The winter of 1990 saw the publication of OASE double issue 26-27, bearing the slightly pretentious title: *his job is to bring about an IMAGINED ORDER, Aldo van Eyck*. As this longish title suggests, the entire issue was devoted to the work of Aldo van Eyck. Its editorial dwelled on the fact that a serious architectural critique of Van Eyck’s oeuvre would be possible only by avoiding Van Eyck’s person and by steering clear of his digressions on the ‘human dimension’ and ‘poetic design’. That very same editorial indicated that the editorial board had set itself the momentous task of ‘incorporating [Van Eyck’s work] into the science of architecture’, which up until that point had clearly not been possible. The issue addressed a range of topics, among them Van Eyck’s approach to living, the journal Forum, CIAM, Otterlo 1959, his urban development work, Nagele and finally Joost Meuwissen on Van Eyck’s private homes.

The inclusion of Joost Meuwissen was something of a surprise. He had been associated with the journal Plan and at the time of this publication he worked for the journal Wiederhall. Meuwissen had never shown any affinity with Aldo van Eyck’s ideas or finished work in either of these two journals. Wiederhall had its heyday in the late 1980s. It had stressed its credentials as a platform for the kind of architecture that infuriated and terrified Van Eyck. Nor does it seem likely that Wiederhall’s editorial board, including the likes of Carel Weeber and Umberto Barbieri, would have inspired much confidence in Van Eyck. In the late 1980s Wiederhall was a remarkably polished journal – seemingly the opposite of OASE in everything. It had a large, square layout, deliberately designed to prevent photocopying. In the first Wiederhall editorial Meuwissen wrote: ‘I love architecture because it is old. In its treatises and manuals it has preserved a dead language up until now.’

Judging by his article Joost Meuwissen appears to have little affinity with Aldo van Eyck’s work. The title should have read ‘Joost in Aldo’s Wonderland’ rather than evoking an image of Aldo wandering around the catacombs of the giant oak, like some bewildered visitor.

Revelling in his own prose, Joost whirls past Aldo’s houses without discovering any real virtuosity. The article’s title characterises Aldo van Eyck as a master who, in his homes, conjures with scale and ushers the users into a wondrous world of changing dimensions. At the same time, it also explicitly describes him as a giant stumbling blindly through the china cabinet of architecture.

The homes have a unique logic that is quite different from his public works, because here he does not put together façades. Instead the floor plan gives rise to the finished product. The façades have disappeared and the building derives meaning from its surroundings and the floor plan structure.

Meuwissen’s article appears to imply that Van Eyck’s homes, which up until that point had gone unnoticed and uncensored, show a weakness and ambiguity that may be more interesting than the meticulous and over-composed clarity of his public buildings. In fact, Meuwissen is carried away by them. The paradox of this article is that whereas Meuwissen wants to provide a dry, analytical description of Van Eyck’s work, Van Eyck may ultimately have touched a chord in him. He thus concludes with the poetic image of Aldo van Eyck up in the tree like the invisible cat with the mysterious smile.

**Joost Meuwissen**

**Remarks on the Houses of Aldo van Eyck**

Joost Meuwissen

Juliette Bekkering

Member of the editorial board from OASE 28 to 40

_Translated by Laura Vroomen_
Within Aldo van Eyck’s body of work, residential buildings form neither a distinct category nor, by any means, a prominent one. Their role is modest. In surveys and other publications about his oeuvre, they are not usually presented as a separate group. In his architectural aesthetics, in word and image, Van Eyck does not make a categorical distinction between types of buildings. Each building is called home. His two largest public projects, the Burgerweeshuis and Moederhuis in Amsterdam (a home for orphans and a home for single mothers, respectively), both have a residential function. Van Eyck’s aesthetics does include a theory of coming and going, though more of coming than of going – a theory of staying somewhere, of ‘dwelling’, but not a theory of residing or living somewhere in the strict sense. In the structure of this aesthetics, each work avoids stylistically refining the previous ones; instead, the objective is to ‘merge prior experiences’ into a rich awareness, and so each work acquires a characteristic tenor that is all its own, offering a truly new and different definition of architecture. Nevertheless, houses seem to have played but a small role in the reception of his oeuvre.1 Perhaps the concept of architecture that they embodied was less timely, less historically compelling or less urban.

Van Eyck’s houses are admired, to be sure, but not often discussed. I do not wish to change this situation radically. Rather, I would like to take their silent builtness and their abstract conceptualisation as a basis, and examine what they present to us from their modern condition, their passive voice – the same voice that speaks to us from the sparse design notes, like the hermetic poet Gerrit Achterberg, singing the praises of something unattainable. The only activity is that of things, the sun entering, the door opening: ‘When the door opens, spring has truly arrived!’2 Truly? Living in the house is waiting for the door to open at last. Deep inside the house, the prime numbers are keeping watch. The play of contrasts, in the larger-scale works, reaches its limit in literary content and ends with a resulting leap towards understanding – the Burgerweeshuis and Moederhuis are run-ups to such a leap. In the smaller-scale works, the monuments and pavilions, that same play of contrasts can – through the restriction of the means of expression – be celebrated directly, as an image: the sign, emblem or logo of an idealised working method. The difficulty is that this play of contrasts in Van Eyck’s houses has neither a beginning nor an end. The mode of address is not the ‘we’ of the architect or the ‘them’ of the occupants, but reality itself. The game grows more fluid. There are no rules. In his houses, no connection can be made between height, breadth and depth. They threaten to escape not only his oeuvre, but architecture itself. Reality is not rescued there by a concept or image, but because it is indicated as outside. Accordingly, the inside – the interior – is devoid of representation; it is vacated; it creates an almost postmodern emptiness, posing a transcendental question – under what conditions is the play

1. The reception history of Aldo van Eyck’s works is still too short for us to take any distance from it. For that reason, not much attention is paid here to the secondary literature of prior interpretations, despite the frictions between the hagiographic (Herzberger), empathetic (Strauven) and critical (De Heer, Barbieri) approaches. This article attempts to trace the definition of building, residing and thinking in the houses of Van Eyck, from an angle that is not so much deconstructionist as it is Deleuzian. This is because Gilles Deleuze has formulated more, and more global, descriptive categories, which can serve as keys to the interpretation of an aesthetic system, especially in Différence et répétition (Paris, 1968). Or at least, it seems to me that in this approach, the deconstructionist preoccupation with destroying dialectic and constructing equality is coupled with a possibility that has not yet been relinquished, the possibility that an aesthetic system is also thinkable. In this sense, the Deleuzian categories are used here not in an applied manner but in a reconstructive one. My approach must have a name, therefore, reconstructionism seems most suitable.

of contrasts possible? – and answering that question by building, by erecting an almost unbridled elevation.

TWISTS
Not that the houses have very different twists than the other works. The entrance recessed deeply into the house, the bayonet reflection in the floor plan, the dominant cornice, the bubbling domes on the roof, or the aggregation of rooms around a large space, the tectonics of the elevation – these features appear in all his works. But their point differs. For instance, the bayonet reflection in the houses is developed only in one direction, and not in multiple ones. To put it differently, an orthogonal bayonet reflection can prompt a diagonal one on a different scale, but the two are not united in a single system of their own, unlike in the larger-scale projects, such as the Burgerweeshuis, or the design for the cultural centre in Jerusalem, where bayonet reflection seems to be used both lengthwise and breadthwise, occasioning a system of swastikas that aims to unite part and whole within itself and thus achieves its effects through the medium of scale.4 In the houses, the reflections are more likely to assign a central role to space – or emptiness – than to scale.

Something similar is true of the deeply recessed entrance, which results in the absence of some formal element of the house: the hallway, the courtyard, the separate circulation space, which in the larger works seem to function precisely as an aggregate, as a larger-scale element – at least in the floor plan.5 In this respect, again, the houses indicate an informal centre to which the smaller rooms will not, in fact, relate in terms of scale. But is this a loss? At first sight, it seems to be experienced as one. The building is too small, as it were, to formalise the complex relations, and so those relations remain informal, like the very experience of living in the house. The hall is absent but, perhaps for that reason, is placed on the upper floor in the houses in Amsterdam and Venlo. But once it is there, is it still because it is missing on the ground floor? In fact, the hall is opened up, by means of one or two voids, opening both outwardly on the upper floor and towards the ground floor. It becomes the central tectonic element, finally indicating that the upper floor is an extension of the ground floor – not merely a second level, but an element in the structure of the house. Here, the hall is not an element of the floor plan and its problem of scale as it attempts to interpret the architecture on the theoretically infinite plane of the earth. It is a tectonic element that indicates the elevation of the house or, rather, suggests that the house is an elevation.

While in the larger projects the twists are necessities, complex and seemingly interlinked and having a function related to scale – a function that is therefore literary and laden with meaning – the serious play of the houses, the elevation erected indoors, requires only one scale. Consequently, the houses

3 Because they indicate different contents, namely inside and outside, I speak of a different scale, although the proportional system does not actually differ.

4 In a recent exchange with Jan de Heer, Johan van de Beek refers to the self-contained compositional quality of these buildings, which have a component structure but whose components never become a model of an infinite structure: ‘Een ingezonden brief naar aanleiding van het centrumloze labyrinth: Gerrit Rietveld en de stedebouw’, OASE 25, 1989, 22, 23: ‘In the work of Van Eyck, the point is to use the turbine (swastika) in such a way that it creates a composition corresponding to the size of the particular project. It never becomes a fragment as a model for a theoretically infinite structure. The composition is not acentric, but polycentric. Its dynamics are sometimes kept in balance through a countermovement by a swastika of a different kind . . . Van Eyck creates a specific relationship between the designed composition and the given context, often by leaving one arm of the swastika open to the environment’. But this is not the point at all! The point is how repetition is conceptualised within the composition, how the composition deals with infinity, that of the ground, the materials and the sky. In their elevation, these buildings do, in fact, have an infinite structure. Attention is always focused too much, and exclusively, on the floor plan, which is described as if it were the building.

Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, Amsterdam, 1973-1978

Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, Amsterdam, 1973-1978, entrance hall and stairwell; elevation and floor plans and axonometric projection

Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, coloured tiles in a mirror frame

Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, wall columns; at left, coloured tiles in descending spectral order from purple to red; at right, in ascending spectral order from blue to red

Van Eyck's houses do have transitional spaces between the inside and the outside, but those spaces are almost always incorporated into the volume of the house itself. Within those houses, they manifest more as a vertical absence or void than

can celebrate the festival of proportion without much reference to the outside. Or at least, this could form the basis for an analysis seeking not the similarities but the differences within Van Eyck's oeuvre. The houses more strongly resemble the tectonic signs of the monuments and pavilions, which are also pure proportion, but they keep those signs indoors and do not let them shine out over the city – or rather, the woods in which they are found. Perhaps the inside and outside of the private house are not divergent enough in character to enter into a formal merger of scale in the design, or to be significant. Both inside/out and private/public seem barely able to signify a social or cultural value in this work. They can form a psychological content, but that is by grace of their informality, their lack of form. Aldo van Eyck must have been avoiding the educational function that, in the 1950s and '60s in the Netherlands, was associated with living in a small country house in a modern style. For him, in a sense, this work must have been a non-genre and thus have represented a kind of building as such, more so than his schools, playgrounds and other urban creations.

TRANSITIONS

Van Eyck's houses do have transitional spaces between the inside and the outside, but those spaces are almost always incorporated into the volume of the house itself. Within those houses, they manifest more as a vertical absence or void than
as a horizontal connection – ultimately, more as a window than as a door. No matter how articulated and linked some houses may seem, their exterior space does little to engage with forms in the vicinity – a square, a circle, a canal, a larger but well-defined space – that could give coherence and meaning to the house as a grouping.6 Even in the house in Rétie, I would argue, this is in fact the case. The coherence seems to be defined internally, in terms more of composition than of grouping. Although all of Aldo van Eyck’s buildings have substantial cornices, this is not the most deeply embedded in the frames that those cornices provide.

The cornice or the edge of the roof surrounds a surface, the rooftop, where the elements of the composition extrude or intrude, a surface that therefore never manifests as a plane but is always a little more than planar. It is the fractal dimension of the rooftop that forms the compositional reference point for the entire house. As a result, the elements of the composition are in fact all conceived as vertical, reaching upward, towards their fractal levelling in the rooftop, and the house is not erected out of the floor plan but conceived as a complex elevation, a system of towers, from its very inception: the San Gimignano connection that has served as a route in architectural metabolism and structuralism.

The term ‘four towers’ is the phrase used to describe the Baambrugge design.7 Why four? Why not one, as in the houses in Amsterdam and Venlo, or many, as in Rétie? It is not just that this design is for a house for the architect himself, who could hardly be expected to wall himself up in a single tower, and instead opted for a place of unbridled building in which his many-faceted, ‘chameleonic’ personality could sojourn. The number four itself must also have been important, because the houses the four, rather than two, directions in the floor plan – the four points of the compass, the four seasons – in their lack of difference as an elevation, or rather, in the repetition of their elevation. Because the elevation repeats itself, the differences in the floor plan become free, rather than designed, content. The intended message is that in the houses no three-dimensionality will be pursued, or in any case, a different three-dimensionality will be suggested than in the public works, which have more to do with the small and large.

ELEVATION

In Van Eyck’s public buildings, the vaulted roof and outer wall can be conceived more or less as a single elevation, no matter how complex they may be. In the Burgerweeshuis, the play of open and closed in the flat outer wall is kept in balance by the round, three-dimensional columns that create space around themselves, that make themselves spatial, that envelop themselves in space like the dancers in a George Balanchine ballet. The choreography here, however, with its intense confrontations in the sphere of perception, is not frontal or orthogonal, but solely diagonal, as the path of the building’s main circulation routes indicates. But the exterior view of the building reveals no more of this – despite, or precisely because of, the fractal overgrowth of the outside space – than the hint of a perceived diagonal. This fails to add much to the outer wall, however, and the undulations of the roof are weakened by the stacking of the architrave and cornice. The rooftop is flattened, not in its entirety, but in the vicinity of the tower. Thus unlike the houses in Rétie.

The result that emerges, in the sectional view, is a reiterable elevation of vaults, a measure, a proportion that can articulate, divide and expand the floor plan. Because the elevation functions as a single material envelopment, the floor plan becomes available. Because proportion predominates, every scale becomes identical, at least conceptually. This is also the case with the foundation and upper floors of the Moederhuis and certainly at the ESTEC site in Noordwijk. The elevation is vaulting that creates a certain tension between the inside and the outside. Height cannot truly be conceptualised in the outer wall; depth is not truly tolerated. The outer wall, right down to the distribution of glazing bars in the case of the Burgerweeshuis, can in fact only be given form as a stack of horizontal bands, a complex frame: that what is found outside the work but from an outside perspective, is part of that work. Precisely for that reason, the floors of the building cannot also be stacked. The tectonic model of the vaulting militates against it.

The larger buildings are extension, theoretically infinite. They require an elevation that can be horizontally reiterated. This is what leads to the problem of the floors, the levels, that is resolved only with difficulty in the outer walls of the Burgerweeshuis and the Moederhuis. But the houses are elevation. The upper level is part of the elevation, not a true floor. The houses develop vertically, not as domes but as towers. They rise to their peak at the centre. This is one reason that in the outer wall, again, the possibilities are quite the opposite of those present in the larger works. The articulation of the architrave and cornice is sometimes pulled out from the Transcendental veiling of the elevation; it is dependent on the arrangement of the towers or the cornice and designed out of a sense of ‘weakness’. However much the formal solutions resemble one another, as they undeniably do in the Burgerweeshuis and the house in Rétie, there is a world of difference between the strong, even classical, Palladian, foundation-tectonic physiology of the Burgerweeshuis’s outer walls – a veritable series of funny faces like those that Aldo van Eyck himself sometimes pulls – and the somewhat textile-like patterns, with no top or bottom to speak of, that are on display in the outer walls of the houses. The house in Venlo does not present the face of the architect but merely wears his inseparable floppy hat. The house front in Rétie is, as it were, no longer designed
as a front or outer wall in any sense, but is dissolved into the weak contour of the woods’ edge, which borders the clearing that contains the furnished complex. Precisely because this edge is drawn so exactly around the complex, and does not presuppose a different, grander scale, its curve does not appear to be a natural boundary but an unnatural palisade, a dividing line, a front, a defence, a resonance or a response to the ramifications of the development of this clearing for the tectonic evolution of the woods. An outer wall without an outside, a façade without a face.

**TEXTURE**

The weak outer walls of the house may be the reason that commentators have typically kept silent about them – because their laxness is seen as a deficiency, or because the endlessly eulogised aesthetics of the larger projects rules out any moments of weakness, and where they arise it conceals them from the eye through the simplest of graphic devices. This is what we find at the Burgerweeshuis in the south wing, with an upper level, where the wards for older children are located. The upper level rises too high to be incorporated into the elevation as an architrave or frame. Regular placement of the windows in each bay is intended as a tectonic mechanism for the upper floor as a whole, but only this window is incorporated into the vertical development of the house front by means of the windows. The upper floor, but also part of the elevation of the entire house as a front. The upper floor is not seen as a floor, but drawn into the tectonics of the house front by means of the windows. This makes the upper floor not only literally a kind of abstract art after all.
shrinks and sometimes grows. Here, Wonderland is characterised as the place where things grow and shrink at a gradual pace, and not by fits and starts, as they do in our world. The dream is of a space so continuous that directions mingle with one another and dimensionality becomes entirely weak. The reality is that the elevation and the outer wall cannot be reconciled with one another because they imply different orientations. The elevation can be a single, fluid movement, but the price that must be paid is the minimisation of the outer wall, which must nonetheless be designed. Or the outer wall can be weak, like those of the houses, but the consequence is that the elevation is then internalised and can no longer be observed.

Displacement (in the Burgerweeshuis) and colour (in the Moederhuis) are immaterial but without content. They are intensive quantities and not qualities. Wonderland is the intuition of pure space without extension and without dimensions, without directions, without high or low, without left or right, and so without symmetry, without up or down. Things grow and shrink there without an external scale, become purely dimensional – the power of proportion, of different proportions, is unchained. But the intensity, which in the form of unity of scale (and thus in the form of an egg, essentially) seems to escape observation because it precedes it, is defined as change. Displacement and colour evade observation in the form of change and, for this reason, cannot be assigned any meaning.

either. As transcendental categories, they cannot have any content of their own – all they can do is rescue the tectonics.

Displacement and colour are not symbolic but imaginary in nature. They are not an image but a mirror of decline, crisis, architecture. Accordingly, in the Burgerweeshuis it is the window that is displaced, the mirror of inside and outside, and not any other element of the outer wall. And so the colour spectra in the Moederhuis are sometimes interrupted by mirrors or even, at the base of the bays, captured in a frame of mirrors. What a topsy-turvy world, in which instead of the mirror being contained in a frame, the frame becomes a mirror. Intensity is a mirror held up to the observer. ‘Space is the undergoing of space’, not the experiencing, observing, thinking or discussing of it. The discussing of what? The difficulty for the critic is that he or she, in his or her text, has no choice but to attach meaning to these elements, which throughout the building never wish to be substance, content. They do not wish to mean or to be meant and are not even intended to be observed. As a category of experience, the intensive quantity (‘space is the undergoing of space’) is passive in this case. The reality of the building can be enjoyed not by seeking but by finding, not by looking but by seeing. But the result is that what emerges from this source, the building itself in its extension, its dimensions, its materials and its completeness as a work of art has no other meaning or purpose than the sheer fact that it was built. Tautology, cycle, identity. It is always this same concept that is brought to the fore and makes the architect’s spoken comments sound like a constantly repeated manifesto.

In a sense, it would be impossible to arrive at this concept without the existence of another series in his oeuvre, one which does not found building on thinking in terms of non-tectonic cleverness, but founds thinking on the act of building. Because the cleverness of the architect is then no more than a special case, it makes sense that the latter series – that of building that provides a foundation for thinking – is an earlier, older current in Van Eyck’s oeuvre. And perhaps both series could be examined as changes of direction within the chronology of the oeuvre, as the alternation of constructive and deconstructive signs. This is similar to what Theodor Adorno found in the work of Arnold Schönberg, the ‘dialectical composer’ who changed direction completely in each new work. Building is also repetition and Aldo van Eyck’s houses, above all, seem to have been conceived as time machines, machines à oublier. It thus seems plausible that thinking, thinking based on living in these houses, will be done in terms of an open or free difference, an unleashing of concepts that are potentially just as unbridled as the elevation hosted in their interior, but without being analogous to it, precisely because that thinking is directed out of the interior and into the world, like a kind of orthogonal. At least, the two staircases in the house in Amsterdam that Van Eyck built with Jan Rietveld can be

Aldo van Eyck, expansion of Martin Visser House, Eikendreef, Bergeyk, 1956; floor plan

Aldo van Eyck, expansion of Martin Visser House, 1967-1969; floor plan

Gerrit Rietveld, Martin Visser House, Eikendreef, Bergeyk, 1956; floor plan


11 Many of Aldo van Eyck’s pronouncements and those of his admirers are doctrines and recurring formulations of what Evert van Uttert has called ‘faith in modern Art’ (in Het geloof in de moderne Kunst, Meulenhoff/Landschoff, 1987). They serve to shield the works from misuse by non-believers. It is thus understandable that in the structure of his aesthetic system, uninterested observation is given priority over interested observation, or at least, it is assumed that even the interested variety can be understood and described in terms of lived experience. That is the approach consistently taken by Herman Herzberger: a report of actual visits and actual observations, which are therefore always in the past tense. Despite the suggestion of a Kantian definition of beauty as disinterested pleasure, the only thing this seems to underscore is the importance of this architectural and its aesthetic system. Herman Herzberger’s final assessment, however, does not have the character of lived experience at all, but of established causality: ‘a question of the correct measurements’ (Herzberger, ‘Het twintigste-eeuwse mechanisme’, op. cit. note 8, 23). But the measurements are always correct if they are measured, and if they are experienced they are equally correct, though only within this aesthetic system. What is more, observation is no longer an adequate response to the metrical feeling, and there is a tension, a quality of intensity, between the observed and the felt measure: ‘The intriguing thing is not the shift of accent in itself, but the tension that exists between the accent you expect and feel in your mind and the accent you actually hear’ (ibid., 21). A question of metrics and rhythm. The shift of accent is seen not as a complex repetition but as a foundational difference. The observed is observed in a field
interpreted this way, for instance. The inner staircase is part of the unbridled elevation, and seen from outside, through the openwork glass outer wall of the middle quadrant of the floor plan, it looks like something mobile, some kind of furniture, something abstract – lines – and thus seems to float, while the outer staircase, in contrast, flings itself out casually like an orthogonal around the omitted quadrants of the house (which is actually square), without having much impact on the outer walls, which are so weak as to remind one of Hein Salomon. In the front view, the landing of the outer staircase seems continuous with that of the inner staircase, which is barely or not at all visible. The result is that where the actual elevation of the inner staircase is apparent in the outer wall, it seems to be part of the outer route.

SCREEN

It is not always the case that the elements indicating the outside can be drawn so closely around the house, like a virtual outer wall. Or rather, sometimes the surroundings are so patently present that it is impossible to create a conceptual exterior. In such cases, there are two ways in which the house screens itself off. In the design for Saint Paul de Vence, this is achieved by reversing the plan, by turning the house inside-out, and at the house in Bergeyck there is an actual screen, in which the wall entirely coincides with the textile sign. Both approaches arise from the nature of the project. The hilly terrain of Saint Paul de Vence tucks the house so thoroughly into the folds of the landscape that the building cannot, in addition, veil itself in its own drapery. Aldo van Eyck consistently avoids a rhyme that would imply a difference in scale. If the elevation of the outer wall has a stacked structure, the floors of the house cannot be stacked. If the landscape has rolling hills, the outer wall is toothed – though in this case, there is another difficulty, namely that the slopes complicate thinking about building in terms of height and elevation. This is why the house is turned inside-out. The weak spiral in the centre of the house erases the centre of the composition, brackets it away, and thus makes possible the fragmentary volumetry of the rectangular composition on the outside – which height and elevation, despite their geometry, cannot formulate. This volumetry is somewhat reminiscent of Theo van Doesburg and Cornelis van Eesteren’s 1923 Maison d’artiste.

While the rectangles are rectangular because they are on the slope, the spiral is spiral-shaped – expansive – because it is at the centre of the house, and not on a slope. But because the centre of the house has more to do with an artificial height, with the elevation of the staircase and the upper level, than with a natural height – or, rather, a height that would serve as a natural sign – the sign of the spiral remains powerless. However, a difference is created that motivates the small, circular motifs in the floor plan between the rectangular vol-umes and the spiral shape. In terms of their shape, they are halfway between the geometry of the exterior and the uncertain curve in the centre. As an intermediate form, however, they are too inchoate to support the elevation. The result of the idea that the house is toothed where it faces the slope – while the slope folds towards the house and the house folds into its own centre, with the spiral emerging like a tooth from the large fold in the centre – is that everything seems to grow but nothing stands. If the house folds in on itself, the result is that the rooms will have to protrude outward. Outward, not upward. In a sense, the house on the hill requires a horizontal sequence. The sequence of square, circle and oval is too well-tempered and, at the same time, too complicated for the sign of the spiral to mean much. If the house had been built, it would undoubtedly have looked quite different.

Even so, the function of a simple graphic form of this kind will always be the same, whether the wall is a sign or there is writing on the wall. The point is always to make space tectonic by a method that is so minimal, so simple, that where it is unsuccessful the method itself appears to be a potential expansion of the repertoire (and it does not work because the method is so minimal; the application of it is minimalistic precisely because it is not an architectural method). However, it does not make an appearance unless the topographic possibilities have been exhausted, as a kind of second choice. The working method thus does not involve any investigation of how this means of expanding one’s repertoire could actually be used more than once – in multiple projects, for instance.

Graphics defines architecture differently every time as a transcendental category, but always defines it systematically as a field of tectonic dissociations or, more precisely, as a field of dissociations of tectonic modes and of construction, in which the building is always identical. And also because the building is always identical, always the same, always ‘a house’. The house in Bergeyck may be the best illustration of this line of thought, precisely because the graphic method is applied as an addition to an existing house designed by a different architect, of which it was necessary to have an open the fragmentary volumetry of the interior.

Bergeyck was in fact one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful, of Gerrit Rietveld’s houses, the sloppiest zigzag he ever made. The rudimentary butterfly floor gives the central place to a living room that is not really a room at all, but an entrance hall, where home life retains something of its potential festivity, its public character. It may be the finest example of this somewhat bourgeois aspect of the programme for the Dutch post-war genre of the small country house. This entrance hall had just one wall, the rear wall, along with a fireplace and side entrances. It was a stage on which everything became mobile, a repousoir, part of the scenery, where the depth and shallowness of the room brought into theatrical relief the play of the actors entering and exiting, stage left and
stage right, whose conversation there could for the last time be considered a form of art, before the dark audience of silent and applauding trees. Was it necessary for this of all houses to be tectonised? Gussied up? Aldo van Eyck’s addition looks like a butterfly net. ‘Counterpoint’, Herman Herzberger calls it.

I would like to quote Herman Herzberger’s elegant analysis of this design at greater length here, because it shows so clearly what is going on: ‘Although it was not a true Rietveld house, it was still a house by Rietveld, not so very tense, and not really relaxed either, but there was not a great deal of space, especially not for paintings and sculptures. We can only imagine the moral and ethical dimensions of the decision to extend this of all houses, but Van Eyck’s masterstroke here dispels all doubt in a single gesture. The circular curve of the wall is placed so that in a single motion it gathers within its rondure the entire, somewhat indistinct openness of the ‘garden wall’ together with the opposing world. Between the two components, the new and the old, new areas emerge on the outside and new rooms on the inside. The unclear patio takes form, the undefined, blunt corner suddenly has meaning, and the rectangular system of the existing living room is reinforced by a continuation of it. We see that the house was really only a torso, which now has a head. Van Eyck completed Rietveld’s house, exposing its weakness and at the same time transforming it into a strength as a component of a new whole, just as a good answer can lend meaning to a trivial
question. . . . Aldo van Eyck’s respect for Rietveld would have been clear enough by now, even without this house, but here we find new confirmation of it. To doubt it, you would have to lack all sense of proportion. What architect other than Van Eyck could have come up with such a solution in a place like this? I can only think of one: Rietveld himself!12

Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that the description of Gerrit Rietveld’s house abounds in pejorative terms – ‘doubt’, ‘indistinct’, ‘unclear’, ‘undefined’, ‘weakness’, ‘trivial’ – while Aldo van Eyck’s addition is referred to as ‘a single gesture’, a ‘masterstroke’, ‘a single motion’, an ‘answer’, a ‘solution’, but in fact described solely as the ‘opposing world’. I would be more inclined to describe the addition as a problematisation of the existing house than as a solution to a problem. Herman Herzberger chiefly describes what the addition does to the existing house, in terms of ‘gathering’, ‘giving form’ and ‘meaning’, ‘reinforcing’ and ‘completing’, ‘transforming into strength’, ‘lending meaning’ and ‘solving’. Tectonics is reintroduced through a single gesture that is not itself examined in tectonic terms. What is suppressed is the view, the elevation, of the addition itself, which is sketched only as an interior, as a ‘world’ and as a ‘component’ – as an egg, in fact – and not as a view, an elevation, something that can be independently examined. Ultimately, the circular form is described as a ‘screen’ and a ‘moderate square’ – in other words as a weak, geometrically unsound square without a centre – but only from the inside. Herman Herzberger’s description keeps a secret, not on the inside but on the outside, that the architects of this complex are said to share: some reason that no other architect than the two who built it could have thought of this solution.13

RÉTIE
This is the secret that is ultimately revealed, as it were, in the house in Rétie, as content without form. The woods, the actual outdoor space, is fractional to the highest possible degree, so that the edge of the woods, the outer wall, is infinite. The screen has become unlimited and infinite, so that the border, the limes, has to be repeated in the elevation of the house and its echoes. With an overabundance of types of bayonet reflection that dissect the rooms by decentring and shifting them, the floor plan looks more like a mathematical model, a diagram, a blueprint, than a composition kept in balance by the difference in scale between the inside and outside, or between small and large. In fact, the house understands only proportion and not scale. This is because the relationship with its surroundings is conceived in terms of materials and fractality, rather than surface or space.

The forest is incorporated into the house in material form – in the form of the wood of which the house is made. It therefore does not have to be incorporated into the house in a spatial sense: it is reflected as an enclosure, a palisade, an outer wall, sometimes vertical, sometimes horizontal, as a dividing line and a screen, but also, in fact, as a movement, a series of material elements. The forest is what is located outside the complex; the wood is a parergon, a frame. From the forest it looks like a wooden house. From the house the wood looks like a forest. The wood, the frame, the dividing line, the elevation – they do not separate the inside from the outside but are both inside and outside, or rather, alternately inside and outside depending on the mindset. The wood, the frame, is ambiguous. The elevation is the domain of difference, not of form. Seen from the frame, the difference between what is inside and outside the frame is arbitrary, but this establishes the difference in content. Or, in the architect’s words, the wood makes it possible, within the house, for the difference in form between inner rooms and outer spaces to become so small that only their ‘content’ still counts as a distinction.14

Inside and outside are seen as a thought, a possible concept – or, better said, a condition of possibility for all possible concepts – for a nearly unbridled art of conversation. It would be wrong for us to suppose that the minimisation of the distinction between interior and exterior spaces could, in this case, be based on a lack of difference, a similarity, instead of an intensive quantity. Ultimately, the event that makes the central issue in this house is that when two things resemble each other their content must differ – precisely because they contain a shift, because they are not located in the same place, because they disguise themselves, diverge, decrease. Only by speaking explicitly of content does the artist avoid a situation in which the only difference is natural – for instance, the difference between the indoor climate and the weather, which would emerge from comparison and the experience of which would, after all, not be the primary topic of conversation for the inhabitants of the house. These people do not talk about the weather.

Difference must become open, free – that is one way of summarising the aesthetic programme of this house, of this complex repetition. The aesthetic system finds its sublime moment in the endless fractal boundary, yet in its intensive quality it presents the possibility of informal understanding, of content without form, of smile without cat. Living in Rétie, in Wonderland, is a smile without a cat.

Translated by David McKay

13 ‘Obwohl Rietveld dieses Haus selbst kaum schatete Rietveld-Haus’, Aldo van Eyck, in Dortmund Architektur ausstellung 1978, Dortmund Architekturhefte no. 3, Prof. Josef Paul Kleihues/Abt. Bauwesen der Universität Dortmund, Dortmund, 1976. The sentence is altered in the errata: ‘Obwohl Rietveld dies nicht das beste Rietveld-Haus ist, ist es dennoch ein Rietveld-Haus’ (‘Although this is not the best Rietveld house, it is a Rietveld house all the same’). Apparently, Rietveld believed that, after all, this was not the worst of his houses, or he was thought to have believed that.
14 Ibid., ‘bei . . . Verminderung der formaten Unterschiede . . . inhaltliche Unterschiede hervorheben’ (because the size of the difference is reduced, difference in content is emphasised).