

JAN FREDERIK STAAL IN AMSTERDAM. THE PROJECT OF THE OPERA HOUSE AS RECONSTRUCTION OF URBAN SPACE IN THE MUSEUMPLEIN

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Resumo: Em 1925, o arquiteto holandês Jan Frederik Staal participou num concurso nacional para a construção da Ópera no Museumplein de Amsterdão. O projeto deveria representar os valores artísticos e culturais de toda a nação.

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar a relação entre a História do lugar e o projeto, identificando, nesse sentido, a continuidade entre o acontecimento do projeto e as razões da construção da cidade histórica. Na cidade histórica holandesa, é possível identificar os princípios que constituem as ferramentas essenciais para a compreensão do projeto do teatro enquanto fenômeno impactante no espaço. Neste sentido, o projeto mostra a forte tendência para a continuidade e consistência com a História e as características do país.

Palavras-chave: Memória; História; Espaços públicos; Identidade.

Abstract: In 1925, Dutch architect Jan Frederik Staal takes part to a national competition for the construction of an Opera House in the Museumplein in Amsterdam. The project should represent the artistic and cultural values of the entire nation.

The aim of this contribution is to investigate the relationship between the history of the place and the project, thus identifying a continuity between the happening of the project and the reasons of the construction of the historical city. In the Dutch historical city, it is therefore possible to identify the founding principles that make up the theoretical framework that is essential to the understanding of the happening of the project of the theater. In this sense, the project shows a strong tendency to move in continuity and consistency with the history and the features of the country.

Keywords: Memory; History; Public spaces; Identity.

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THE MUSEUMPLEIN. GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF A PLACE

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the area called Museumplein looks like an empty space, an urban vacuum, characterized by the presence of three monumental buildings the Rijksmuseum, the Concertgebouw and the Stedelijk Museum; the three buildings appear not to be coordinated between them within a unified plan.



Fig. 1.
Jacob Olie, The Museumplein, 13 april 1895.
Courtesy of Stadsarchief of Amsterdam

The area seems to have remained asleep, as anesthetized within the historical events that led to the “forma urbis” around the seventeenth-century walls in the last three decades of the nineteenth century¹ (Fig. 1). The growing urban development beyond the city walls after the second half of the nineteenth-century requires the proper handling of a phenomenon of urban growth that threatens to escape the control of the city authorities. The construction of the city around the walls in the late nineteenth-century respects in its ways and shapes the reasons of land occupation that characterize an established tradition of planning. The regularity of the expansion plan proposed and adopted in 1876 by the pragmatic Director of Public Works, J. Kalff, with the modular repetition of the court-type block, the “Dutch Baublock”, prefers the comforting certainties of the past to the bold experimentations of urbanist Jacobus Gerhardus van Niftrik. The city administration commissions the planner Jacobus Gerhardus van Niftrik with the presentation of an expansion plan to govern the chaotic growth of the city beyond the perimeter of the seventeenth-century walls. The 1866 plan (Fig.2) includes the construction of a large green belt with public parks, various connecting roads and crossings, mindful

¹ About the history of Museumplein see: VAN DER WERF, 1993; REPORT *et al.*, 2008; WAGENAAR, 2013.

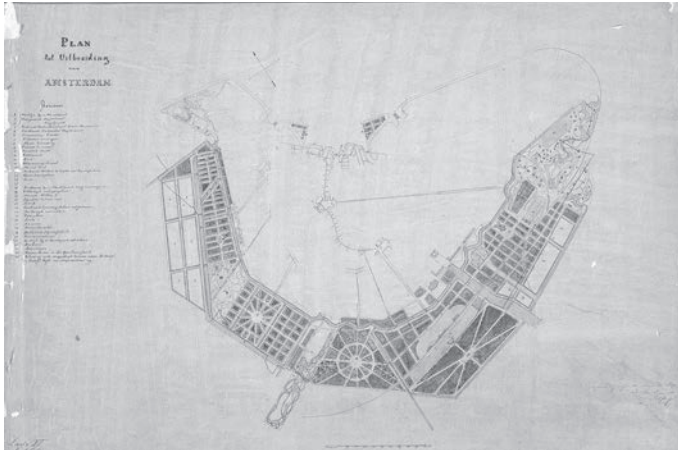


Fig. 2.
Gerhardus Jacobbus van
Niftrik, Development plan of
Amsterdam, 1866.
Courtesy of Stadsarchief of
Amsterdam



Fig. 3.
Jan Kalff, Development plan
of Amsterdam, 1875.
Courtesy of Stadsarchief of
Amsterdam

of the geometric plan of the French parks of the royal age such as the gardens at Versailles, at Le Notre or Haussmanian Boulevard. Designed as a scenic background of a wealthy middle-class neighborhood, *Plan tot Uitbreiding van Amsterdam* is too pretentious for the city administration that recognizes the unlikelihood of its realization in light of the inevitable expropriations, demolition of houses and subdivision of land, which appeared to be difficult to implement given the means of implementation available to the Municipality. J. Kalff's plan (Fig.3), a few years

later, is thus preferred to that of van Niftrik although in subsequent decades the idea of allocating the area near the walls to the residential neighborhood of the wealthy class of the city still lingers.

The decision that leads to prefer one plan to the other is not so obvious and trivial because the two projects are bearers of a different idea of city. The first plan, of urbanist Jacobus Gerhardus van Niftrik, refers to the open city model, the second, that of the Director of Public Works J. Kalff, to the closed city model. The latter is rooted in the idea of a city that has covered the whole history of the Western world. From the classical city, to the medieval town, until the city of the Renaissance, whose example continues until the nineteenth century city, the closed city model is characterized not so much by the presence of the walls as identifying element, certainly an important but not decisive one, but, as Antonio Monestiroli claims, by “the fact of defining urban places exclusively as internal places (the street, the square) in total separation from the natural environment”².

All this is evident in the expansion plan of the area around the walls proposed by the Director of Public Works Jan Kalff. This model meets the expectations of the municipal administration in such a way that its formal validity will be preferred and adopted in the planning acts of other parts of the city of Amsterdam in the following decades, showing a strong tendency to move in continuity and consistency with the history and the distinctive characters of the country³.

The model of the closed city appears to be the result of a construction process of urban form that passes through the recognition of the unchanged fundamental elements of the city: the road layouts and building type (blocks) assembled into an organic and living whole. As a matter of fact, in the closed city (classical, medieval, of the Renaissance) a close relationship of reciprocity between the building fabric (block) and arrangement of road layouts (plan) remains as the exclusive fact in a unified whole, that appears not only the result of a regulatory system of functional value or the result of a careful composition of the practical aspects of real life, but the way of building the spatial structure of the city where the aesthetic values are fully enhanced, thus fulfilling the project of the city designed as a place of representation and place of custody of the values of the community.

Alternative to the model of the closed city proposed by Jan Kalff is the model of the open city proposed by Niftrik. This model invites you to think about a new urban form, which is fully realized in the relationship between nature and city. The urban block is no longer recognizable as the primary part of the city, the road

² Monestiroli, 1997: 10.

³ About the planning acts of other parts of the city of Amsterdam see FANELLI, 1968; CASCIATO *et al.*, 1980.

network is no longer the system that generates urban form. On the contrary, the latter is defined in the close relationship that the urban events establish with the surrounding nature.

Niftrik therefore proposes an experimental model of alternative city to the closed city, where urban elements and the natural environment are related in a continuous and mutual relationship and comparison. Such a model, not so much rooted in the collective memory, is too advanced compared to the expectations of the Dutch society, even if the search for such a model can already be found in the contemporary spatial planning culture (Physiocrats, Garden City) that emerges with the rise of the Industrial Revolution.

However, even Kalf's plan suggests leaving the decision on the area in front of the Singelgracht pending. Pending a definitive answer that will come only later, a vocational uncertainty and a sense of temporary functionality continue to persist in the area due to the presence of buildings of crafted industrial character whose presence strongly opposes the idea to allocate the area to upscale neighborhoods for the middle class.

The peculiar trapezoidal shape seems to be present from the beginning when, in 1866, the plan for the development of Amsterdam was presented by urbanist Jacobus Gerhardus van Niftrik. The Vondelpark, the Boererenwetering, the seventeenth-century bastions of the walls are the precise limits of an irregular area that opens out in the direction of the urban development that will later characterize the expansion of Amsterdam South.

The realization in temporal succession of the Rijksmuseum inaugurated in 1885, as a result of a competition won in 1876 by Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers, the Concertgebouw inaugurated in 1888 by architect Adolf Leonard van Gendt and the Stedelijk Museum, opened in 1895 based on the project of architect AW Weissman, a student of Adolf Leonard van Gendt, not coordinated by an arranged unity, will mark the beginning of the long season of research of a possible unity of a highly representative place of artistic and cultural values of a community for which a number of missed opportunities will follow one another in search of a vocation for the area now understood as a square, then as a park, then as a place for large public events. The competition for the Rijksmuseum formally ratifies the fate of the area that later would become the cultural center of the city with the construction of the Concertgebouw and the Stedelijk Museum, a symbol of national culture, thus denying the possibility of a saturation of the urban void with residential buildings, urban villas for the wealthy middle class. Projects for the arrangement of the area, included in a time span ranging from 1872 to 1891, put the city administration in a difficult and ambiguous position, forcing them to make a choice and to postpone or partially implement solutions that swing between two extreme positions. The

first one that aims to saturate the empty space with residential buildings, the second one that envisages conceiving the empty space as a large urban square. The proposal of architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers and J. Ankersmit, formerly commissioner of Public Works, for the arrangement of the land adjacent to the museum, the *Bebouwingsplan voor het museumterrein* of 1891, appears as the final outcome of a tiresome labor that directs the choice of the municipal administration towards a large central square solution. The proposal of architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers is the bearer of the ideals of a community: in it, you can recognize the seeds of a more general intention germ that considers the area not as the place of the simple definition of a functional program, but the place of representation of the values in which we recognize a community. The proposal of architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers will be implemented with some modifications the local authority only in 1902.

The Rijksmuseum built in 1885 by the architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers represents a major urban event within the area. Placed next to the walls it looks like an urban connecting door, hinged between the old town and the new expansion. The new museum, strongly attacked by critics after its inauguration, in fact, reflects the signs of the municipal administration, which requires the construction of a passage under the building as a natural continuation of Spiegelstraat towards the future expansion of the city.

The avenue designed by Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers as a structuring element of a unitary square culminates perpendicularly in respect of a monumental building that, had it been accepted by the administration, would have provided the opportunity to regularize the square into precise geometries and symmetries. In fact, the Concertgebouw opened in 1888 just before the presentation of the plan is placed in an isolated area, stranger to the compositional facts of the museum factory according to a visual axis rotated with respect to the main facade of the museum, which prevents an effective relationship. The location of the Concertgebouw is the result of the liberal choices of the time. Therefore its implementation is linked to private initiative of the rich middle class, which, for practical and economic reasons, mainly chooses to build the new temple of music in an area undoubtedly disadvantageous but relatively low cost.

The situation is bound to get complicated after the realization and decentralized location of the Stedelijk Museum, inaugurated in 1895. The triptych of monumental buildings built over a decade set the stage for the construction of a museum complex that is waiting to find a convincing formal solution and that knows how to represent its cultural value. The need to express the collective value of space by unifying the individual buildings within a general idea becomes ever more compelling and it becomes necessary to make clear this civic character through the forms of architecture.

In the first and second decade of the twentieth century, the big square finds its final form, beyond any further possibility to build, with the construction of residential building blocks that surround the urban void in the east. The vast square before being only a possibility drafted on paper in architect Petrus Josephus Hubertus Cuypers 's proposal is now conceived concretely in the urban context by closing a decade long debate about the urban form that should be allocated to that area which, from now on, will become the identifying blank and meaningful space of the Museumplein.

In 1928, it was now clear to everyone that it was inappropriate to achieve Staal's grand plan, which had finally been ditched by the criticism arisen immediately after the announcement to the public of the competing projects at the exhibition opened at the Stedelijk Museum between 14 and 27 February 1926. The formal fate of ' area will find a definitive answer much later, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the project of the Swedish landscape architect Sven Ingvar Andersson. The formal solution adopted⁴, reminiscent of green spaces of Dutch imagination, is the final act of a long story that had begun almost one hundred and fifty years before.

THE PROJECT OF THE STAAL OPERA HOUSE

The Museumplein seems to have reached a definitive form during the second decade of the twentieth century (Fig. 4). Finally, a long protracted affair seemed to have ended because it was no longer possible to imagine coming forward with alternative solutions to an urban place that had now preemptorily acquired in the

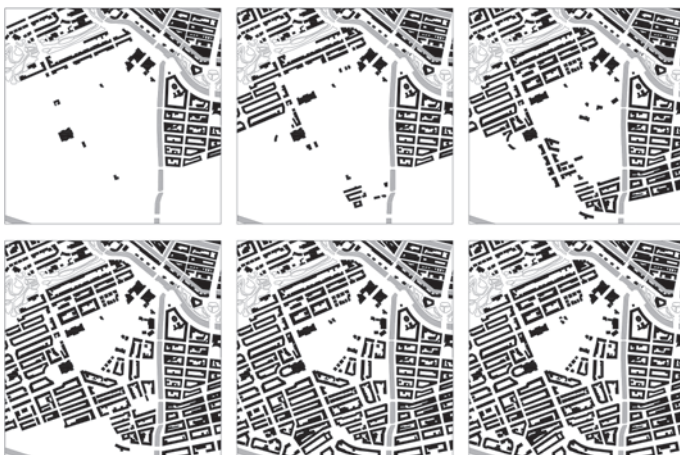


Fig. 4. The Museumplein, Development of the area from 1870 to 1940. From the work of Alessandro Dalla Caneva

⁴ About the Masterplan see ANDERSSON, 1993.

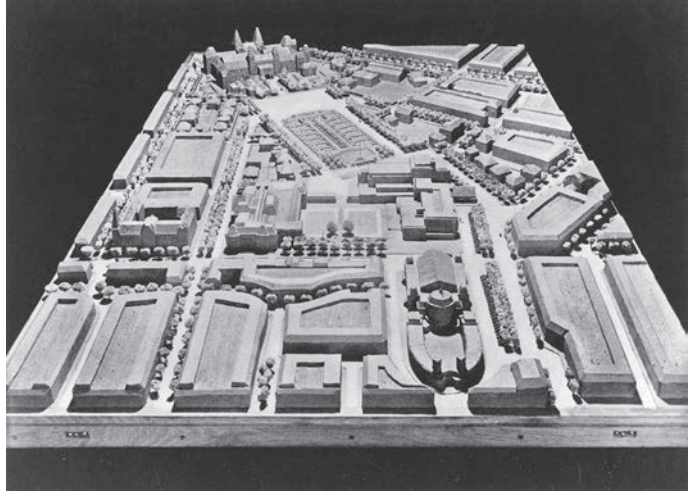


Fig. 5.
Jan Frederik Staal, Model of
the Theatre Project, 1928.
Courtesy of Stadsarchief of
Amsterdam

collective imagination its final form with the triptych of monumental buildings that were for it envisaged: the Rijksmuseum, the Stedelijk Museum, and the Concertgebouw.

The invitation from a society of music loving free citizens to present solutions through a competition for an Opera House in the Area of Museums in the first quarter of a century brought back once again a matter that seemed to be over. The Opera House, the fourth national monument within the Museumplein, proposed itself as an unexpected opportunity to revolutionize the public space of the square.

At the competition took part known architects of the Dutch architectural scene: C. J. Blaauw, Ir. J. Gratama, J. M. van der Mey, Ir. D. F. Slothower, J. F. Staal, H. Th. Wjdeveld⁵. The winner, architect Jan Frederik Staal⁶, proposes to the jury, which includes architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage, as president, J. F. Bunge, A. R. Hulshoff, M. v. Notten, P. Vorink, the solution regarded as the most appropriate (Fig. 5). In Staal's project, the urban space takes on a new dimension and unity, completely renovated in its form. It is evident in the formal solution adopted that the reasoning behind the winning project are the result of a choice that goes beyond the reasons of a strict functional program and are rather dictated by a more general desire to reconfigure the entire layout of the area. In fact, in response to a shared intention, which is the bearer of the civil values of a community, the project recognizes in the Museumplein the cultural artistic values of the entire nation. Staal's project is responsible therefore, of an ideal program that does not belong to him, but lives

⁵ About the competition see KROMHOUT *et al.* (1926); 73-78, 85-89, 97-104, 109-112.

⁶ About the work of Staal see: BAKX, 2013: 4-15; —, 2015; BOEKEN, 1940: 195-197; VAN DER STEUR, 1929: 1-36.

in the society that produces it. A program that seeks in every way to achieve and accomplish through shapes the aspirations and needs of monumentality expressed in the civil society.

The shape of the theater and the new squares that are clearly defined in shape, size and hierarchy by Staal's project are the result of a conception of architecture that manifests its social vocation in the creation of communal spaces. The civic character emerges openly through strict provision in the context of the forms of the projects. The twentieth century was felt in Holland as a great time to change society. The figure of Jan Frederik Staal grows within this fervent atmosphere full of expectations.

When Staal joined the Amsterdam School⁷ in 1915, becoming editor of the *Wendingen* magazine that between 1920 and 1930 professed the faith and spread the thought of school, despite altering its architecture towards a less conventional language that does not abandon the objective character of Berlage's architecture, will find the same cultural climate based on the same *berlagean* ideals. The architecture promoted by Michel de Klerk and the one professed by Hendrik Petrus Berlage appear united by a similar guiding thought in considering the city as a place of manifestation of civic and collective values, expressed in an exemplary way in the building of public space. Berlage will show the expressive architectural charge mainly in the implementation of the Amsterdam South expansion plan, revealing in the adopted form, in clear continuity with the traditional closed model of the city, the highest point of a civil architecture design in the Netherlands in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The project by Staal that won the competition, called by the motto *Hindarfjall*, clearly and convincingly reveals the ambition of understanding architecture as a social art that is expressed fully in the construction of space. The motive behind the project is not practical nor functional. A more general goal is expressed in building a monumental place where outdoor spaces, large classrooms in the open, measured and calibrated in dimensions and measures, become the ultimate reason for the project transcending the contingent in the ideal, in particular in the universal and identify the civic character of the project.

The urban where the main monuments are located – the Rijksmuseum, the Stedelijk Museum, the Concertgebouw and the Staal Operagebouw – become a sort of large open-air theater where the institutions make themselves recognizable in the form of the place. The three main monuments received a benefit from the intervention of Staal. The calibrated choice that decides on the position and location of the Opera House in the urban context creates hierarchies of spaces within which

⁷ About the Amsterdam School see CASCIATO, 1997; DE WIT, 1983.

the principal monuments reveal their representative role. All this is accomplished in the logic of typical building of the traditional closed city where the relationship between the street and the house, the square and the public building constitute the founding principle.

The fact that the goal is to build a monumental place emerges clearly in the different conception designs, all united, even in the particular differences, to solve the relationship between public spaces and monumental buildings that are located on the site. The theater is therefore placed inside the square in an arbitrary manner, but its lying on the horizontal plane meets the need to determine the form and appropriate size of urban spaces on which the main monuments are located. The construction of space, the layout of the buildings that are on it located, produces a dialectic between the parties that detects the representative role of public buildings.

The form of the theater is the result of rigorous alignments both on the horizontal level, as on the vertical level with the roads and the preexisting historical volumes. This method takes care of solving the continuity with the historic city. The priority given to the alignments that the project establishes with the road networks, with existing volumes defines with certainty the size and positions of public spaces, and identifies the boundaries within which, later, the project would have to be arranged, allowing for infinite possibilities and freedom of composition.

The shape responds to a complex functional program that includes, in addition to the theater and related spaces associated with it, public places of gathering such as a bar and a restaurant, halls and foyer, whose formal recognition is identified clearly on external volumes that enhance the symbolic value, as well as practical reason, in the belief that in a good architectural design the system of the obtained spaces is the result of a free interpretation rather than the answer to the compelling logic of a strict functional program. The project is not designed as a box-shaped volume inside which the main functions are freely cut, but as a succession of spaces, each with its own individuality and formal recognition. Against the functionalist dogma of spatial continuity, the logic of composing rationalist paratactic still prevails albeit interpreted in a less rigorous and freer fashion.

Staal's project was not realised in the end. It was the subject of many disputes that brought back once again uncertainty to the formal fate of the Area of the Museums. Only in the twenty-first century, the Amsterdam community will finally put an end to the centuries-old dispute over the respondent form to be assigned to an area full of hopes and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the area called Museumplein has developed in accordance with the principles of construction of the historical city. The Staal's project fits perfectly into this idea of development.

The research focuses the relationship between the history of the place and the project, identifying a continuity between the ways of getting the project and the reasons for the construction of the historical city. In the historic Dutch city it is possible to identify the fundamental principles to the theoretical understanding of the ways of getting the theater project. In this sense, the project shows a strong tendency to move in continuity and coherence with the story and character of the identity of the country.

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