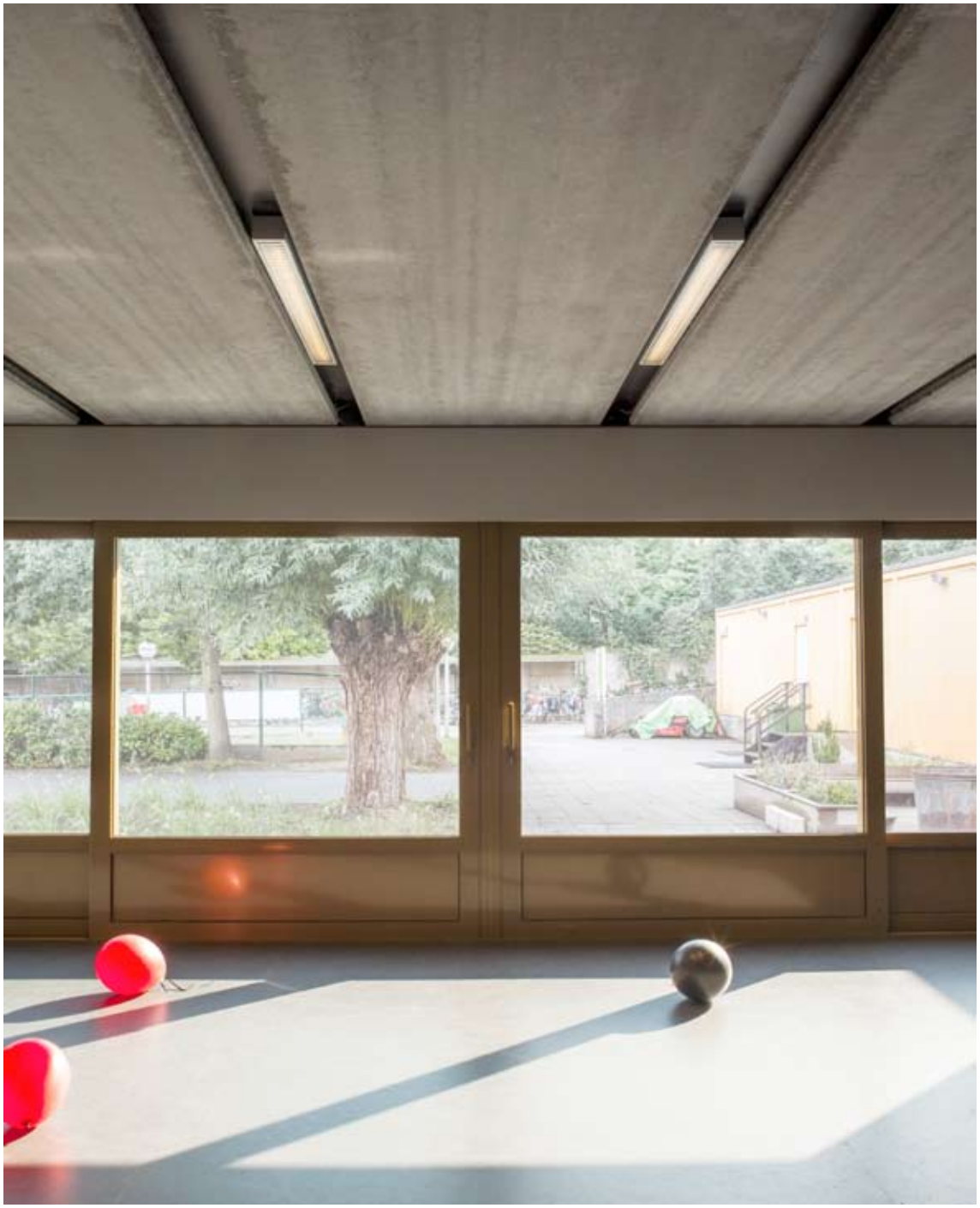
BSGO De Spreeuwen in Mechelen (B)

The elementary school De Spreeuwen is located on long site at the Leuvensevaart canal in Mechelen. Over time the nursery school has been extended several times, resulting in varied addition of buildings and yards. For the extension Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven Architecten got the commission to add ten new class rooms and a covered school yard to the complex.

Design: Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven Architecten bv, Rotterdam
Client: Gemeenschapsonderwijs Vlaanderen, Brussel
Structural engineer: BAS BVBA, Leuven
Mechinical engineer: SB Heedfeld, Riemst
Acoustic consultant: Daidalos Peutz, Leuven
Contractor: IBO NV, Heffen
Construction conservatory: De Clerq Industriebouw, Lochristi
Programme: Addition of ten class rooms and school yard to existing school building
Photographer: Karin Borghouts



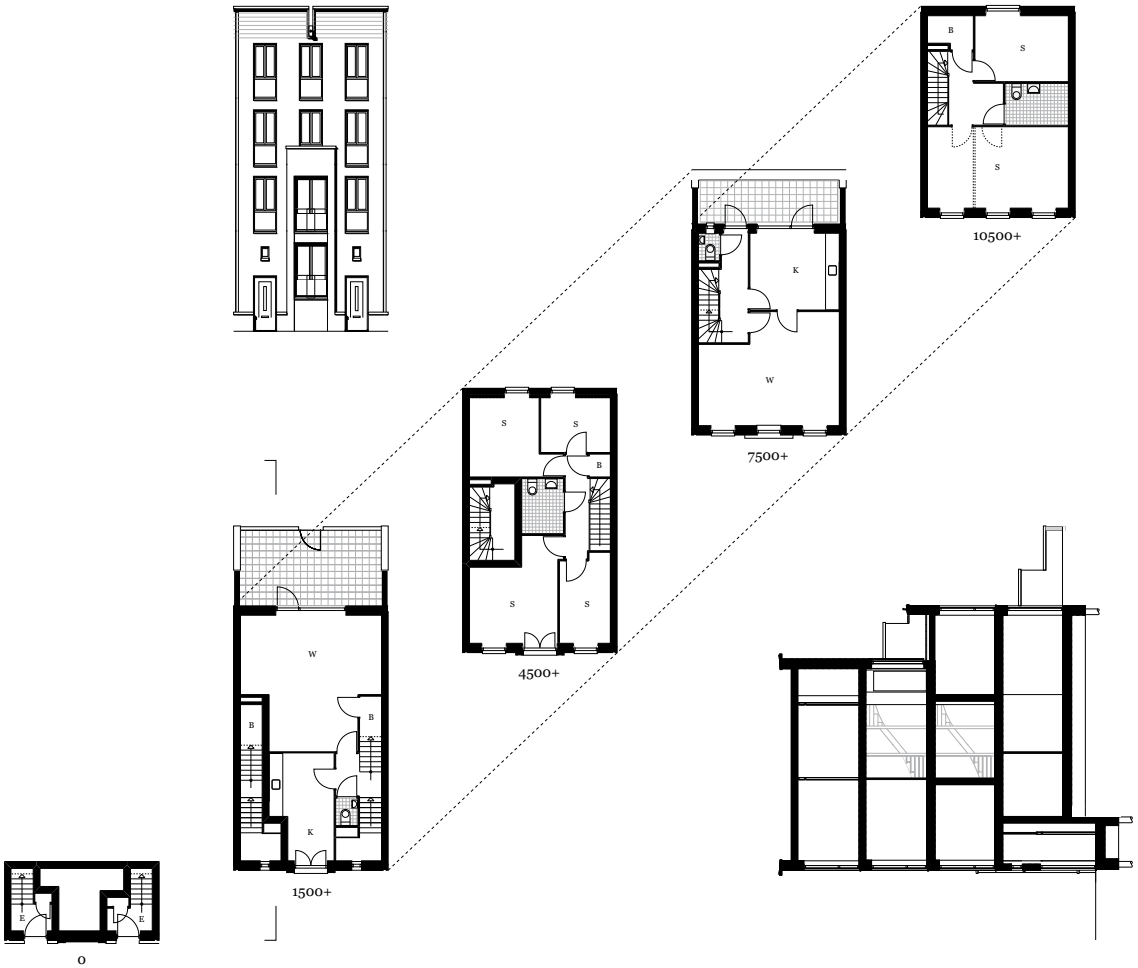


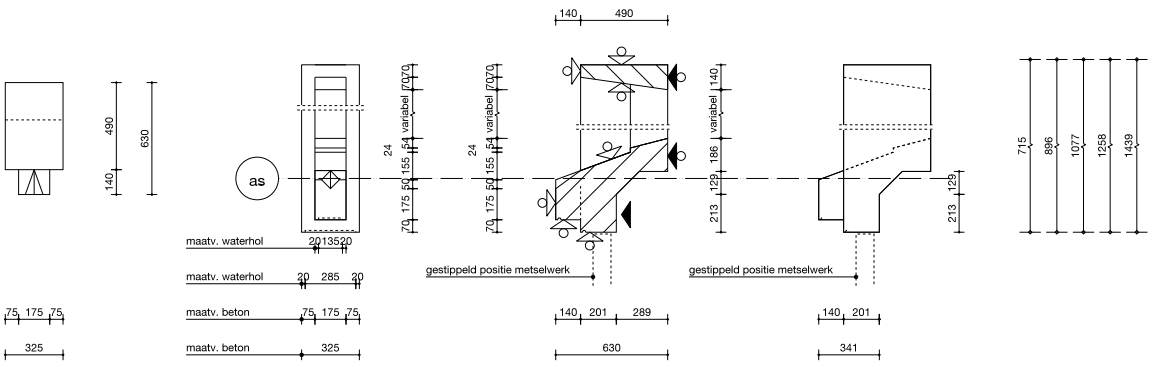


Social Housing Oranjeboomstraat in Rotterdam (NL)

Oranjeboomstraat once was a long stately avenue in the Feijenoord district of Rotterdam where double maisonettes together with churches and schools lined the streets. During the urban renewal of the 1980s many of these houses have been replaced or renovated in which process the characteristic house like conception was abandoned. With the newbuild of 42 social houses Hans van der Heijden reintroduces the original architecture in the street imagery.

Design: Hans van der Heijden Architect, Amsterdam (biq until 1 July 2014)
Design team: Hans van der Heijden with Sam van der Heijden (HvdHA), Pieter Soetaert, Rick Wessels (biq)
Client: Woonstad, Rotterdam
Structural engineer: Leen Brak, Gouda
Cost consultant: Van der Ree & Vermeulen, ‘s-Gravenpolder
Contractor: Bouwbedrijf Frans Vink & Zn, Moordrecht
Programme: 42 dwellings with on-site parking
Photographer: Stefan Müller, Berlin



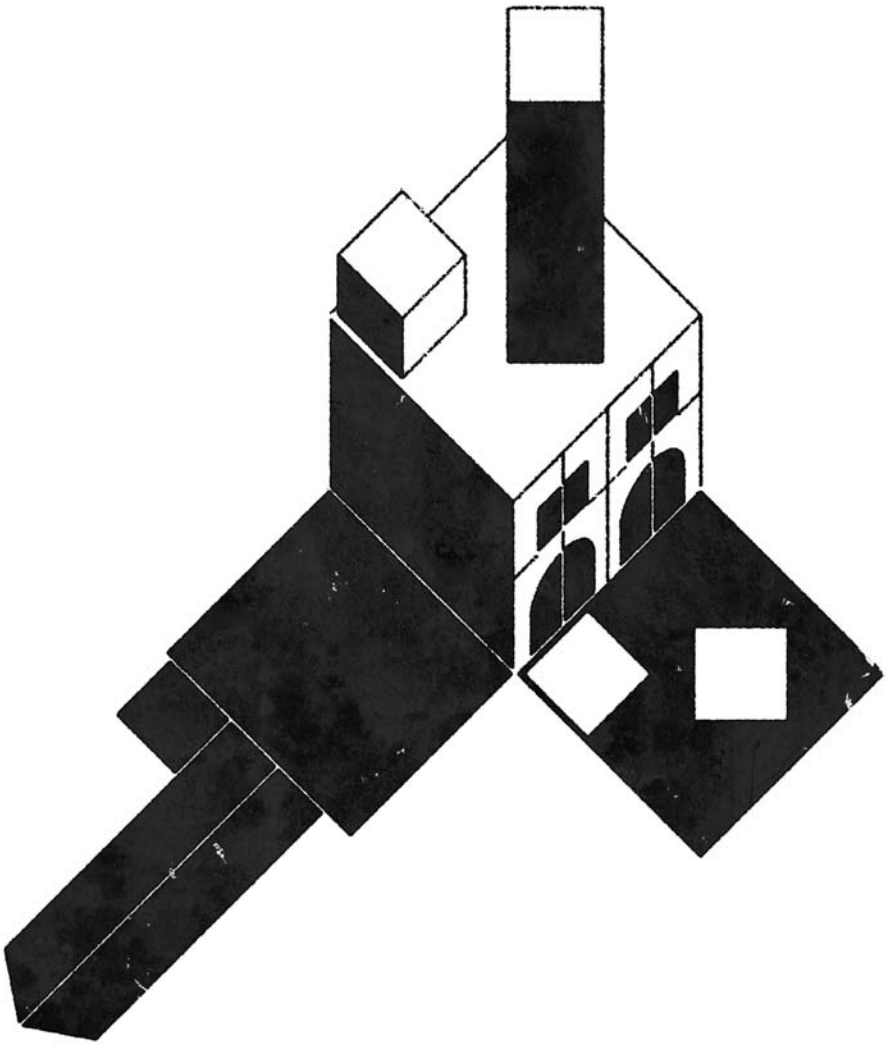


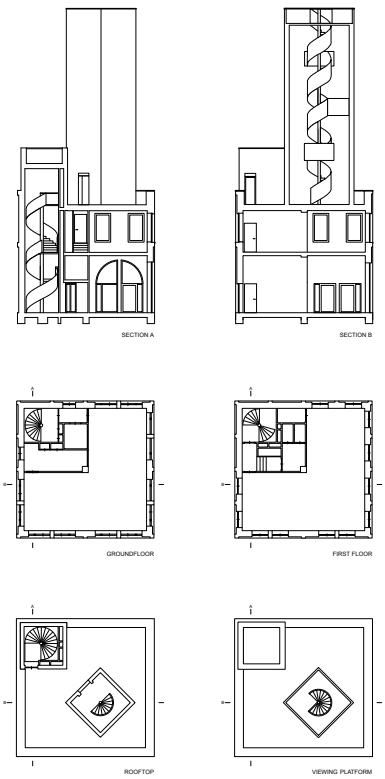
bovenaanzicht spuwer vooraanzicht spuwer doorsnede spuwer zijaanzicht spuwer

Landmark Nieuw Bergen in Bergen (NL)

The north of Limburg is characterized by its extensive landscape of fields, nature and lakes. Every small village is visible from a far distance due to the silhouettes of the church tower. The new town Nieuw Bergen, developed after the Second World War east of Bergen, never got such a point of recognition. In the framework of the renewal of the village centre Monadnock was therefore commissioned to design a prominent tower building.

Design: Monadnock, Rotterdam
Client: concept-nl projectontwikkeling, Eindhoven
Programme: observation point and restaurant
Photographer: Stijn Bollaert




SECTION A
SECTION B
GROUNDFLOOR
FIRST FLOOR
ROOFTOP
VIEWING PLATFORM

Hans van der Heijden Architect,
Amsterdam
www.hvdha.com

Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven Architecten,
Rotterdam
www.hcva.nl

Monadnock,
Rotterdam
www.monadnock.nl

Office Winhov,
Amsterdam
www.winhov.nl