

Joost Meuwissen

# ALDO IN WONDER- LAND

Remarks on  
the Houses of  
Aldo van Eyck

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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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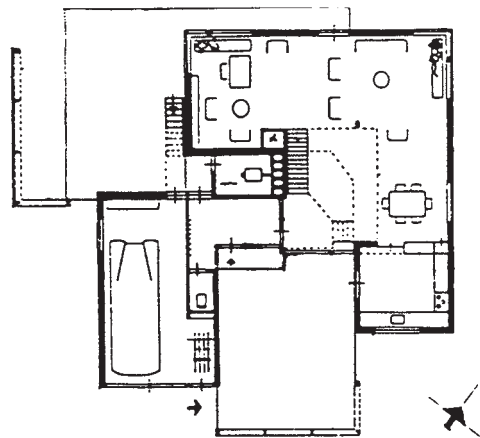
The reception history of Aldo van Eyck's works is still too short for us to take any distance from it. For that reason, not much attention is paid here to the secondary literature of prior interpretations, despite the frictions between the hagiographic (Herzberger), empathetic (Strauven) and critical (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

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!'<sup>2</sup> 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

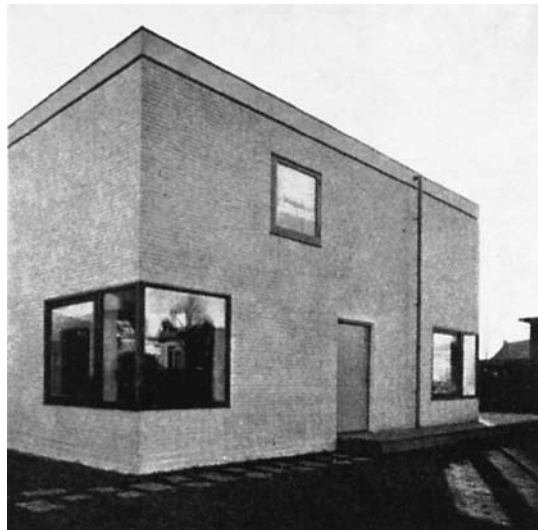
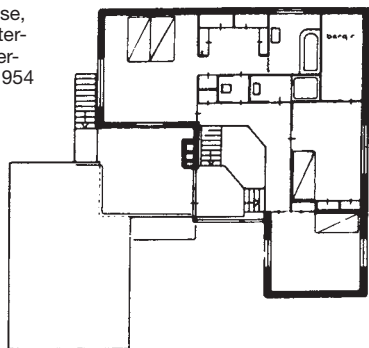
Deleuzian categories are used here not in an applied manner but in a reconstructive one. If my approach must have a name, therefore, reconstructionism seems most suitable.

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Jan Rietveld and Aldo van Eyck, 'Huis aan de Herman Gorterstraat te Amsterdam', *Forum*, 1956, 118, 119.



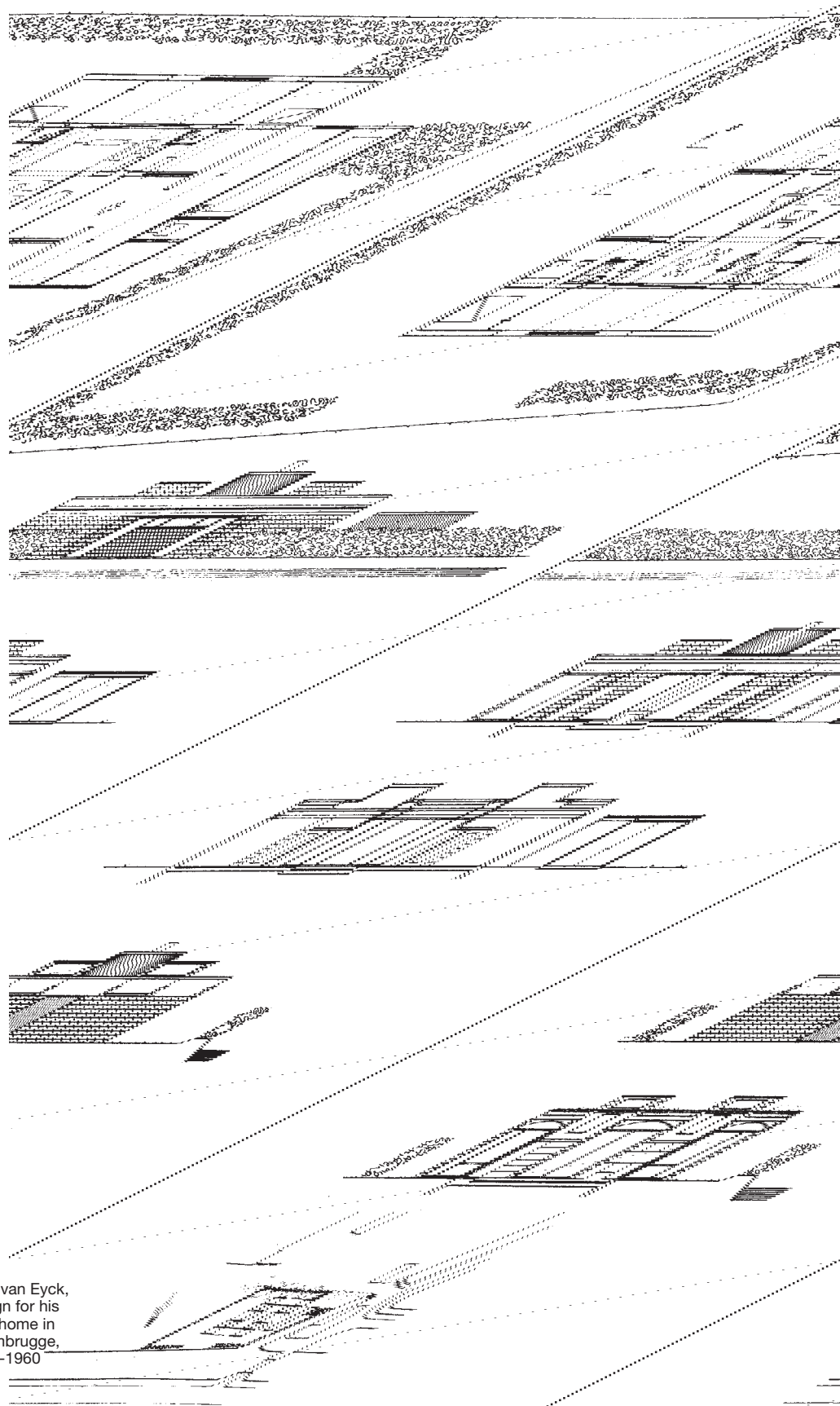
Jan Rietveld and Aldo van Eyck, floor plan of the Damme House, Herman Gorterstraat, Amsterdam, 1951-1954



Jan Rietveld and Aldo van Eyck, Damme House, Herman Gorterstraat, Amsterdam, 1951-1954



Jan Rietveld and Aldo van Eyck, Damme House, Herman Gorterstraat, Amsterdam, 1951-1954



Aldo van Eyck,  
design for his  
own home in  
Baambrugge,  
1958-1960

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 larger 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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

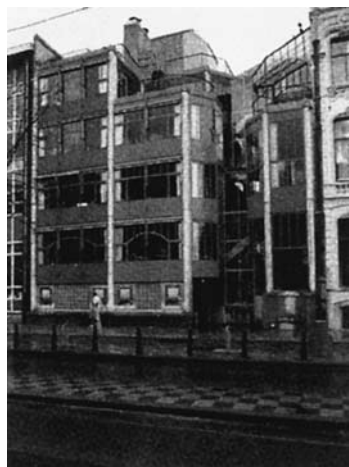
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In a recent exchange with Jan de Heer, Johan van de Beek refers to the self-contained compositional quality of these buildings, which have a component structure but whose components never become a model of an infinite structure: 'Een ingezonden brief naar aanleiding van het centrumloze labyrint: Gerrit Rietveld en de stedsbouw', *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, 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.

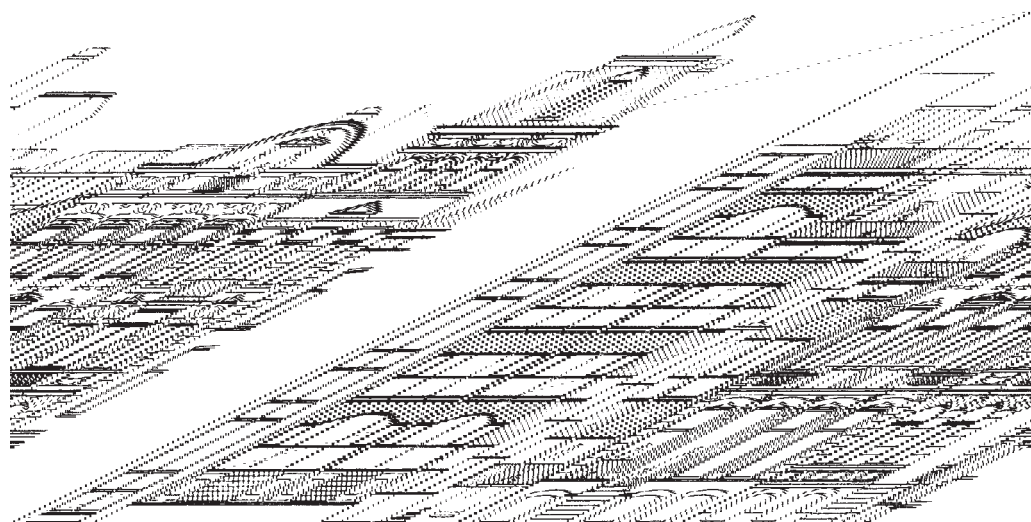
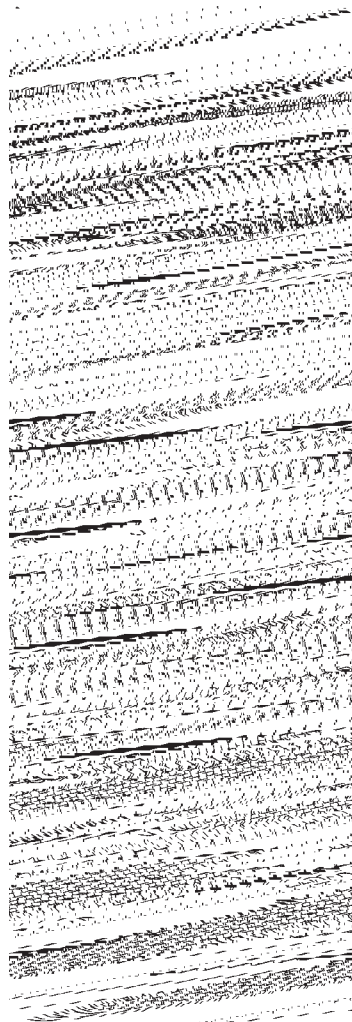
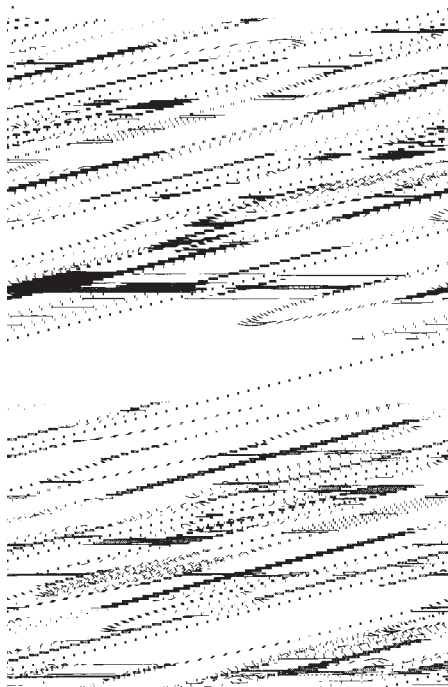
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Jurgen van Staaden makes a telling observation about this issue in 'Het ontbreken van het plein', *6-nieuws*, 1976-1977, 713-715.





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

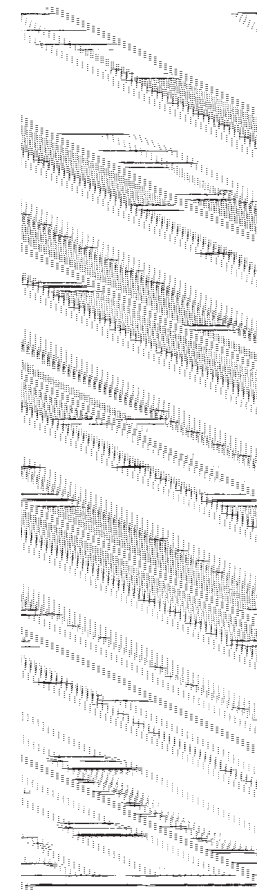


Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, Amsterdam, 1973-1978

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



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

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.<sup>6</sup> Even in the house in Rétié, 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, the houses seem 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.

'House on the water with four towers' is the phrase used to describe the Baambrugge design.<sup>7</sup> Why four? Why not one, as in the houses in Amsterdam and Venlo, or many, as in Rétié? 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 it suggests 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

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Their centre is a horizontal or vertical decentring, a shift, a change, around which the rooms are not grouped but reflected, while in the larger projects the elements of the floor plan are clustered together relative to the centre, which however is too empty to hold them in place. See note 4: More acentric than polycentric. In the Loosduinen church, the actual centre is the drainage channel that ceases to exist somewhere in front of the front door. In fact, this is another decentring and shift, but not a change, except in the material used, namely water, in which the church is reflected naturally but not architecturally. Or at least, the relationship between the church as a grouping and this centre is structural, possibly even symbolic, but not, as I see it, in the nature of a mirroring. Unfortunately, further analysis of this point would take us far beyond the scope and topic of this article.

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'Four two-storey towers each give access to four independent quarters. Inbetween, covered outdoor living spaces enclosed within the perimeter of the house . . . Recurrent motif in most subsequent projects', Aldo van Eyck, 'In Search of Labyrinthian Clarity', *l'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 177, 1975, 15.

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 outer wall. This is unlike the houses.

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, a parergon: that which 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 outer walls of the houses serves merely as a transparent or flimsy 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 Rétié, there is a world of difference between the strong, even classical, Palladian, foundation-tectonic physiognomy 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 Rétié 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 windows would make it an extended architrave or frame with an unacceptably weak, textile-like appearance. The pattern of windows would dominate and somewhat detract from the tectonics of the substructure. Finally, the windows would merge with the dome in an excessively three-dimensional way. The rightmost of the three windows on the upper floor is therefore displaced out of its plane and incorporated between the planes and above the column as a tectonic moment in the elevation of the outer wall over the two floors. Not the plane of the house front for the upper floor as a whole, but only this window is incorporated into the vertical development of the front elevation. This makes the upper floor not only literally but also figuratively asymmetrical. A conceptual difference is also imposed onto the windows: part of the fabric of the upper floor, but also part of the elevation of the entire house front. The upper floor is not seen as a floor, but drawn into the tectonics of the house front by means of the windows. Although the swastika floor plans on both levels offer every reason for such a solution – with Van Eyck's game of bottom corner open, top corner closed – still, you cannot deny that, even from a diagonal perspective, the house front is created through a completely unambiguous shift, a graphic trick which in itself is entirely pointless and has little to do with architecture, but does dominate the view.<sup>8</sup>

The same thing applies to the two left-hand bays – extending onto the upper level – for which the principle of giving every window a face becomes very difficult to maintain on every level. Each bay has a single colour of its own from top to bottom, creating vertical bands of colour that negate the

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The fractal exuberance of the wall line in the floor plan of the Burgerweeshuis could also be seen as an attempt to make the outer wall visible from within – an attempt that clearly is never entirely successful, not until the house in Rétié. In addition to this minimisation of the outside of the outer wall and the nominal minimisation that results from the inclusion of the outer wall as material in the elevation, of which it can then only form the base, there is a third minimisation, which we could describe as open. This minimisation attempts to remove the outer wall from view in order to give direction to the movement. Eyes and feet are directed elsewhere, and so the only remaining impression of the outer wall is as a screen. In the Burgerweeshuis it is the horizontal movement, as a result of which the glazing bars around the courtyard enter into a geometrical relationship but are equal in width, because people and their gazes move horizontally rather than vertically. In the Moederhuis it is the vertical movement, 'the distribution of windows on the street side, which distracts you from the houses across the street and leads you (without compelling you) to gaze involuntarily at what is going on in the street below', Herman Herzberger, 'Het twintigste-eeuwse mechanisme en de architectuur van Aldo van Eyck', in *Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, Hubertus house* (Amsterdam, 1982), 23. The architecture does its job without compulsion and involuntarily, but it does get the job done. In *Architectuur als oude wetenschap* (Amsterdam, 1988), 170 (the relevant chapter had been previously published in *Plan* 1982, no. 7-8) I asked whether the distance between the nominal concept of the observed outer wall and the free concept of involuntary observation as experience has not become too great in this case and in fact comes at the expense of the architecture: 'That the buildings, in other words, are not appreciated in terms of the ideas involved in their design, but experienced in a "different" way . . . An architecture that was about architecture would evoke an experience about ex-

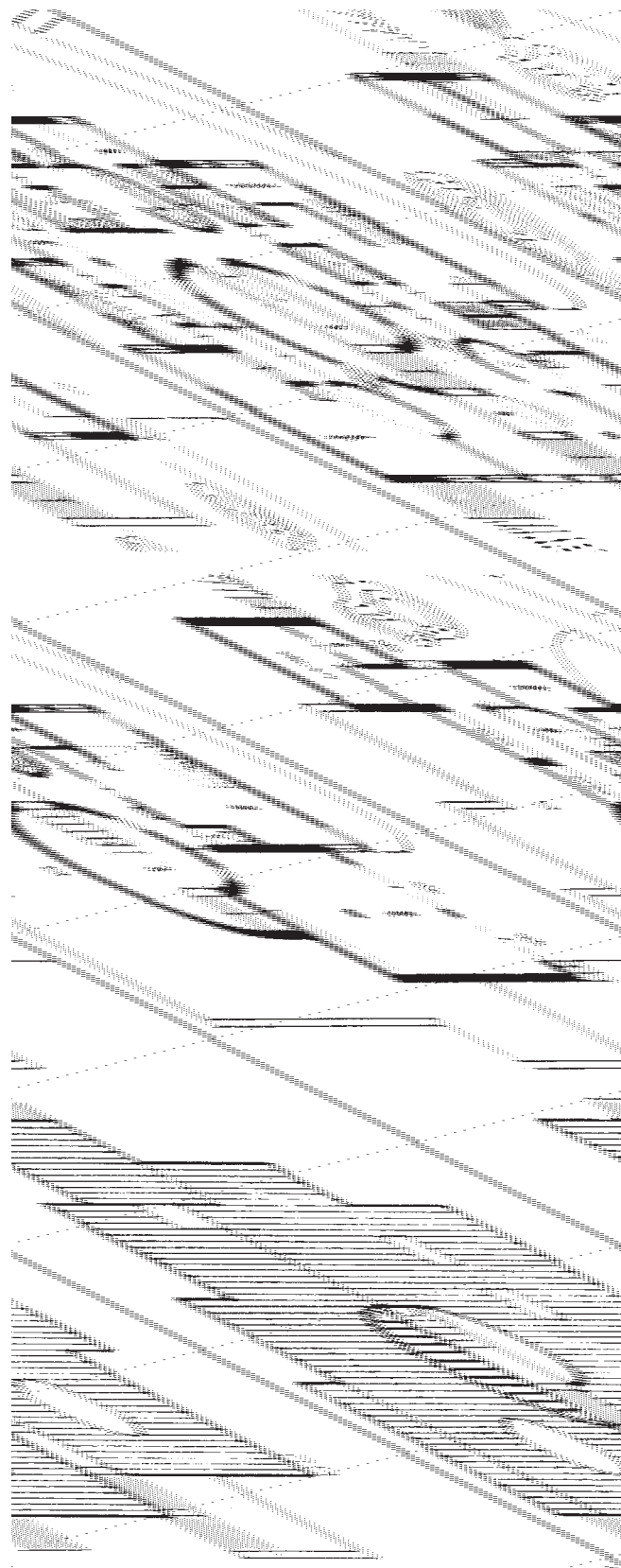
entire concept of stacked floors. The height of the building is involved in the tectonics of the outer wall not as height, but as colour. The simple graphic technique – colour – is not the larger-scale element intended to bring together multiple levels in one colossal order. On the contrary, the bays differ in height. Colour is not a concept relating to scale, but a transcendental category that links the texture of the upper levels to building as an elevation, as an act.

But the difficulty is that just like the displaced window at the Burgerweeshuis, this imaginative trick also dominates the outer wall. The train of thought proceeds in the wrong direction. The non-tectonic element – unambiguous horizontal shifting, colour as surface – is brought into the building process as a last resort available only once, as an element which makes it possible to continue building. It serves as the representation or concept of the possibility of building, instead of building itself serving as the condition of possibility for this concept, this term, for colour, graphics, celebration. As if the party tent was the point of the party. Because the architect cannot give shape to any upper levels, they are covered up and represented by an element that cannot give shape to any upper levels either, but can act as tectonic writing on the wall. The problem is that the textile-like writing is the condition of possibility for the wall on which it is written. That is why in these larger projects the writing also has to play the role of the wall. In the houses, in contrast, the outer wall does not have this function, because it does not have to be seen from outside, unless by a thief or an architecture critic. The textile-like quality we find in the larger projects defines building as a graphic sign, a kind of writing; in the houses, the act of building is instead a condition of possibility for their textility, for the thinking, for the curtains, the house front, for the freedom of difference and the development of ideas. While in the larger projects the idea of building is sought in the identity of the building as 'house', in the houses this idea is stripped of any form or design, to be enjoyed, as it were, as informal, liberated content.

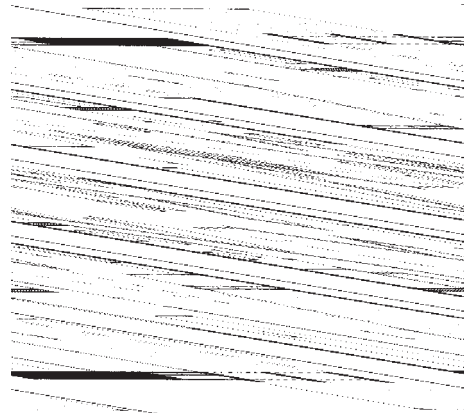
## WONDERLAND

In the Burgerweeshuis, the window shifts across the wall in a tapestry-like pattern, without a great deal of top and bottom, and then becomes a one-off sign, a single gesture, that rescues the top and bottom of the building's tectonics. Likewise, in the Moederhuis, the spectral colour pattern of the vertical series of tiles that straddles the columns is expressed in two series, one ascending and the other descending. This creates a kind of woven thread pattern, giving the different but uniformly coloured groups of windows in each bay the appearance of a tectonic plane. It is in relation to this building that the architect emphasises unity of scale: 'Between the largest room and the smallest . . . the intensity changes but not the scale . . . because it is only Alice who sometimes

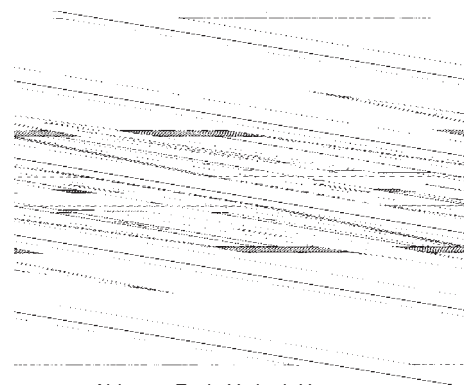
perience'. The result, after all, is that the idea is concealed. Herzberger (see above, page 23) is undoubtedly right to claim that Aldo van Eyck's buildings do not aim to change people's behaviour but rather 'to give people richer opportunities to determine their own attitudes towards one another at all times'. But the problem is that one's attitude towards things disappears from view, not only in involuntary observation but also in the minimal aesthetic system of this architecture. In this respect, of course, the architecture of Aldo van Eyck is a kind of abstract art after all.



Aldo van Eyck design for R. van Eyck House in Saint Paul de Vence (France), 1968



- |                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. entrance    | 5. bathroom      |
| 2. living room | 6. loggia        |
| 3. kitchen     | 7. storage space |
| 4. bedroom     |                  |



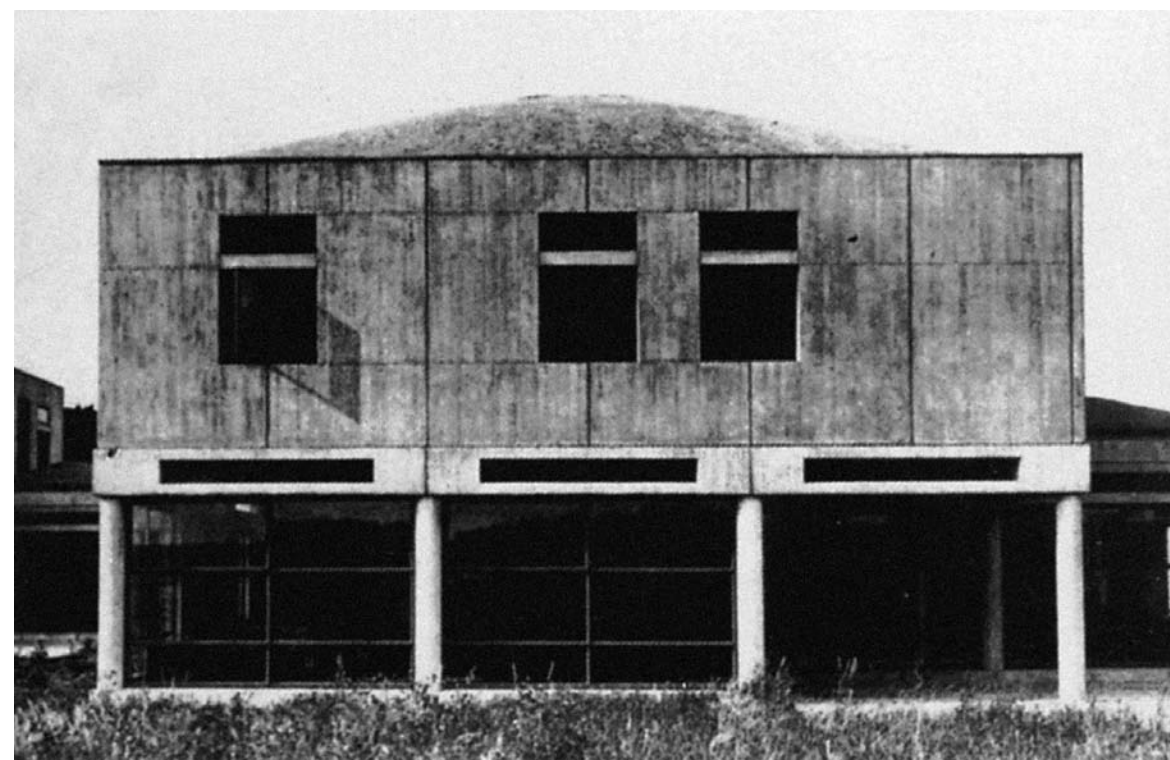
Aldo van Eyck, Verkerk House, Herungerweg, Venlo, 1967-1970



shrinks and sometimes grows.’<sup>9</sup> 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

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Aldo van Eyck, ‘De bouw van een huis’, in: *Aldo van Eyck, Hubertushuis, Hubertus house*, op. cit. (note 8), 84.

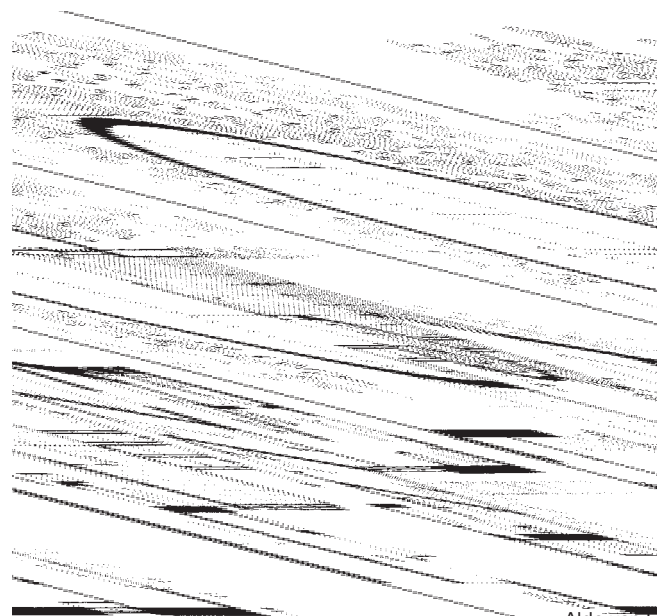
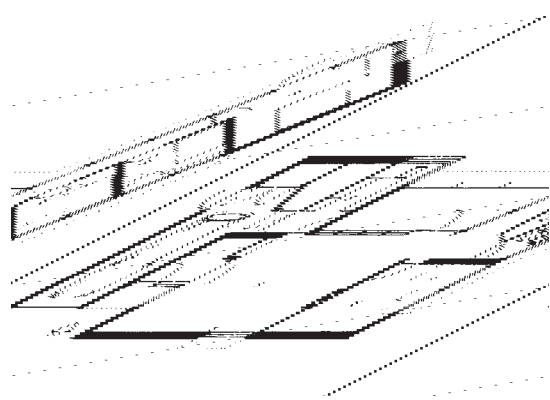


Aldo van Eyck, Burgerweeshuis, Amsterdam, southern wall of one of the wards for older children





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



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



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',<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 analogical 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

10  
Aldo van Eyck, 'Inleiding tot de Loos tentoonstelling op de afdeling Bouwkunde, bij de opening woensdag 17 maart 1965 uitgesproken', *Delftse School* 12, 1965, 269-273.

11  
Many of Aldo van Eyck's pronouncements and those of his admirers are doctrines and recurring formulations of what Evert van Uiterd has called 'faith in modern Art' (in *Het geloof in de moderne Kunst*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 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 architecture 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 Salomonson. 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 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 tectonic 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, as different types 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 opinion.

Bergeyck was in fact one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful, of Gerrit Rietveld's houses, the sloppiest zig-zag 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 execution 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 *repoussoir*, 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

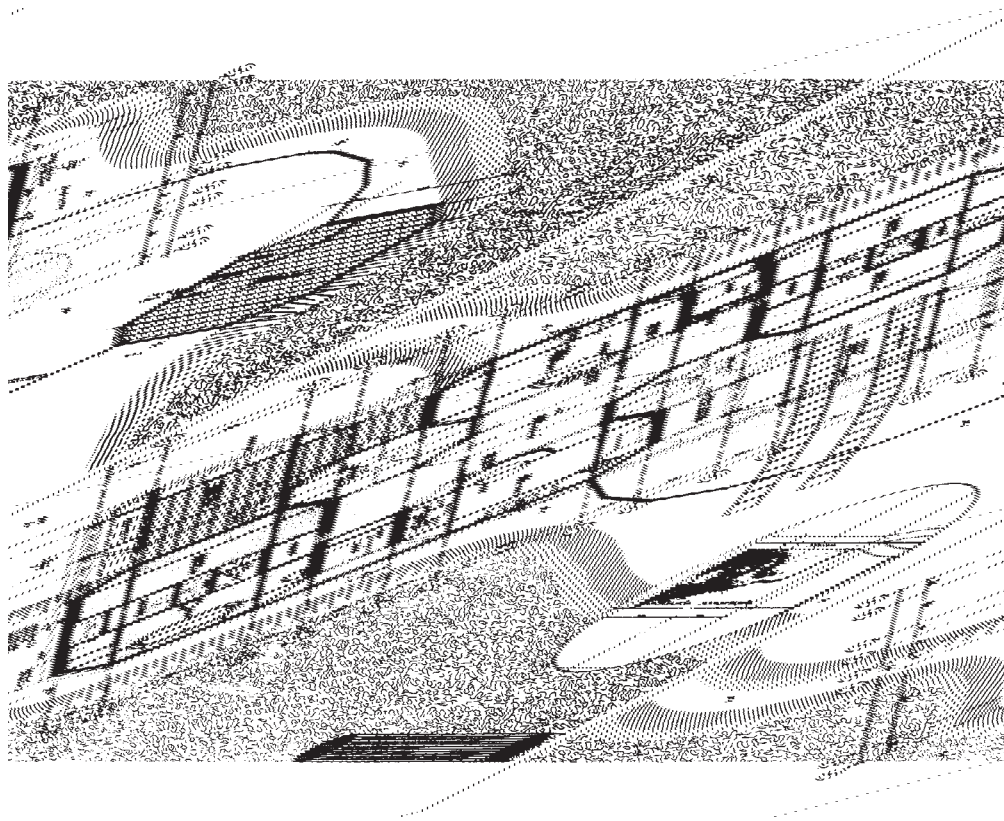
of expectations. Nevertheless, Herman Herzberger's interpretation is closer than that of any other commentator to the core, the deep obstacle, in Aldo van Eyck's aesthetic system, namely that repetition, the repetition of elevation, materials, large and small spaces, can be observed *hors système* only as an event, as an image in a dream, without any field in which it might take place, and within the system only as measure, as number, as a 'shift of accent in itself'. The concept of identity, having a single scale or at least an unchanging one, is compatible with the repetition but not with the idea of space that is free of concepts. Aldo van Eyck: 'The point is not space, but the interior of that space and the inner horizon (as my wife has called it . . .) of that interior (even if it is outside)' (Van Eyck, 'De bouw van een huis', op. cit. note 9, 80).

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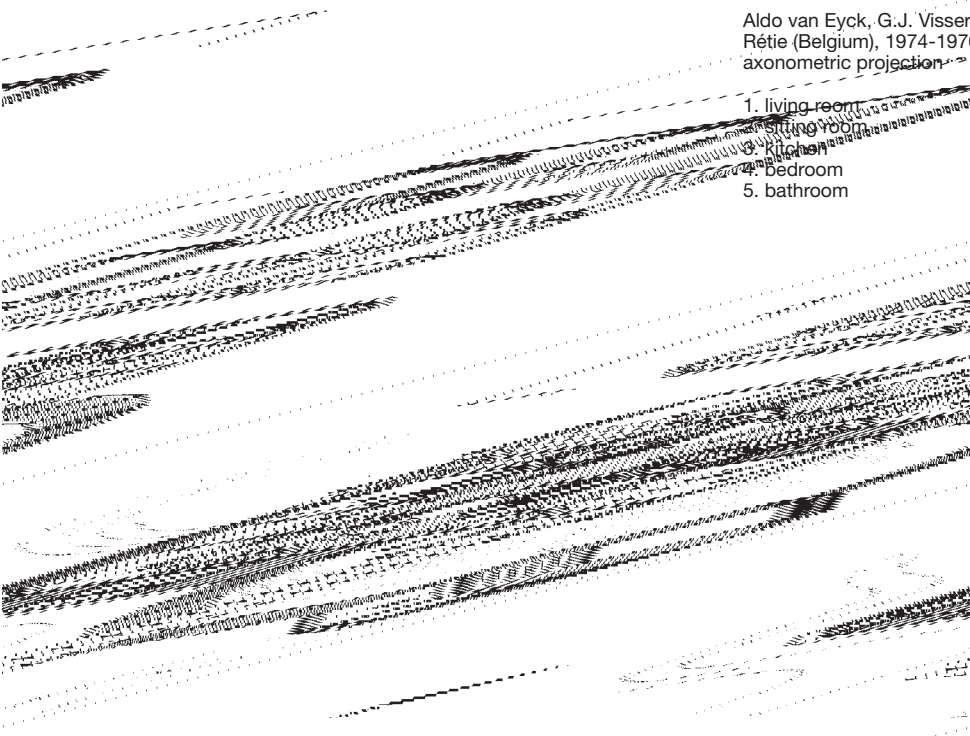
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Aldo van Eyck, G.J. Visser House, Rétié (Belgium), 1974-1976; plan and axonometric projection

- 1. living room
- 2. sitting room
- 3. kitchen
- 4. bedroom
- 5. bathroom



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



Aldo van Eyck, G.J. Visser House, Rétié (Belgium), 1974-1976



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!<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that the description of Gerrit Rietveld's house abounds in pejoratives – '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.<sup>13</sup>

## 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 fractal 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

12

Herzberger, 'Het twintigste-  
eeuwse mechanisme',  
op. cit. (note 8), 16-18.

13

'Obwohl Rietveld dieses  
Haus selbst kaum schätzte  
Rietveld-Haus', Aldo van  
Eyck, in *Dortmunder Architek-  
turausstellung 1978, Dortmunder  
Architekturhefte* no. 3, Prof.  
Josef Paul Kleihues/Abt.  
Bauwesen der Universität  
Dortmund, Dortmund, 1976.  
The sentence is altered in the  
errata: 'Obwohl 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'). Appar-  
ently, Rietveld believed that,  
after all, this was not the worst  
of his houses, or he was thought  
to have believed that.

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.<sup>14</sup>

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. Or in any event, the thesis that becomes 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, decentre. 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*

14

Ibid., 'bei . . . Verminderung  
der formaten Unterschiede . . .  
inhaltliche Unterschiede her-  
vorheben' (because the size of  
the difference is reduced, differ-  
ence in content is emphasised).