Defining Space Simply as the Appreciation of Space Entered"
The Architecture of Aldo van Eyck
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"Defining Space Simply as the Appreciation of Space Entered": The Architecture of Aldo van Eyck

by Casey Mathewson

"Humanistic architecture," architecture that is, which satisfies the full spectrum of man's needs—his body, mind and spirit, is without doubt a crucial theme in the creation of our built environment, a theme which always seems to fall victim to other considerations, such as architectural vanity, fashion, style and, most often, to the reality of the budget. That architecture in its very essence must be humanistic is a conviction shared by all too few architects and "planners". Our pluralistic society is, for the most part, concerned with providing the most amount of square footage for the least amount of money. Seen in this light, it becomes quite clear why the essentially socialist architectural movement which came to be known as the "International Style"[1] was so readily accepted and realized around the world.

The dissatisfaction with the sterile results of this style which claimed to be a movement is, of course, widespread: the architectural discussion has taken drastic turns in the last few years. We are experiencing an exciting, healthy period in the history of architecture. The range of possiblities is infinite—the "three thousand miles" which separate the virtuoso spaces of Richard Meier's east coast museums and houses from Christopher Alexander's "Pattern Language"[2] seem like a long stretch of Venturi's strip via Arcosanti. There is little doubt that the whole of the world architectural scene is in a state of change—a mannerist phase of the late Modern Movement which may end up in a kind of eclectic Baroque based on Robert Venturi's paramount statement that:

> The architect who would accept this role as combiner of significant old clichés—valid banalities—in new contexts as his condition within a soceity that directs its best efforts, its big money, and its elegant technology elsewhere, can ironically express in this indirect way a true concern for society's inverted scale of values.[3]

Whether Venturi's "valid banalities" have anything to do with ameliorating the condition of man in a direct way, that is by giving him a better environment to live in, is the pressing question which needs to be considered if the next architecture is to be a "humanistic" one.

But the present-day situation in architecture has roots which lie much deeper in the past than Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981) or in Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966). The reaction against the stale architecture propagated by the important CIAM group (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne) in its 1933 Charter began as early as 1947 within the ranks of that organization itself. It was around this time that a second generation came of age. The coming of this generation, led by the Dutch architects Bakema and Van Eyck meant the beginning of the end for the CIAM.

2) Church, the Hague; altar and light.

What this new generation wanted, what it missed in Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* or the many built versions of it, was certainly a humanistic architecture. The statement issued at the end of the 1947 CIAM meeting in Bridgewater reflects the influence of the younger members on the doomed CIAM ship:

> The aim of the CIAM is to work for the creation of a physical environment that will satisfy man's emotional and material needs. . .and to stimulate man's spiritual growth.[4]

This new generation realized that the one-sided approach of orthodox modern architecture would lead it into the dead end of the 60's and 70's. But they were at the same time committed to the goals and aspirations of the Modern Movement, they wanted to widen the scope of architecture and make it function on more levels.

It was the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck (1918-) who, through his prolific essays and his powerful buildings, emerged as one of the central figures of this new generation of architects. And through the years it has time and time again been Van Eyck who has provided impetus and concrete alternatives in the worldwide architectural discussion. An analysis of his theory and work provides valuable insight for understanding the present-day situation of architecture, and a wealth of ideas which can be used in designing the next architecture.

Although Van Eyck himself has gone through some changes in the last 40 years, there is a common thread which weaves through everything he has written and built. This "thread" is our theme, for Van Eyck has been a lifelong proponent of the very humanistic architecture which we hope to define.

Van Eyck's unique position between the Modern Movement and that which has come to be known as the postmodern movement is clearly visible in his 1948 critique on the CIAM, long before anyone had even dreamed of the term postmodern:

> CIAM knows that the tyranny of common sense has reached its final stage, that the same attitude which 300 years ago found expression in the philosophy of Descartes is at last losing ground. . .
>
> Although architecture — planning in general — answers many tangible functions, ultimately its object differs in no way from that of any other creative activity, i.e., to express through man and for man the natural flow of existence. . . The question arises whether CIAM, accepting the contemporary situation as an inevitable background for practical realization, should nevertheless adopt a critical attitude towards it and act accordingly. . . A new civilization is being born. Its rhythm has already been detected, its outline partly traced. It is up to us to continue.

In Van Eyck's early essays and critique the most important aspects of his sound architectural theory were already crystallizing. He found the fascination of the CIAM with technology, with architecture as machine, to be one of the main problems facing architecture. This tendency in modern architecture can be traced back to the 1914 Futurist Manifesto, where Sant'Elia and Chiattone declared that:

> Architecture is breaking free from tradition. It must perforce begin again from the beginning. . . This architecture cannot be subject to any law of historical continuity. . . We must invent and rebuild the Futurist city; the Futurist house must be like an enormous machine.[7]

This attitude went on to have tremendous influence on the early Modern Movement and it is still with us today, its recent proponents being the Archigram group of the 60's and today's High-Tech.

But if we look at the whole of the Modern Movement, we discover another attitude which developed parallel to this fascination with the machine, an attitude which has been equally important in the formation of twentieth century thought. Oddly enough, the roots of this attitude lie not in an optimistic belief in the future, but instead in a fascination for the past, for "primitive" cultures. It is interesting that the best of the modern painters were the forerunners: Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picassso, Paul Klee, Constantin Brancusi and even Le Corbusier. These artists called for a renewal in painting, Cubism, which was partly based on the study and modern interpretation of African art. The first Cubist painting, Piccasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* would never have been created without Picasso's study of African art.

1) *Orphanage, Amsterdam; interior street.*

It was only a matter of time before this approach was applied to architecture. As the machine-oriented CIAM began to lose momentum the thinkers and philosophers of the 50's and 60's, Van Eyck among them, began to look for answers in other fields of twentieth century thought in their desire to create a humanistic environment. A research group dealing with the problem of habitation at the 1953 CIAM at Aix-en-Provence reported:

> "Primitive" architecture, which has been brought closer to us in a sense, has become a symbol of the pattern of life reflected in it. This way of life has been handed down to us over the centuries and has its deep roots in the original state of human and cosmic nature. Modern painters of the last 40 years have shown us that the most immediate means of expression are to be found in the "primitive" and prehistoric art. Today, in a situation of dire need, it offers a new opportunity to deepen the roots of modern architecture.[8]

Van Eyck summed up the development in 1959:

> Modern architecture has been harping continually on what is different in our time to such an extent that it has lost touch with what is not different, with what is essentially the same. The time has come to gather the old into the new; to rediscover the archaic principles of human nature. Man is always and everywhere essentially the same.[9]

And again, 21 years later in 1981:

> The dilemma of the modern movement in architecture is that it missed the boat by sidestepping the philosophical implications of what came to light around

the turn of the century and since, through the astounding intelligence, artistry and perseverence of a small number of artists and scientists in every media and field. What they discovered, unfortunately, hardly penetrated the minds of architects.[10]

The interest for "primitive" cultures spread throughout many disciplines. The philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss played an important part in giving the new generation a philosophical background with his philosophy of Structuralism, which was also based on the study of "primitive" cultures. After many years of study, Lévi-Strauss came to the conclusion that man had basically done nothing other than repeat himself over and over.

While the architecture of the 60's went on in its fascination with technology, Van Eyck kept on working, writing and teaching—for the most part unheard and forgotten. He and Herman Hertzberger, one of his closest followers who has gone on to create powerful buildings himself, travelled repeatedly to analyze archaic cultures. They hoped to find the archetypical characteristics in human behavior—the things which have remained the same through time—and to create an architecture which would tailor to these humanistic concerns.

Through this attitude toward history, Van Eyck developed an interesting feel for the future and for the meaning of time. His observations about the interior and transparency of time provided an interesting method by which one should consider the images of the past in relation to the present and future:

> As the past is gathered into the present and the gathering body of experience finds a home in the mind, the present acquires temporal depth—loses its acrid instantaneousness; its razor blade quality. One might call this: the interiorization of time or time rendered transparent. It seems to me that PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE must be active in the mind's interior as a continuum. If they are not, the artifacts we make will be without temporal depth or associative perspective. (1962)

> Architects nowadays are pathologically addicted to change, regarding it as something one either hinders, runs after or, at best, keeps up with. This, I suggest, is why they tend to sever the past from the future, with the result that the present is rendered emotionally inaccessible—without temporal dimension. Both are founded on a static, clockwork notion of time. So let's start with the past for change and discover the UNCHANGING CONDITION OF MAN in the light of change. . .

> I have heard it said that "an architect cannot be a prisoner of tradition in a time of change." It seems to me that he cannot be a prisoner of any kind. And at no time can he be a prisoner of change. (1966)[11]

Van Eyck's views on Urban Planning, on the architecture of the city, are also worth analysis, especially when one realizes how much of what he has prophesized has actually taken place in the last decades. He wrote in 1959:

> From 1947 onward a different attitude slowly begins to assert itself. Urban planning will develop to become an art, dependent on form and unthinkable without it. The gap between architects and town planners will continue to decrease; the borders will disappear.[12]

One of the cornerstones of Van Eyck's work could be defined as the humanization of the dogma of the Modern Movement. By identifying "each space with that same space entered," Van Eyck always considers human experience to be the most important factor in design. He ridiculed Sigfried Giedeon's well-known Space-Time Conception and confronted the CIAM's streetless park-like city with a better alternative; an alternative which has gained widespread acceptance in the last several years:

> WHATEVER SPACE AND TIME MEAN, PLACE AND OCCASION MEAN MORE. For space, in the image of man, is place; and time, in the image of man, is occasion. Space has no room, time not a moment for man. He is excluded. In order to "include" him, he must be gathered into the meaning space and time. For half a century architects have been providing OUTSIDE for man, even inside. But that is not their job at all; their job is to provide INSIDE for man, even outside![13]

It was about this time that the philosopher/architect Louis I. Kahn entered the international scene. The similarities between the two are striking; one thinks of Kahn's declaration that "the street is a meeting place. . .a community inn which doesn't have a roof"[14] or of his concern for considerations related to place. Whether Van Eyck influenced Kahn or vice-versa, it is clear that these two architects learned from each other, and there is no doubt that both of them were striving to create a meaningful humanistic environment. They are certainly two key figures in the development of recent architecture.

One of the most important hypotheses of Van Eyck's theory is what he calls "the philosophy of the doorstep." Here he emphasizes the importance of transition zones, zones which connect buildings to their immediate surroundings and vice-versa. Here again Van Eyck provides a feasible alternative to the theory of the CIAM, which usually dealt with interior space at the expense of outdoor space:

> There's one more thing which has been growing in my mind ever since the Smithsons uttered the word "doorstep" at Aix. It hasn't left me ever since. I've been mulling over it, expanding the meaning as far as I could stretch it. I've even gone so far as to identify it as a symbol with what architecture as such is and should accomplish. To establish the IN-BETWEEN is to reconcile conflicting polarities. Provide the place where they can interchange and you reestablish the original twin-phenomena.

> Take an example; the world of the house with me inside and you outside, or vice-versa. There's also the world of the street—the city—with you outside and me inside or vice-versa. Get what I mean? Two worlds clashing, no transition. The individual on one side, the collective on the other. It's terrifying. Between the two, society in general throws up a lot of barriers, whilst architects in particular are so poor in spirit that they provide doors two inches thick and six feet high. . .every time we pass through a door like that we're split in two—but we don't notice any more—and simply walk on, halved.

4) Orphanage, Amsterdam.

3) Mother's House, Amsterdam; stair detail.

> Is that the reality of a door? What then, I ask, is the greater reality of a door? Well, perhaps the greater reality of a door is the localized setting for a wonderful human gesture; conscious entry and departure. . .A DOOR IS A PLACE MADE FOR AN OCCASION. I think that is symbolical. And what is the greater reality of a window? I leave that to you.[14]

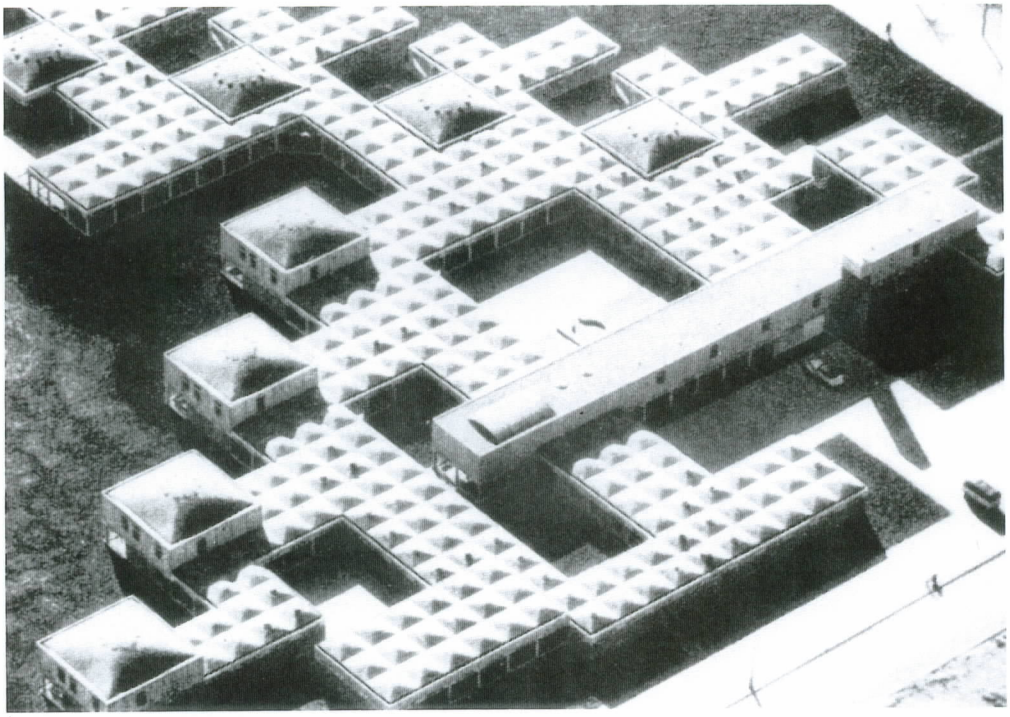
While Van Eyck's theory has been criticized as not comprising a consistent whole, in that it doesn't have a solution for every problem, it should simply be seen as his advice for the creation of a better built environment. His theory should not be considered as dogma, he does not want to propagate his theory as the only correct theory. Basically, he just wants architecture to respond to the needs of man.

There are, however, several threads connecting his theory and his buildings, the most important of them being (1) Van Eyck's effort to utilize anthropological studies in order to gain a better understanding of human behaviour, (2) his use of basic geometric and symbolical forms in order to create clarity and (3) his concern for the city of history, exemplified in his recent work.

Following is a sampling of his most important buildings. Starting with his important Orphanage (1959) and ending with the recent work of Theo Bosch, Aldo's former partner, this overview can only begin to do justice to the work of Aldo van Eyck and should be seen as an introduction to a long book which still needs to be written. Not only in theory, but also in his work, Aldo has shown again and again that it is possible to create a whole, humanistic architecture which is also a meaningful expression of our time.

Orphanage, Amsterdam 1957-60

Van Eyck's first internationally recognized building, his orphanage in Amsterdam, was designed and built during the time when he was formulating his theory and organizing the CIAM '59 meeting in Otterlo. It served as proof that the young, rambunctious Van Eyck could back up his theory in reality; this house for children is full of convincing built examples of his theory. It has served as an example for count-



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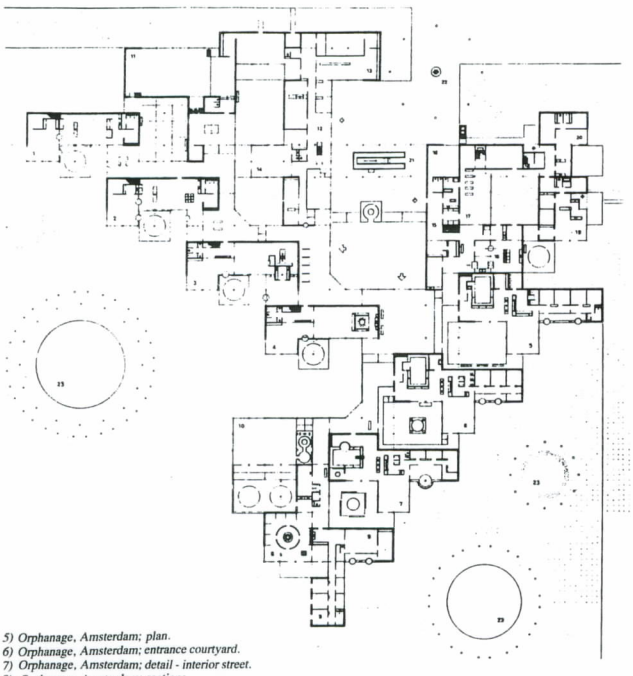

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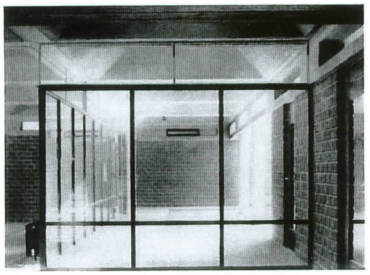

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5) Orphanage, Amsterdam; plan.
6) Orphanage, Amsterdam; entrance courtyard.
7) Orphanage, Amsterdam; detail - interior street.
8) Orphanage, Amsterdam; sections.

less later buildings and, more importantly, it came at a time when new input was desperately needed. Unfortunately, it hardly made a dent in the architectural discussion of the time and inhuman housing projects went on springing up all over Europe and the USA for quite sometime. And while this house may seem odd by our standards today, it must be seen as an outstanding achievement in its time.

This is a home for 125 children between the ages of a few months and 20 years. Each of the eight compartments is oriented to a large domed space which serves as a symbolic house. The central organizing principle of the design is the idea of building as city. The circulation is conceived as an internal street which acts as a continuation of the actual street outside. The courtyards serve as plazas, as gathering spaces, for the community of the house.

Van Eyck's masterful use of what he calls ''twin-phenomena'' enrich the house in many ways. The entrance courtyard can be seen as a kind-of gate for the entire complex. When we consider Van Eyck's previously mentioned ''philosophy of the doorstep'' here, we discover that the entrance court serves as a transition zone between the city and the building itself. Instead of the sudden, uncomfortable transition of many modern buildings, we encounter a logical, gradual transition. The conflicting elements of city and

building are reconciled through mild transition. One encounters clear, clean spaces repeatedly throughout the building.

The structural solution is partly a result of Van Eyck's study of primitive architecture. The odd domes remind strongly of North African villages which exercised a strong influence over Van Eyck during the design phase. Here he developed a mass-produceable system which minimizes cost but can be varied in an attempt to utilize the advantages of 20th century technology in the creation of a humanistic built environment:

> In order that we may overcome the menace of quantity which we are now faced with. . .the ''aesthetics of number'', the laws of what I should like to call ''harmony in motion'' must be discovered. Projects should attempt to solve the aesthetic problems that result through the standardization of CONSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENTS; through the repetition of similar and dissimilar DWELLINGS within a larger housing unit.[15]

This idea has been taken further by other Structuralist architects, the best example being the office complex Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn, Holland by Herman Hertzberger.

Unfortunately, although Van Eyck's landmark orphanage has become a kind of Mecca for architects, it is badly in need of repair and routine upkeep. It appears that the City of Amsterdam is less convinced of the importance of this building than the international architectural community is. . .

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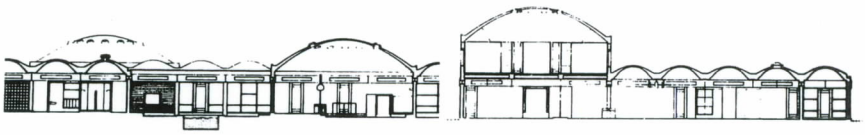

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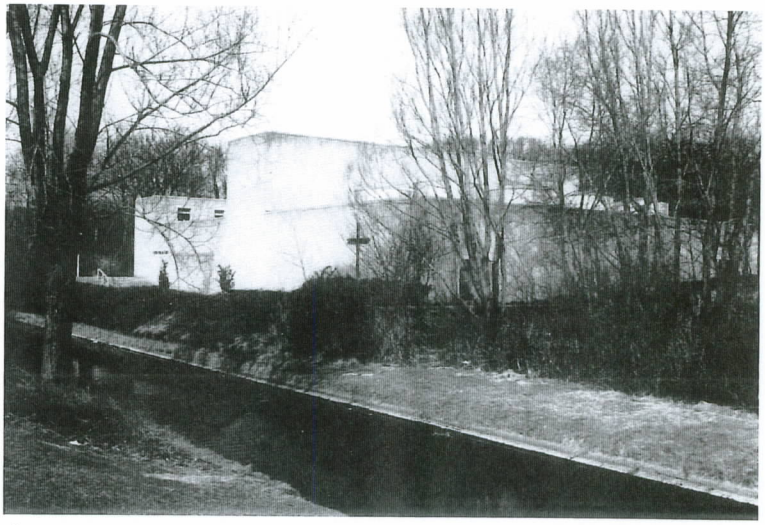

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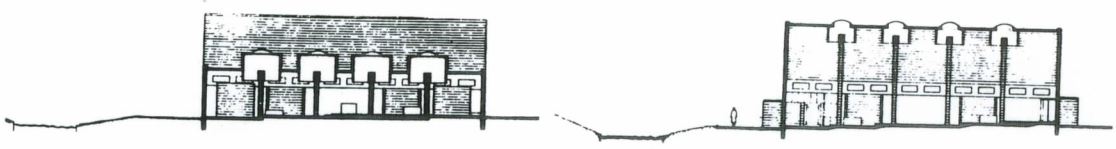
9) Church, the Hague; overall view.
10) Church, the Hague, facade detail.
11) Church, the Hague; plan.
12) Church, the Hague; sections.



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Catholic Church in the Hague 1968-70

In the ten years which followed the completion of the orphanage, Van Eyck was given few chances to build anything important; it seems his ideas and theories were simply a few years ahead of their time.

For his next major project, a Catholic church in the Hague, Holland, he utilized the symbolic power of basic geometrical elements to create a sacred atmosphere. The outer form is simple and restrained. The main organizing principle is the idea of interior street. The high space behind the altar is a kind of ''sacred way'' which separates the low church space from a meeting hall. Van Eyck refers to the ''twin-phenomena'' high-low which is evident in the contrast between the crypt-like church and the ''Gothic-like sacred way.'' The ingenious skylights filter the light from above in a way which creates an impressive spiritual atmosphere. Although the altar is on the traditional axis, the church does not have an authoritarian character; through skillful use of human scaled detailing and proportions the church has a unique humane character.

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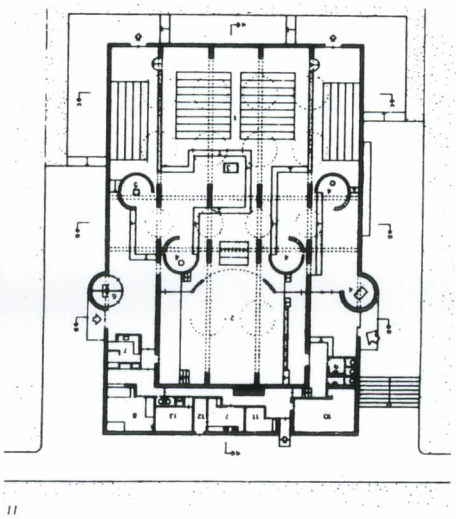

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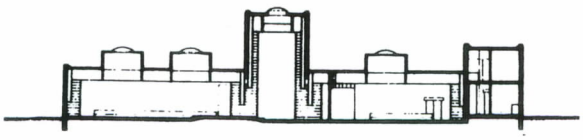

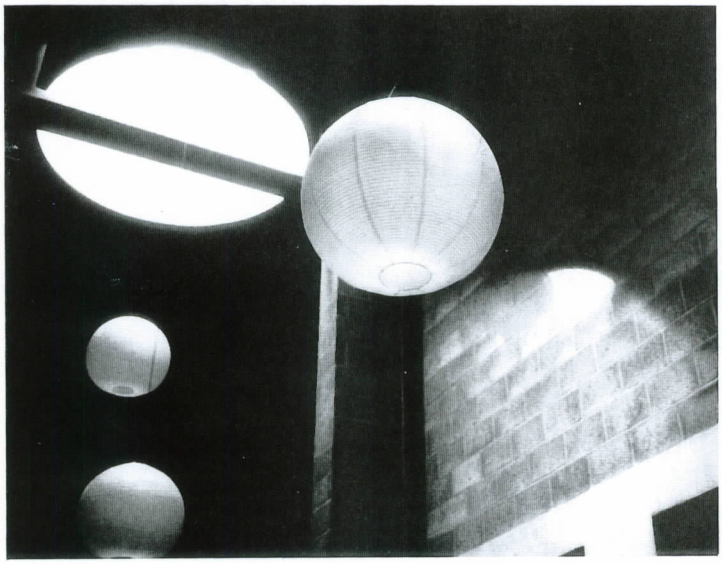

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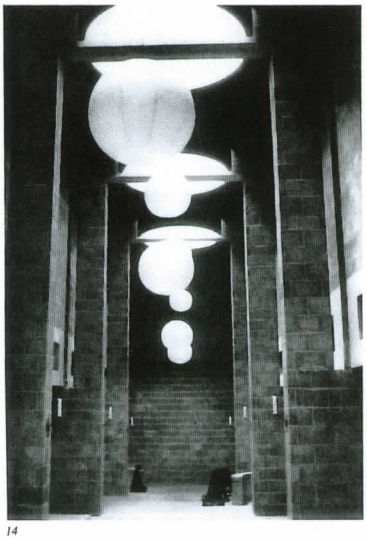

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13) Church, the Hague; skylight detail.
14) Church, the Hague; ''sacred street.''

knows, Anna Livia Plurabelle may yet preside over architecture!) James Joyce, *Finnigan's Wake*.[16]

This project is indicative of the general trend in housing projects here in Europe—high density, low building heights, traditional materials and forms and, most importantly, enclosed urban space, space which serves as a "stage' for the "theater" of the city.

Mother's House in Amsterdam 1975-80

Van Eyck's major building of the 70's, his Mother's House in Amsterdam, can be seen as a kind of return to his "modern" roots; here he attempted to abstract and utilize the positive characteristics of the Modern Movement. Instead of totally discounting the architecture of the last 60 years as incorrect and inhumane, Van Eyck strives for a truly contemporary solution—an expression of our time; of the state of our technology and of our society itself.

This house for families without fathers is a place where mothers and children find temporary shelter—a social center for fatherless families. It provides a place where families can gain a toehold and start over again. The project deals with helping people—with providing them with spaces in which they can heal and readjust; just the project for Van Eyck. Starting with his Orphanage and continuing through today, Aldo's best projects have always been those where a social element is involved—literally architecture which must deal with special human needs and problems.

The Mother's House is located on a busy street near the center of Amsterdam. While the Orphanage stands isolated on the outskirts of town, this is a sensitive urban site with old buildings on both sides. But instead of trying to directly respond to the styles of the neighboring buildings in a banal way, Van Eyck developed a new aesthetic which should express the special function of the house in our society and at the same time clearly make it a building of our time. The virtuoso use of glass reminds one of the early 20th century Dutch architect Duiker who experimented with glass in his revolutionary Openlichtschool in Amsterdam as well as in Hilversum at the Zonnenstraal mental hospital.

But Van Eyck's transparency here is much more refined

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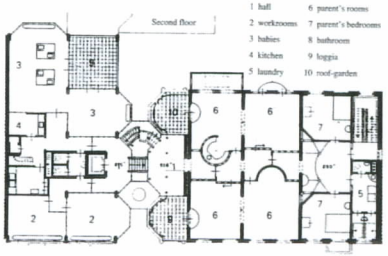

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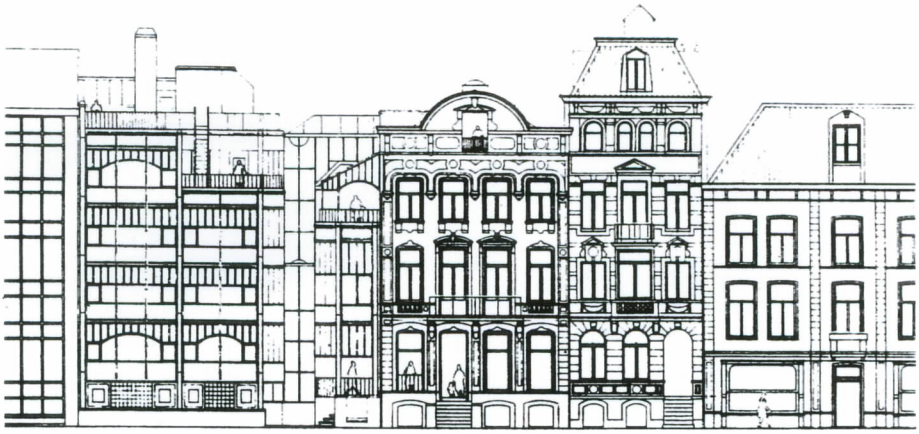
than a simple pane of clear glass. He works with layering devices which make the actual pane of glass only a small part of the larger pattern which is the wall, an element which acts as a "reciprocator" between the conflicting forces of inside and outside. And it is the use of glass which further makes this building clearly a building of our time; Van Eyck satisfies the conditions of the Modern Movement—he provides light and air—in a new and refreshing way.

The striking use of color here also connects the Mother's House to the early Modern Movement. One is again reminded of early Modern Dutch architecture, especially of the De Stijl group (G. Rietveld, Van Doesburg, Mondrian, Van Esteren, and many others) who designed their facades as if they were compositions on canvas—Rietveld's Schroeder house in Utrecht is the best example. Here Van Eyck has utilized a bright rainbow of colors to give a sense of cheerfulness and accessibility. "With the steel building standing before me yet unpainted, I tried to think of it as a painting, ending up painting it as if it were actually two dimensionally spatial. Not in front of me but wrapped around me, to use Céanne's term. I spent as much time and thought on the colors as I spent on the building without them: trying again and again I managed to get a little way beyond the beginning."[17]

23) Mother's House; elevation.
24) Mother's House; facade on Plantage Middelaan.

The colorful, somehow happy facade jumps out and calls attention to the fact that this house fulfills a special function in society; for Van Eyck this means that it must have its own expression, for him it would be wrong to build this house, given its truly modern function, in traditional Dutch style.

Close examination reveals that the design does respond to the neighboring context, it strikes an interesting balance between old and new. The new addition is broken into two sections. One recedes from the street and acts as a connector between old and new as well as a vertical circulation space. The other section is right up on the building line and has the exact same width and similar window sizes and proportions as the building to the right, which is also part of the design. In this way Van Eyck integrates the context without copying it. After all, what use is it copying an old eclectic town house which was built under entirely different social conditions? Can (or should) architecture express that which is different in our new and modern society and perhaps even hope in the positive future development of man, or should it be more a literal copy of other epochs and then, indirectly, of other social systems with entirely different characteristics than ours? This is the question which Van Eyck addresses here, and only time will tell which answer, if any, is correct. But Van Eyck has certainly taken a big step here, providing a beginning for further development and energy for the next architecture in an otherwise confused time.



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all sides, are especially inviting and simply three-dimensional spatial masterworks.

Contextually, the steel and glass aesthetic of the Mother's House and the Pentagon has been utilized here again and, although the building at first appears to be brutally anti-contextual, the spindly transparent facade has been executed in a convincing way. The 100 meter long facade is broken down into several parts, each one bearing a vague resemblance to the traditional canal houses of Amsterdam. The whole facade can be read as a row of canal houses, each one different but part of the whole. The colors here are pastel and quiet where one might have expected a return to the bright rainbow colors utilized for the Mother's House for this important building.

With or without Aldo's ''rainbow'', this building is fantastic — modern in the true sense of the word, it is so much more than just functionalistic architecture. It functions on many levels at the same time: spatially, contextually; for people, for architects, it is architecture and art at the same time — the culmination of Van Eyck's theories and Theo Bosch's ability to give them three-dimensional expression at a large scale.

Conclusion

Although this report may give a rough overview of Van Eyck's colorful palette of ideas and work, it is clear that the bulk of his lifetime work, which has found expression in so many fields of thought, has barely been touched upon here. Yes, we are literally dealing with an artist's palette of thought here: art, technology, sociology, literature, archeology, theology and philosophy; Van Eyck has united all of these fields of thought in his architecture without being partial to any one of them. He has striven for, and realized, a wholistic architecture, an architecture which really does function on many levels.

As for the future, Aldo offers plenty of solid advice. He seems to be presently as dissatisfied with the situation of contemporary architecture as he was with the contemporary architecture of 1959; especially the ''RPPs'' (Rats, Post-Modernists and other Pests) fall under his frequent attack.

He senses in their architecture a dangerous fascination with theory and esoteric considerations as opposed to making architecture simply for the people who actually inhabit it. He wrote in 1981:

> CIAM was traumatically afraid of the wicked past. RPP's equally traumatic infatuation with it is merely the other side of the same false coin. But then and now the same notion of time prevails, hence the same awkward posturing vis-a-vis the past. It is still history out or history in. In the locally limited minds of architects this generally means in and out of Rome or yes or no to classicism alternating ever 20 years or so. Why are architects, of all people, always changing between false alternatives, always tending towards either-or instead of and-and? . . . The notion that the past is somewhere behind us and ordinary people somewhere below us is particularly revealing and loathsome.[18]

His advice for the next generation of architects deals with the essential questions of our time and provides solid answers. Here he outlines the basic theme which unites all of his varied work in his advice for the future:

> . . . Never cease to identify that which you construct with the people you are constructing it for — for those it will accommodate. Identify a building with that same building entered, and hence with those it shelters, and define space — each space built — simply as the appreciation of it. This circular definition has a purpose. You see, whilst excluding all academic abracadabra, it includes what should never be excluded, but paradoxically generally is; I mean those entering it, appreciating it — PEOPLE . . . What is needed is better functioning this time. Just that — just better functionalism. For there is no such thing as a solid teapot that also pours tea. Such an object might be a penetrating statement (and thus perhaps still a work or art), but it is simply not a teapot since it cannot pour tea . . . That architecture — buildings — should no longer help mitigate inner stress, but should, instead, provoke it, is a hardly conceivable objective.[19]

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33) Faculty of literature, University of Amsterdam.
34) Faculty of literature, Univ. of A'dam; foyer from above.

When we compare this attitude towards architecture to Robert Venturi's quote which began our story, it seems as if we are dealing with two opposite polarities, two seemingly different versions of what architecture is or can be. But actually Venturi and Van Eyck have the same goal in common: an architecture which satisfies the physical as well as the spiritual needs of man and rises above the banal architecture which has destroyed so many of our cities and perhaps even helped turn society against architects, making our position even more difficult.

The next question is: Will the ''next architecture'' be capable of reconciling these seemingly opposite polarities, creating architecture which really does function on many levels? I'll leave that to you . . .

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