De bijdrage van architect J.J.P. Oud aan herdenken, herstellen en bouwen in Nederland (1938-1963)
The contribution of J.J.P. Oud to commemoration, reconstruction and architecture in the Netherlands (1938-1963)

Up to now, historiography of twentieth century architecture has paid almost no attention to the late work of Dutch architect J.J.P. Oud (1890-1963). If these projects, which were designed after Oud left the Gemeentelijke Woningdienst (the Municipal Housing Department) of Rotterdam in 1933, are mentioned at all, it is usually unfavorably and concerning only one particular building. For the design of Shell's main office in The Hague (1938-48), Oud supposedly used traditional principles of design, such as symmetry, closed architectural forms and, especially, obsolete ornamentation and decoration. As a result of these accusations the Shell Building was presented in literature as an improper, anti-modern and even early post-modern building. Consequently, most of his other late designs were treated with the same deprecatory criticism, often without argumentation. This study tries to refute this historical judgement and correct it through a detailed historical research of eleven projects by Oud that date from 1938-1963.

This thesis deals with the reconstruction of the commission, design, construction and reception of projects that came to birth between the first design for the Shell Building (1938) and Oud’s death in 1963 (chapters 3-13). The projects were selected on the basis of several criteria, resulting in the presentation of a broad range of subjects and conditions. These eleven projects were chosen because of the difference in circumstances of the commission, typology and urban context. In addition, coherence was sought with the topics Oud dealt with in his theoretical and popular writings. This resulted in the following selection: the urban design for the reconstruction of the city center in Rotterdam (Holplein, 1942-44); the Savings Bank in Rotterdam (Spaarbank, 1942-57); a design for the restoration and rebuilding of the St.-Laurens church in Rotterdam (1950); three monuments: a monument for a life-insurance company (De Nederlanden van 1845) in The Hague (1943-45), a national memorial site for the army on the Grebbeberg near Rhoden (1948-53) and the National Monument on the Dam in the center of Amsterdam (1949-56); a small-scale and a large complex with offices, warehouses and shops, both in Rotterdam (Esveha Building, 1947-50 and Utrecht Building, 1954-61); a low-cost residential area in Arnhem (Presikhaaf, 1951-53); the Lyceum in The Hague (Second Liberal Christian Lyceum, 1949-56) and a convalescent home for children in the woods near Arnhem (Bio-herstellingsoord, 1952-60).

From this research, three main subjects arose, which are analyzed within a broad cultural and historical context in separate chapters. The nonconformist structure Oud thought out in order to reach a unity in architectural design is the subject of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 deals with Oud’s revolt against several manifestations of material and spiritual reconstruction in the Netherlands, especially in construction of schools and public housing, urban design, conservation and the commemoration of the recent national past. Oud’s participation in the historiography of De Stijl is the subject of the concluding text. He tried to protect his contribution to De Stijl in literature, and presented his late work as the logical consequence and completion of the designs he made during the formative and enduring years of De Stijl (1917-21 and from 1921 onwards) (Chapter 14).
The unity of architectural design

After World War II, Oud observed that the prestige and influence of the architect within the building process (design and execution) was threatened by several developments, of which the increase in teamwork was the most significant. In several contributions to architectural magazines and newspapers, in which Oud presented these burning matters to the public, he also listed several examples. One of the most illustrative buildings in this context was the new main office for Unesco in Paris (1963-58). In his article Zijn er nog architecten? (Are there still architects? 1959), Oud declared that the design of the building was done by several architects and that the construction was supervised by a team of specialists. But Oud’s criticism was most harsh concerning the fact that the application of visual arts (painting and sculpture) was not supervised by the architects, but was handed over to the artists themselves and advisory boards. In Oud’s opinion, the unity of the architectural design was severely threatened by this process. At most, the result would be a harmonious combination of architectural elements, but a profound and real unity would never be reached. In his eyes, to reach such a unity was the exclusive task of the architect, and could never be achieved by a committee.

Oud’s strong disapproval of teamwork was motivated by his analyses of the damage that resulted from developments in engineering, science and economy within postwar society in the 1940s and 1950s. These factors had caused a fundamental change in the building process. Not only were the possibilities of architecture to build culture undermined, but architecture threatened to be cut off from other social elements and institutions as well. In many cases, Oud’s late work makes an attempt to free architecture from this deadlock; an attempt aimed more at practicality than at theory. This means that during the design process Oud literally experimented with new types of collaboration - he formed coalitions within the contemporary building industry that often resulted in conflicts with clients, local and national government, and artists. During this struggle Oud considered his designs not only as a test case, but also as a demonstration of a manner of teamwork that was resistant to many different effects of bureaucracy, standardization and the growth of commerce within the building process. In 1959 he called these manifestations vorm-ondermijnende machten (subversive forces).

The architectural theory of design Oud formulated as a response to these forces consisted of several parts. At the center stood the architect as an artist; the significance of classical rules for composition and design; the value of symbols; and, last but certainly not least, the importance of emotion in architecture.

The focal point of Oud’s position was based on the dialectical relationship between building and architecture inherent to modern architecture, and his idealistic search for a synthesis between the two. This is not only clear in his work, for instance in the design of the Rotterdam Savings Bank (1942-57) and the children’s convalescent home in Arnhem (1952-60), but is also explicitly expressed in his written criticism of the late work of the German-American architect Walter Gropius. In Oud’s opinion, Gropius – who propagated and perfected teamwork as the head of The Architects’ Collaborative and as a teacher at The Graduate School of Design at Harvard University – was totally insensitive to architecture as an art. As a result of Gropius’ activities an impersonal, anonymous architecture came into being that Oud could approve of in a technical sense, but that he did not consider to be integral architecture because of the total lack of emotional impact.

Besides this, according to Oud, contemporary architecture as an art was being threatened by the undirected contribution of visual artists. Oud considered architecture to be, without a doubt, the Master of Arts. In his buildings the application of painting and sculpture would only take place under strict supervision of the architect. In the design of the Shell Building (1938-48) Oud designed all of the ornaments himself and did not seek cooperation with artists. But the design of the Savings Bank and the Second Liberal Christian Lyceum in the early 1950s were a turning point in this respect: in these projects Oud explicitly sought cooperation. Due, in part, to the unpleasant experiences during his collaboration with painter Theo van Doesburg (1917-1921), Oud strove to use true art forms that were also strongly committed to architecture. With these efforts he reacted directly to manifestations of the so-called postwar revival of De Stijl. Oud’s collaboration with Dutch artists after
World War II, for instance with sculptors Willem Reijers, Rudy Rooijackers and Aart van den IJssel and painter Karel Appel, was an explicit answer to the spatiaal colorisme (spatial colourism) of artist Constant and architect Aldo van Eyck (1953), the expositions organized by the Liga Nieuw Beelden in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 1955 onwards, and the new internationally oriented art-magazine Structure (1958-64) with Joost Baljeu as its driving force. Oud envisioned these ‘movements’ as dangerous for two reasons: in the first place he foresaw a new academism that cherished abstract design as a given vocabulary. And secondly, these aesthetic movements seemed to wipe away the difference between architecture and art – which would always be to the detriment of architectural purity.

Architectural purity in Oud’s work always coincided with the employment of classical rules of architecture (as art). The same thing was true for Oud that was true for several of his contemporaries, such as Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: the search for a new, contemporary architecture by no means meant disregarding classical rules of design and composition. The academic design method, the Beaux-Arts tradition in architecture – that Oud learned during his education in Amsterdam (Quellinuschool, 1903-6), from Henry Evers in Delft (1910-12) and from Theodor Fischer in Munich (1912) – were the solid basis for his designs during his whole career, albeit in varied intensity. Geometric principles of design, for instance, are recognizable in several of his projects done during the first years of his practice (1906-16), but in his architecture of the 1920s it is less significant. From the 1930s onwards he reached a new phase in his work in which the classical aspects – such as symmetrical and axial planning, geometrical proportions and the application of ornament – were very clearly expressed. These architectural means were not used by Oud to gain a historical architecture but were accepted as a professional approach behind one of the most important goals of modernism during the inter-war period: the realization of a new, non-historical architecture. Until now, Oud’s commitment to the objective basis of architecture (proportion, ornament, symmetry) in his late work has been interpreted as a last (desperate) attempt to hold on to architecture as an art, rather than aestheticism and individualism, influence of politics and bureaucracy, and knowledge of engineers and technicians. This is, for the most part, a result of Oud’s repeated pleas in his texts. And his buildings do seem to underscore this interpretation at first glance. But because of this his true architectural motive – to reach a non-historical classicism – has been overlooked.

The new direction Oud headed in as an architect and theorist at the end of the 1930s has to be interpreted as an attempt to go beyond the architectural boundaries he had reached earlier with his designs for public housing. For Oud, public housing could, at most, be an anonymous background for monumental buildings such as churches, city halls and banks. That’s why he sought to enrich architecture by (existing) figurative means such as ornament and art, and by abstract means that were heavily related to architecture: wall, material and mass. Both of these architectural elements were used to express social order in the townscape and the layout of the city. This varied from an explicit corporate structure such as that expressed by the Shell Building (1936-48), Savings Bank (1942-57) and Esva Building (1947-50), to a small-scale and intimate social composition in the case of the isolated children’s home in the woods near Amhem. With these designs Oud reacted against a form of urban design that dissociated itself more and more from aesthetic expression of the community, in favor of a theoretical and scholarly way of planning. The successive proposals for the Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan for Amsterdam (General Expansion Plan, 1934), and the designs for the reconstruction of Rotterdam by Witteveen (1941) and his successor Van Traa (1946), were the clearest expression of this. The central aspect of the conflict between Witteveen and Oud concerning Oud’s design for the Hofplein in Rotterdam (1942-44) – fully analyzed in this book – can be traced back to this. While Witteveen saw the three-dimensional layout of the new city center purely as a setting for traffic, Oud and his draughtsmen worked painstakingly on the architecture of the Hofplein as a symbolic form, able to express the city center as a community center and place for recreation, shopping and trade.
Oud and the mental and material recovery

The research of the constructive forces of architectural design Oud started in the 1930s coincided with public discussions on the role of the artistic and scholarly elite in a society dominated by technocrats and mass-culture. In those years, Oud witnessed the repression of the influence of the cultural avant-garde and the growth of a new elite: one made up of technicians, planners and managers. He interpreted teamwork and the anonymous architecture that resulted from it, as a sign of the rise of the ‘man of the masses’, who was also a threat for architecture as art. Oud’s library is evidence of his strong interest in the contemporary, intellectual debate on the mass and the individual and all problems related to it. Together with Dutch writers such as H. Marsman, M. ter Braak and Adriaan Roland Holst, the historian J.H. Huizinga, the sociologist and historian P.J. Bouman and intellectuals with an international reputation such as Ortega Y Gasset and Oswald Spengler, Oud is a typical example of an intellectual without a party. His dedication to architecture as art was, on the one hand, deeply influenced by Marsman, who searched for ‘impassioned coherence’. On the other hand he felt inspired by Ter Braak’s ideas on literature as a counter-attack against a culture that was drowning in a technocratic swamp. At the same time he was also attracted to Huizinga’s opinion about a new cultural ideal for a society that was purified by an elite.

Illustrative in this respect, and totally ignored in Dutch historiography until this moment, is Oud’s statement made during the design of the National Monument to honor the army (1948-53). From the moment the design process started, Oud resisted the restricted military character of this memorial site. Because of the public’s negative attitude toward the activities of the Dutch army, not only during World War II (1940-45) but also during the postwar years in Indonesia, where the Dutch troops fought against anti-colonialist domestic forces (1947-49), the most influential people on the committee in charge of the commission tried to use the monument as an instrument to clear up the army’s negative image. In Oud’s opinion, collective memory shouldn’t be dominated by the image of an army with a warlike spirit, but by the motives for the battle. He wanted to express the struggle for mental freedom, the sense of community spirit and the acceptance to take one’s responsibility: these three moral categories together formed the basic elements of the democracy Oud was aiming for.

In contrast to architect W. van Tijen, who was primarily interested in the technical and functional design of modern architecture in the Netherlands (Nieuwe Bouwen), Oud was fascinated by architecture’s ability to give form to cultural ideals that are fundamental to society. This is precisely the crux of the ethical and social role of architecture he stood for. This goal consists of three main themes: Oud’s opposition to all exponents of historical forgery; his ambivalent feelings on technical developments; and the problems faced by the individual in a society dominated by mass culture, with the morbid growth of bureaucracy as its most profound exponent.

In articles Oud wrote in the first years after World War II he reacted against the architecture of the Delft School, the traditional architecture that in most cases dominated the first phase in the rebuilding of devastated cities and villages. In Ontmoedigende plaatjes (Discouraging Images, 1948) and Bouwen zonder make-up (Building without Make-up, 1949), Oud accused architects of the Delft School of falsifying history. He denounced the manner in which they made use of clichés and decorative forms in order to reach a seemingly historical architecture and turned away from the technical and economic consequences of modern times.

Oud observed the same frenetic dealing with the past during restorations that were supervised with the Rijkscommissie voor de Monumentenzorg (the committee for conservation of historic buildings in the Netherlands). This national institute operated in defense of an artificial architecture that was the result of architecture historical research and was by no means influenced by contemporary building. As a member (1935-63) of the Rijkscommissie, Oud was confronted with this attitude during the restoration of the Church of Saint Laurens in Rotterdam. The main purpose of architects Meischke and Van der Steur, who delivered a design for the restoration (1948), was the anecdotal historical appearance of the church in the urban context. The design that was published by Oud (1950) as an alternative makes an attempt to defend architectural values. He proposed...
to construct a site for commemoration and a new church as part of Van Tras’s reconstruction plan (1946). In this way the old church would be governed by the design of the city as a functional and technical system.

Until now, no convincing explanation has been found for those characteristics in Oud’s late work that can be described — for convenience’s sake — as ‘a new monumentality.’ In this dissertation these characteristics are related to Oud’s ambivalence toward contemporary developments in science and all processes of teamwork and decision making in design and engineering that are a result of it. For instance Oud’s designs for the Hofplein (1942-44), Savings Bank (1942-57) and the monument for De Nederlanden van 1845 in the Hague (1943-45), must not only be regarded as answers to the falsified ‘pure Dutch architecture’ designed during the war, but also as a personal endeavor to reach a ‘new monumental architecture’ – as a (Dutch) contribution to the debate on ‘New Monumentality’ that developed in the United States in the 1940s. For those who closely study congress reports such as New Architecture and City-planning (1944) and Building for Modern Man (1949), it will be clear that there was a growing importance for ‘abstract monumentalism’ in American architecture. These publications propagated an anonymous, formless building that was unspolied by ‘architectural rules,’ but was fully concerned with the characteristics of technical and functional data and especially building programs. At the same time Oud tried to practice a design-method that was an acceptable compromise between a strong architectural form and technical and functional demands. From the American point of view, however, it seemed as if his oeuvre was heading in a whole different direction: Oud’s monumentalism was seen as being related to neo-classical architecture used by the dictatorial regimes – such as National Socialism and Fascism – that dominated large parts of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

Oud’s insistence on the architect as the unquestioned leader of the building-process gave birth to a series of conflicts with those bureaucratic forces in building and planning whose importance grew significantly in postwar society. During the design of two national monuments, the National Monument to honor the army on the Grebbeberg (1848-53) and the National Monument on the Dam in Amsterdam (1949-61), Oud was confronted with a wide range of committees. Especially while working on the Dam Monument, Oud could not accept the disapproval (by a committee) of the design he had proposed. He proclaimed that it would become impossible to develop a clear form that possessed sufficient artistic quality and had an intelligible expression as well. He refused to look for consensus by claiming his artistic status and even tried to get support from the minister himself.

Rules for public housing were the second type of bureaucracy Oud feared. In this sector of the building-industry he was confronted not only with budget cuts, but also with a strict set of rules (Voorschriften en werken), imposed in advance. Postwar social housing was totally dominated by the control of building costs and rents. As a result, housing construction was transformed into a modern industry. From 1950 onward Oud reacted in public against the absurd growth of bureaucratic rules and used his own prewar designs for housing as arguments in this debate. While his colleagues in Opbouw, an association of Rotterdam architects, looked for (arbitrary) variety and more divergence in the townscape (Pendrecht), Oud advocated for uniformity and consistency, and presented his own designs as a guide. The discussion between Oud and the minister of Reconstruction and Public Housing regarding this resulted in the commission to Oud to design more than 350 dwellings for low-cost housing (Presikhaaf), a project that was to end more or less in a personal tragedy for Oud.

‘Mein Weg in De Stijl’

In the early 1950s Oud was involved with several presentations of his work to the public. He curated the first comprehensive exposition of his work in Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1951. That same year he participated in the preparation of the De Stijl exposition that was first held in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1951) and later on, in a different constellation, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1952-53). In this period he also made the first draft for an autobiography that was published as Mein Weg in De Stijl in 1960. With these activities
Oud stressed the historical and almost continuous development of his work. He presented his work as an uninterrupted search for a new, complete architecture. The purport of all these activities and efforts was to credit, once and for all, the leading role he had played as architect within De Stijl (1917-21), especially through his contacts with the painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg (a pretension that was attacked from the start by Van Doesburg particularly). For Oud the purest architectural examples of the aesthetic theory of De Stijl were not the house Rietveld designed in collaboration with Mrs. Schröder (1924), nor the Contra constructions (1923-24) made by Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren. The projects that were the first to be considered as examples in this respect were all designed by Oud himself and built in the 1920s: housing in Hook of Holland (1924), Stuttgart (1927) and Kielhoek (1925-28). Those were the first convincing realizations of the theory Oud had formulated in 1921 in Over de toekomstige bouwkunst en hare architectonische mogelijkheden ('On future architecture and its architectural possibilities'). With these strongly defended arguments – that can be questioned from a historical point of view – Oud started a polemic against a series of historians who wrote about De Stijl and almost completely ignored Oud's contribution as architect in favor of the 'painting-architecture' by Mondrian and Van Doesburg – which Oud had disapproved of from the start. In studies by architecture historians such as Nikolaus Pevsner (Pioneers of the Modern Movement, 1939), Sigfried Giedion (Space, Time and Architecture, 1941), and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (Painting toward Architecture, 1948) Oud's contribution to De Stijl and Dutch architecture of the inter-war period was ignored for the most part.

Oud's reaction to this direction in historiography was not limited to discussions with writers and publishers, or to contributions to exhibitions and publications, but was also carried out in his projects. From the early 1950s onward Oud's designs are to be interpreted as opposition against this denial of his work in postwar literature. He wasn't always explicit about this in explanations of his work. He did present the collaboration with Karel Appel in the Lyceum in The Hague (1955) in the context of the continuation of his early conflicts with the painters of De Stijl in

De Stijl. Toen en nu ('De Stijl, then and now,' 1957). But he never mentioned El Lissitzky's projects, which he used as inspiration for the detailing of the Utrecht Building (1954-61) in Rotterdam, nor did he ever write about sanatorium Zonnestraal (1926-28) as a point of reference for the children's nursing home in Arnhem (1952-60).

In the end, all these activities were without results. Or even worse: Oud's continuous interference with historiography seems to have taken away the clear view of other, less personal themes in his work: the experimental way in which he tried to find solutions to architectural problems that were essential in the first years after World War II, such as increasing bureaucracy, mental reconstruction and the commemoration of the war, the assimilation of advancing technical possibilities, and the cooperation with artists.
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