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A Curious Competition for a Protestant Church in the Netherlands

INVITED

Structuralism, Competition, Church Building, Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger

/Abstract

In recent years various scientific studies have been published focusing on church building in the Netherlands in the post-war period. From an international perspective, however, the certain developments remain if not unknown at least underexposed. One of them is a competition for a Reformed Church in 1963 between architects that would set their mark on architecture in the Sixties and Seventies. Although the location was not within a major city, but on the outskirts of a smaller one, it highlights a crucial moment, or as Belgian architectural historian Marc Dubois, echoing Geert Bekaert, called it, 'a pivotal moment' in the history of the Netherlands heralding the end of the ecclesiastical pillarization. This article offers an accurate reconstruction of the competition, that was held between different architects who would later be considered as the main exponents of the Structuralist movement.

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“The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous, so full of hope” (Joseph Conrad)¹

“The artist’s territory is the world in its unbroken wholeness” (Rudolf Schwarz)²

In recent years various scientific studies have been published focusing on church building in the Netherlands in the post-war period.³ From an international perspective, however, the certain developments remain if not unknown at least underexposed. One of them is a competition for a building for the Reformed Church in 1963 between architects that would set their mark on architecture in the sixties and seventies. Although the location was not within a major city, but on the outskirts of a smaller one, it highlights a crucial moment, or as Belgian architectural historian Marc Dubois, echoing Geert Bekaert, called it, “a pivotal moment” in the history of the Netherlands heralding the end of the ecclesiastical pillarization.⁴ This article offers an accurate reconstruction of the competition.

Shortly after the end of World War II an institution was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church on the “de Horst” estate in Driebergen near Utrecht with the intent to refresh the relationship of church and society and to tackle the growing secularization in a professional manner [Fig. 1]. The institution constituted of an academy with a boarding school and a sociological research institute and organized regularly study days. It was in a woody area and named *Kerk en Wereld* (Church and World) and its goal was to provide courses in order to train pastors and teach other people how to understand the Bible in a more modern way.⁵ In 1957 the Van der Leeuw Foundation in Amsterdam, named after the Dutch religious philosopher Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), had the purpose of being a meeting center of art and church. The traveling exhibition had “to contribute to clarifying the problem of church building”. The exhibition had the significant title “Ark – 10 years of church building” and presented national and foreign examples of modern church building. The event was to be seen in

1 Quoted in: Fred R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, 1979), 540.

2 Quoted in: Wolfgang Pehnt and Hilde Strohl, *Rudolf Schwarz. Architekt einer anderen Moderne* (Ostfildern: Hatje Verlag, 1997), 12-13.

3 See: Rob Dettingmeijer, “De kerk uit het midden: van godshuis tot een of ander huis. Het belang van de kerken in de wederopbouw,” *Bulletin KNOB*, no. 1 (2002): 1-15; Sander de Jonge, “Kerkarchitectuur na 2000. Het ontwikkelen van grensverleggende typologieën vanuit het samenspel tussen liturgie, architectuur en duurzame ontwikkeling,” (PhD Diss., Katholieke Universiteit Brabant, 2002); Marisa Melchers, *Het nieuwe religieuze bouwen. Liturgie, kerk, en stedenbouw* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 2014); Herman Wesselink, “Een sterke toren in het midden der stad: Verleden, heden en toekomst van bedreigde Nederlandse kerkgebouwen,” (PhD Diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2018).

4 Marc Dubois, “Primal Image of all Architecture. Churches in Belgium and the Netherlands after 1950,” in *European Church Architecture, 1950-2000*, ed. Wolfgang Jean Stock (Munich/Berlin/London/New York: Prestel, 2002), 123. Geert Bekaert, *In een of ander huis. Kerkbouw op een keerpunt* (Tiel/Den Haag: Lannoo, 1967), 90-93.

5 For this institution see: Maarten van der Linde, *Werkelijk, ik kan alles. Werkers in kerkelijke arbeid in de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk 1945-1966* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1995).



Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Groningen. When the architectural critic and writer Jacobus Johannes Vriend (1896-1974) saw the exhibition, he concluded that “the emotional language of architecture in Protestantism is, as a rule, hard to find because such an expression is alien to its essence”.⁶ The exhibition clearly reflected that. Six years later, in 1962, in honor of its tenth anniversary, the foundation organized a competition for the design of a radical new church design for their site in Driebergen. The driving force behind the event was the reverend Willem Gerard Overbosch (1919-2001), who strived towards a reformation of the liturgical practice. One of the reasons was that in the beginning of the year 1962 the architect Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud had criticized severely the architectural situation in the Netherlands and in particular the state of church building stating that it was without any inspiration. In his eyes church building had to be “holy”.⁷ The article was like a wakeup call and the Van der Leeuw Foundation wanted to investigate if a new kind of church could be designed where art played a crucial role. The selection of the architects for the competition was curious as none of them had showed any inclination towards deeper felt religious sentiments. Some of them were raised in a family where religious values counted, like Van Stigt, but most of them were explicitly agnostic but both the undation and Institution agreed that they wanted something not traditional but a solution that would be seen as in correspondence with the times, more contemporary than conventional. The choice of the architects for the competition was debatable but, in the end, proved to be in hindsight a very interesting one. By concentrating on a young generation with a drive towards innovation the organizing foundation tried to give a new impulse to church building.

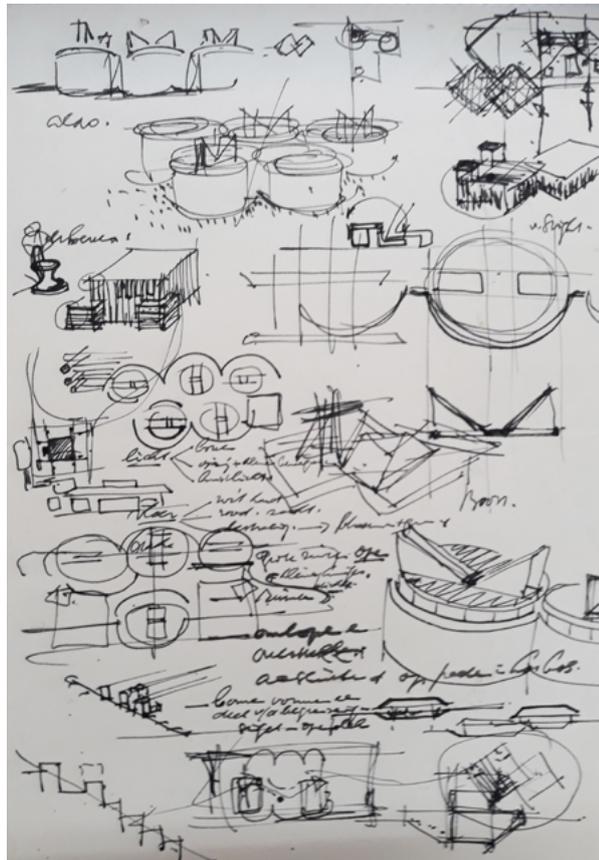
6 J.J. Vriend, *Reflexen – Nederlands bouwen na 1945* (Amsterdam: Moussault's, 1959), 152.

7 See: Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, “Het carnaval der architecten,” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, February 10, 1962.

Fig. 1
Photo of the competition site
(source: Nieuwe Instituut di
Rotterdam – NI, Archive Boon).



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The institution *Kerk en Wereld* had built in 1962 a new seminar building on their premises designed by the architect Karel Frederik Sijmons (1908-1989), but he declined to participate in a competition because he saw himself not as an avant-gardist, but as belonging to the elder generation who already had built many churches.⁸ Something new was sought for. Seven relatively unknown and young architects were after some discussions invited: Piet Blom (1934-1999), Gert Boon (1921-2009), Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999), Herman Hertzberger (1932), Jelle Jelles (1932-2003), Joop van Stigt (1934-2011), and Jan Verhoeven (1926-1994). All of them played a major role in the history of the architectural magazine *Forum* and were considered later as belonging to the Structuralist movement in the Netherlands. In fact, it was a get-together of architects who to a large extent shared the same views and who regularly came together to discuss their projects for the competition. They were thus aware of each other's proposal [Fig. 2]. None of them, however, had deep religious feelings and any experience in church building although several months before Van Eyck had been asked to design the Pastor Van Ars Church in The Hague, so he had the opportunity to work on two church projects at the same time.⁹ It took courage for the organizers to choose for these architects. The total fees for the jury members were

⁸ Karel Lodewijk Sijmons (1908-1989), known for his publications on modern Protestant Church building, was initially on the shortlist but he had already built several churches and for this reason declined an invitation.

⁹ For the history of the Van Ars Church see: Annemarie van Oorschot and José ten Berge-de Fraiture, eds., *Pastoor van Ars, Monument van Aldo van Eyck* (The Hague: Ars Architectuur Comité, 2015); Francis Strauven, *Pastoor Van Ars Church, The Hague. A timeless sacral space by Aldo van Eyck* (Cologne: Aldo+Hannie van Eijck Stichting, 2022).

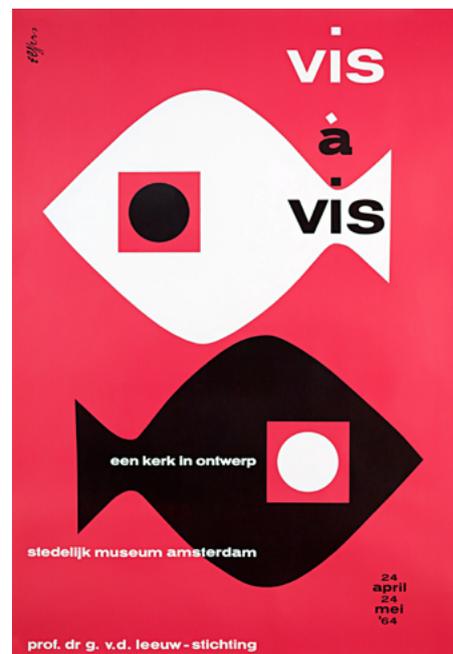
Fig. 2
Program booklet of the competition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Bakema).

Fig. 3
Drawing of Jelles of the various entries (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Jelles).

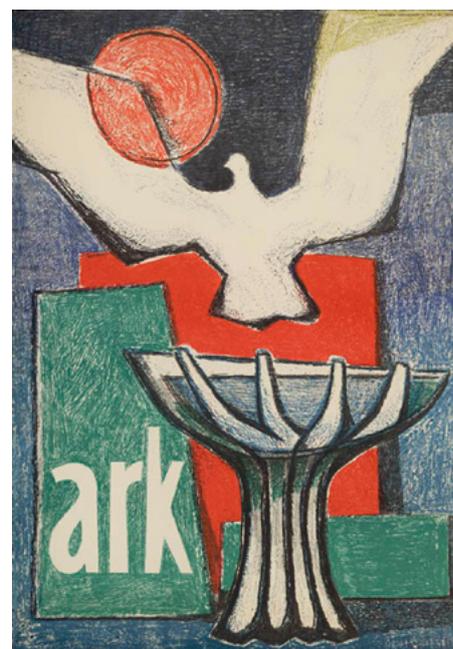
calculated at 4200 Dutch guilders, that for all the architects and artist on 24.000,50. The total amount of the event, excluding a possible realization of one of the projects was 56.695,12 Dutch guilders.

It was the intention of the foundation that each architect would work together with an artist and strife towards the integration of all arts in one building. A dispensation could be given if motivated, as was written in the program booklet [Fig. 3]. The jury of the competition was initially composed of the artist Chris de Moor, the theologian Conrad Willem Mönnich, the pastor N. van Gelder and the architects Jaap Bakema, whose office had designed a church in Schiedam in 1957 and another one for the new town of Nagele in 1961, and Gerrit Rietveld. Later the jury member Mönnich was replaced by the theologian, art connoisseur and member of the Van der Leeuw Foundation H.R. Blankesteijn (1929-2015) and the architect Henk Brouwer (1920-1970) was added. Rietveld had received the commission to design a religious centre in Uithoorn in 1961. It was his only church. He died shortly after the result of the competition was presented. Both Bakema and Brouwer were professors at the Delft University of Technology. The main question for the foundation was if in their apostolary centre, which had to be strongly focussed on the world outside the church, something like a classical church should be built. In the end the brief of the competition was that the space had to be flexible: during the week there had to be room for about 30 people, but on Sundays for ten times more. Van Eyck's design, with the motto *Wheels of Heaven*, was regarded unanimously as the best by both the jury and the other participants, even if Rietveld also appreciated the project of Jelles. He probably admired the influence of Mies van der Rohe in the simple construction details. With his asymmetrical project with shifted circles Van Eyck's proposal best suited the assignment of the Van der Leeuw Foundation, which had not prescribed either a building type or any particular form of liturgy but had left much room for interpretation. An exhibition of the plans and models, arranged by the artist Dick Elffers and held from the 24th of April till the 24th of May 1964 in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, had the title "Vis à Vis" [Fig. 4].

Photos in the archive of the writer and journalist Rein Blijstra in the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam (NI) give a good impression of the arrangement of the projects. The poster was, like the one of the exhibition *De Ark* in 1957, also designed by Elffers [Fig. 5]. For many of the visitors the exhibition might have been difficult to understand but many newspapers and magazines gave a detailed description of the projects¹⁰ [Fig. 6]. The exhibition was also shown in other locations. For every exhibition venue a discussion evening with the architects was scheduled. It was the breakthrough of structuralism in architecture



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Fig. 4
Poster of the exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum, 1964.

Fig. 5
Poster of the exhibition on church building, 1957.

10 "Door andere ogen: enkele persstemmen over Vis à vis," *Katholiek Bouwblad*, no. 31 (1964): 324-325.

even if some architects, like Van Eyck, had searched for solution that were not structuralist in intent. Van Eyck had made a name for himself with his design for the Orphanage in Amsterdam, that was finished in 1960. The international world of architecture was immediately convinced of its importance. Many influences came together in this building. As Van Eyck said: "that's what happens when you can't choose between a Parthenon, Pantheon, Galla Placidia, San Spirito, Vierzehnheiligen church, Zonnestraal, or mud Pueblo Village".¹¹ Ever since his trip, together with Bakema, to the Pueblos in New Mexico in 1962 Van Eyck had become fascinated with circles placed in a non-hierarchical way in order to create special places in his architecture. Before that time, he used round forms especially in the many playgrounds that he designed in Amsterdam.

The different proposals

Piet Blom, who had in October 1962 won the Prix de Rome prize, did not decline to participate in the competition but decided to do nothing. In a long letter from which we cite here in extenso he explained his opinion to the organizers:

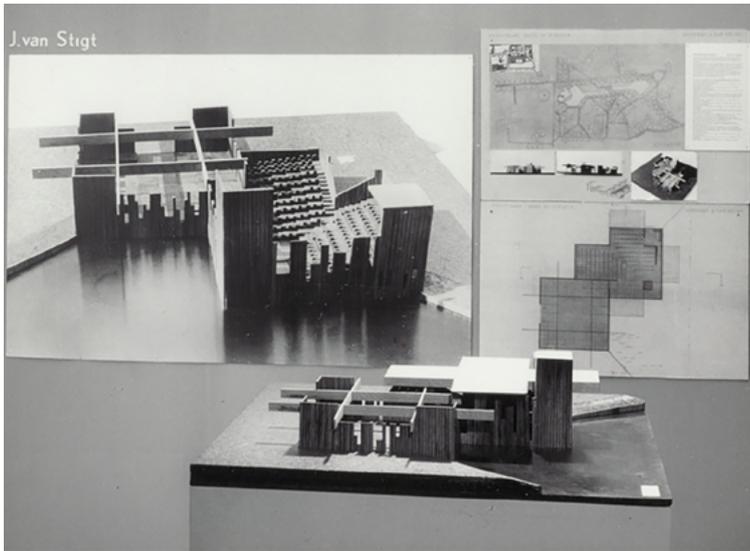
"I can't do anything different from what I did, nothing. I consider myself a member of a church without a world; that is the world without a church. Surely it is the world of God. It is full of holy sacraments. But we don't see them as long as we don't sanctify them. Yet only man is able to sanctify them; in fact, it is his typical human need. Because the church is incapable of helping me sanctify the sacraments, there are not even clear words like yes and no to exchange. Kick the people out of the church; then they must sanctify what is worth sanctifying. Since hell and heaven are thought in time, we encounter good and evil during our life. It is very common to be in heaven as many days of our life as possible. That's how I want to be; that's how I want to build. I can't fucking do that, and that's because it is forbidden in the regulations, because they stipulate: make it like this: there is church and world, there is private life and public life, there is the social and anti-social world. Because one material is used to experience the other as a spatial result, it has become impossible for me to build anything. Literally, then, I refuse any assignment until I may build 'the church' – until I may begin on the everyday heaven".¹²

11 Quoted in: Marinke Steenhuis, ed., *Joop van Stigt, architect. Werken vanuit een flexibele structuur 1960-1985* (Amsterdam: SDO, 2014), 24.

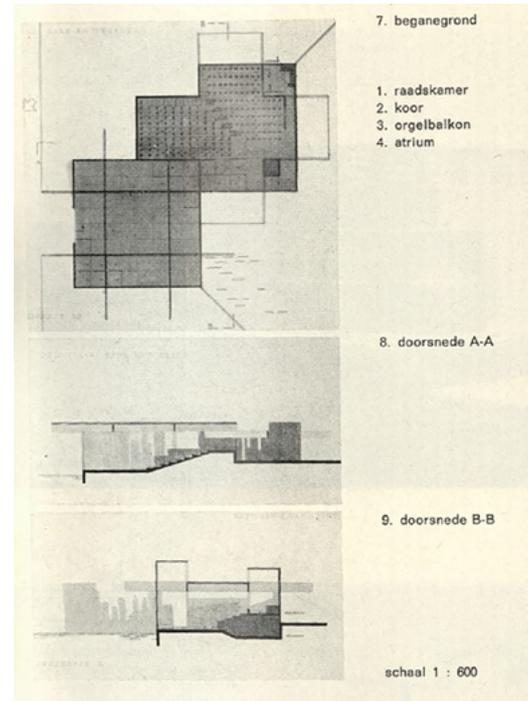
12 See the jury report in the archive of Bakema in the Dutch Architecture Institute (NI), BAKE, d60. The report was published in: "Zes 'kerken in ontwerp,'" *Bouwkundig Weekblad*, no. 15 (1964): 165-179.



Fig. 6
Article on the exhibition in 1964
in *De Tijd – Maasbode*



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8

Blom thus takes a particular point of view that is determined by his principles. His contribution – if we can call it that – embodies a fundamental critique of the church in Dutch society at that moment. His letter testifies to his uncompromising character and attitude, but the particular value of the statement of this wayward architect was not fully understood and taken into account. His ‘nothing’ was, however, not seen as an entry although it was very conceptual.

Joop van Stigt, the youngest of the contenders, had been an overseer of the Orphanage building of Van Eyck in Amsterdam. He also had worked for Gert Boon. Already in his early plans, made during his studies, Van Stigt had noticed that the configuration of two squares that were interlinked and partially overlapped each other offered many possibilities for a flexible use independent of the program [Fig. 7]. Also his proposal for the church in Driebergen was determined by this view but, as he stated ‘it is a little madness to create a center of silence in this time when people are afraid of silence’.¹³ Van Stigt envisioned a partially cross-shaped church to which an open atrium had to connect [Fig. 8]. The building had to be dark as the earth with the roof directing the light. The projecting ceiling connected inside and outside. Both spaces of the church had to have the same bar grid. Light would be reflected by the pond against the ceiling within the building. He wanted to see the building constructed entirely from railway sleepers that he considered closely related to the trunks of the surrounding forest. The amphitheatrically designed seats were also made of this material: raised pile heads from the floor. He considered loosely placed chairs and benches as alien creatures in a room destined as a church. The walls were, like the floor to be made of wood. The unity of material had to be clear. The inner space was

Fig. 7
Photo of the part of Van Stigt in the exhibition (Nieuwe Instituut, Archive Blijstra)

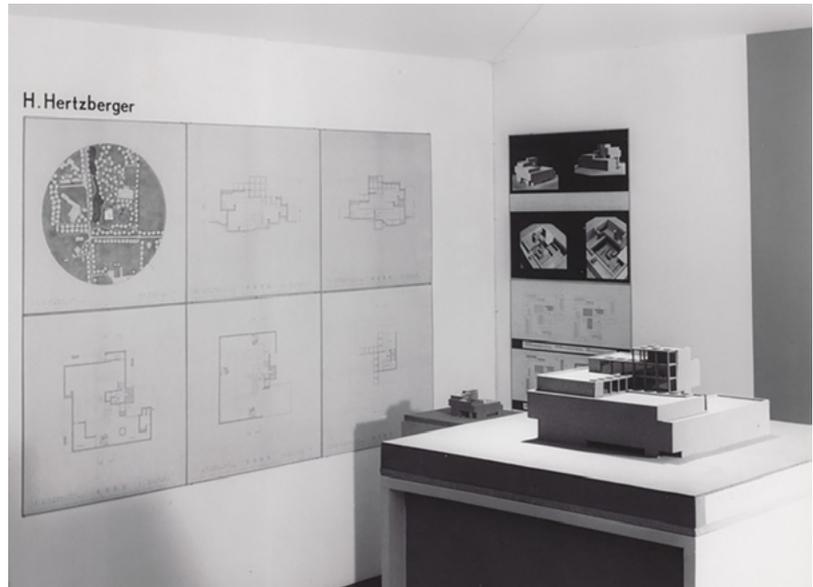
Fig. 8
Drawings of the project of Van Stigt in *Bouwkundig Weekblad*.

13 Quoted in: “Kerk is meer schuilhut dan monument,” *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, January 23, 1965.

conceived in such a manner that both with 10 or with 100 persons in it the relation between the player and the audience would be an organic whole. Everybody had to be included. The seclusion had dominate here, which, also due to the used material gives it something stiff and unyielding. The atrium had to be an in-between space where one could meet each other. The architect had again showed his obsession with the creation of structures built using a grid system. In 1966 he would summarize his views in the words: "I strongly believe in Laws. In

the architectural image, in which there is a balance between construction and space distribution, between wishes and economic possibilities. This now is the architectural image with which this time will manifest itself".¹⁴ The project had a certain severity and heaviness to it. There was hardly any flexibility. The jury had a harsh verdict and also disapproved the fact that the contender did not have the opinion that his work could be completed with the help of a visual artist. Van Stigt thought that the architecture should be enough. In his explanation he wrote: "The things you make as an architect must be as complete as the painter's canvas or the sculptor's sculpture. You can only speak of architecture when the work is complete, without additions from a visual artist".¹⁵

With his student housing in Amsterdam and the Montessori school in Delft, Herman Hertzberger had already made a name for himself as a talented architect in 1963. He declined the involvement of an artist by pointing out in advance that he declined any visual moment outside his architecture. "In my architecture I try to be the visual artist". His project perfectly fits in his oeuvre, in between the Montessori school and the designs for the schools in Badhoevedorp and Wasenaar that remained unbuilt.¹⁶ Whereas in Delft the space is developed horizontally in his church for Driebergen the interior shows different levels that are built up spirally and that permit diagonal sightlines [Fig. 9]. We do see the same box-like roof lights as in his school in Delft. But the typical characteristics of the architectural language of Hertzberger are already clearly recognizable. The whole church is based on the use of a module of 1.5 by 1.5 meters. The stepping and shifting spaces form a series of occupiable corners and places permitting diagonal views. There is no vantage point from which the whole space can be seen. The spatial development narrows if one goes upwards. Seats can



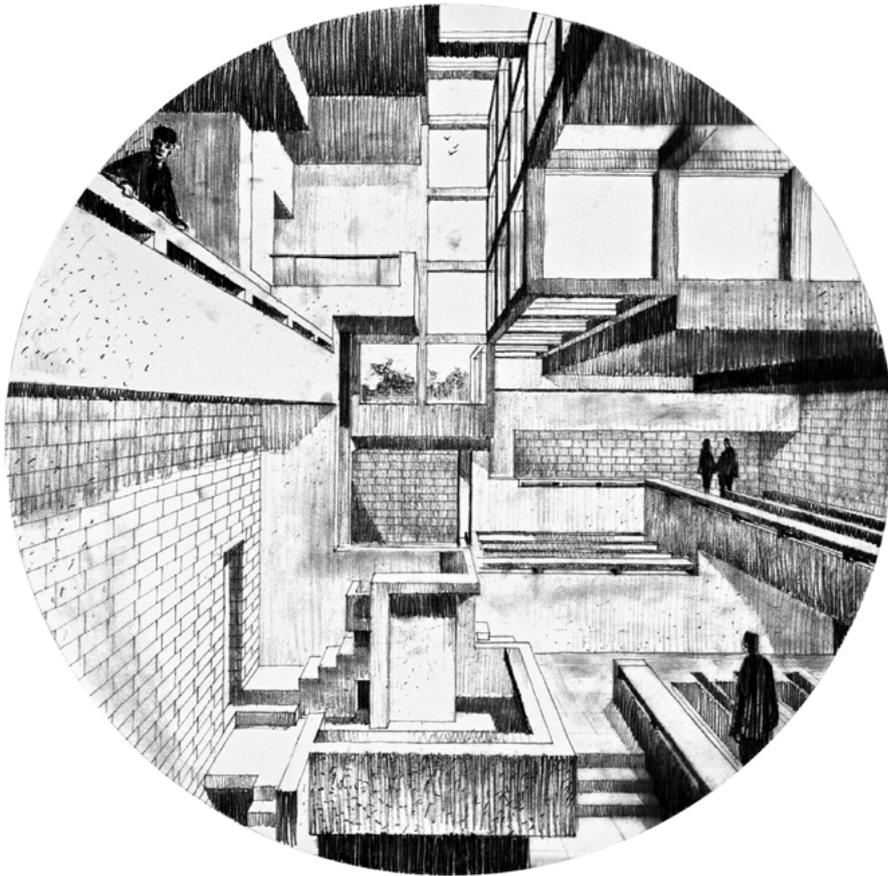
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14 Steenhuis, *Joop van Stigt, architect. Werken vanuit een flexibele structuur 1960-1985*, 32.

15 See explanation in the archive of Van Stigt, in the Dutch Architecture Institute (NI), STIG 333-1.

16 For Hertzberger's oeuvre, see: Robert McCarter, *Herman Hertzberger* (Rotterdam: NAI010, 2015).

Fig. 9
Photo of the section of Hertzberger in the exhibition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).



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be placed on each level if needed. One can sit by oneself or in a group. By this fragmented placing of the audience Hertzberger undermined the idea of the church as a place of the collective. He stressed more the creation of intimate areas from where one could listen to the church service. He wants a conversation church and not a sermon church. The space should have, what he called, a diaphragmatic character, but should not lead to a labyrinth feeling or a sense of lost. It should be suitable for any group size. In fact, he wanted to give the choice to the visitors of the church to decide themselves in which measure they would like to participate in the service. This freedom of choice led to the articulation of space and the breakdown of a unified space.

Hertzberger showed his talent in his proposal, showing that for him architecture had to create different places where people could see and could be seen. The round perspective drawing of the interior shows that very clearly [Fig. 10]. This interior did not meet up to the expectations of the Catholic church builder André Thunnissen (1921-2014), who wrote that on the outside "it had a lively and moving silhouette, but inside a fear of emptiness [...] had led to fragmentation". This fragmentation led to "fantastic perspective and spatial views" but 'an interplay between the pulpit and the viewing balconies higher up' was lacking.¹⁷ In his explanation Hertzberger underlined that in his design 'he did not start from the idea of a meditation centre, because then one immediately ends up

Fig. 10
Perspective of the interior of
the project of Hertzberger
(source: Nieuwe Instituut
di Rotterdam – NI, Archive
Hertzberger).

17 A.W.P. Thunnissen, "Bewuste en gewilde onzekerheid," *Katholiek Bouwblad*, no. 31 (1964): 323.



11



12

with all kinds of demands that people want to make of a church, while he is of the opinion that you cannot put a church in a certain program' He even went one step further,' stating 'we really need to make a church out of everything we do'.¹⁸ The jury asked themselves if the building was as plastic as the designer had intended. The involvement of an artist would have softened the initial idea that had driven Hertzberger. From the side of the theologians there was the critique that the building would have been 'so intense in form, that it does not allow for liturgy'.¹⁹ There were two main speaking places, a platform on which one or

18 Quoted in: "De Kerken zijn niet meer overtuigd van wat ze willen," *Twentsch dagblad Tubantia*, October 31, 1964..

19 "Zes kerken in ontwerp", 171.

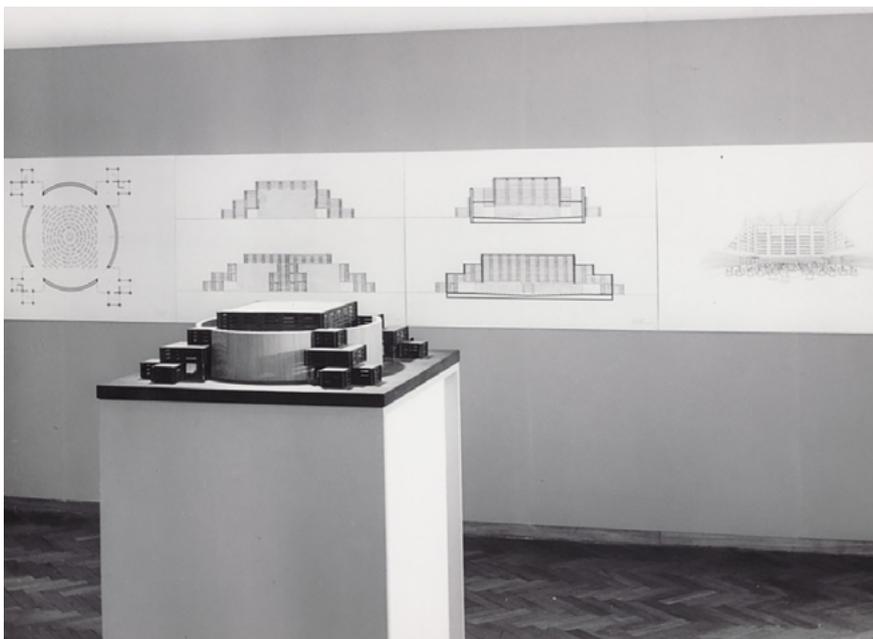
Fig. 11
Photo of the section of Jelles in the exhibition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

Fig. 12
Photo of the model of the project of Jelles (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

more lecterns could be placed and a higher pulpit. This gave several different opportunities to address the audience. The jury appreciated the architectonic ability and admitted that it was sublimely composed but wondered if there was enough 'relaxation' in the design, that could have liberated the way towards a greater lucidity. The central space would be almost mystical and lightened only by the cubic roof light.

Evert Jelle Jelles, who grew up in Indonesia, finished his studies in Delft with J.H. van den Broek and Cornelis van Eesteren, both exponents of the Modern Movement. Jelles admired the functionalist principles, and he was especially influenced by the work of Jan Duiker, whose archive he saved from destruction. He usually combined those principles with the visible use of wood and (concrete) brick and the configurative coupling of square floor plan elements, a form comparable to cell structures. His proposal for the church was conceived as an open pavilion in the clearings between the wooded areas. His chapel has four glass walls, creating, as it were, a covered open space in the forest. One could as it were look through the pavilion. A far overhanging square roof with a roof light in the middle dominated the project. This determined the main structure that divided and connected the roof girders and the double uprights. Transparency had become thus almost a religious factor. There were two small annexes attached to the church area where the necessities for the service could be kept and a toilet could be installed. The architect stated that he wanted to make 'almost nothing', an open place in the forest with a shelter of minimal means that took in regard the surrounding plants. With his symmetrical construction of thin vertical columns and horizontal planes, Jelles created not a fascinating, dynamic sign in the space, but rather an architectonic, transparent structure in which the interior is completely subordinate to the exterior [Fig. 11]. An enormous metal roof covered the pavilion that contained an upper and lower church. The simplicity of the design and the constructive detailing appealed to some of the jury members, but others were more sceptical about its religious impact.

This place of stillness had to be a place for many activities and possibilities, from church service to a place of repent, of communication between the people, either as group or as individuals. The jury had many problems with the intentions and said that the optimal shelter with a minimal boundary lead to the opposite effect. The open place in the forest was taken over by the building and yet shelter did not provide any privacy or possibility to concentrate [Fig. 12]. The boundary between outside and inside was reduced as much as possible, but the jury was hesitant in their opinion if this was a good thing. They asked themselves if 'a view on the world' is analogous to "a sight of the forest". They nevertheless appreciated the refraining from any formal exuberance. For his project Jelles worked together with his wife, the visual artist Nienke Jelles-Schepers, who coloured the glass. The transparency of the architecture does not lead to an intensification of the experience, only the glass windows give the place some mystical significance. Jelles addresses the openness of the church to the surrounding world.



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Fig. 13
Photo of the section of Verhoeven in the exhibition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

Fig. 14
Photo of the model of the project of Verhoeven (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Verhoeven).

Fig. 15
Photo of the section of Boon in the exhibition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

The only architect who was not from Amsterdam was Jan Verhoeven.²⁰ He had studied at the Academy of Architecture in the capital with Van Eyck but shortly after finishing his studies opened an office in Amersfoort. He had designed already several housing projects. The meeting place is central in almost all of his designs with complex geometric structures. For him, the relationship between the individual and community is crucial and based on equality. In his proposal for Driebergen circle and rectangle determine the lines of the structure in which one would not so much recognize a church when viewed from the outside but rather a temple. Inside, the communion table is exactly in the center of the round main shape and around it are placed loose chairs, not in rows, but irregularly distributed in the space. It is precisely these chairs that affect the ecclesiastical character of the space [Fig. 13]. They are designed so heavily that everyone sits alone in the church. Perhaps the architect also intended to give this extreme individualism a chance – but again: in a church people sit together: as a community. He wanted the pastor not on a pulpit but to sit among the people present. The jury appreciated the honesty and frankness with which this proposal for church building is presented, but nevertheless had several points of criticism. They found the space less suitable for their starting point, namely a certain liturgical mobility or flexibility. The structured light within the high wooden walls was not found very convincing in relation to the designer's objectives [Fig. 14]. He had wanted to create a sort of All-Space but the architecture was too self-complacent. The chosen space does not have many expressive possibilities. The play with the form of circles and squares did not lead to a liberating end goal. The sculptor Edvard Zegers and his wife Loekie Zondag had participated in the conception of the proposal and Edvard was responsible for the model and the design of the chairs.

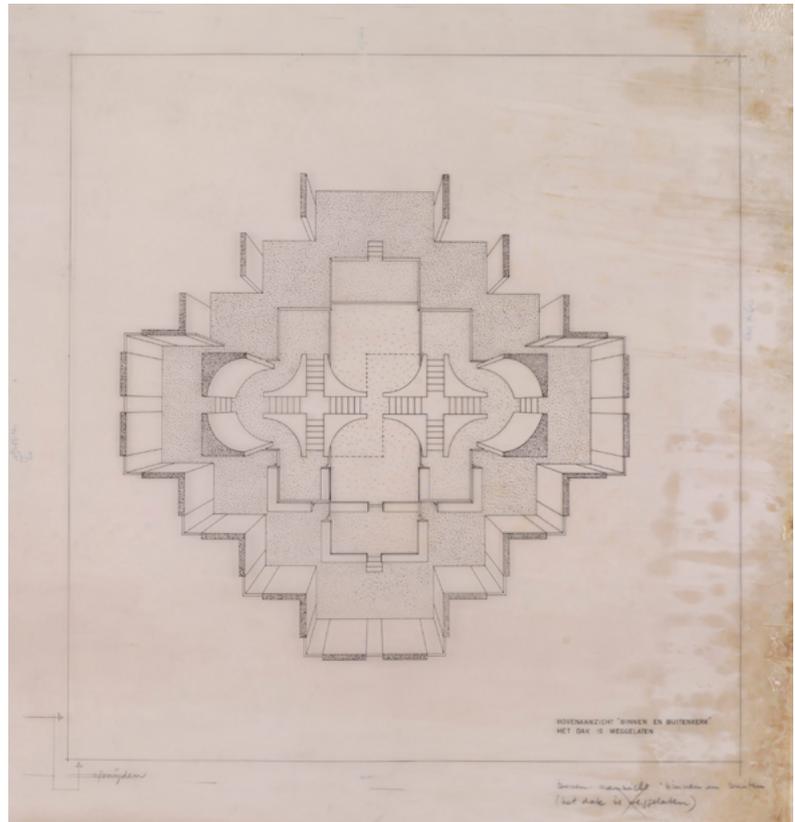
Gert Boon made a proposal together with the painter Joost van Roojen, who would work later also with Van Eyck and Hertzberger, and the sculptor Carel Visser. He was with Verhoeven the ones who had adhered fully to the requirement to work together with other artists and strive towards a synthesis of the arts. Boon believed that the religious and the non-religious are not to be divided and that people could enter without any particular intention. "The place where normal things happen becomes the 'altar' when the moment is appropriate. And what had become altar becomes the place for normal things" [Fig. 15]. Clearly Boon had envisioned a church that could also be used for catholic or other kind of services, but the designer above all stressed that he had chosen to design an "inhabitable thing". That thing, constructed out of bricks, had to be the space for everything, or at least, everything that had a religious purpose. Later he called it in a German explanation: the heart.²¹ It was not there to divide inside and outside but to unite. The structure is the altar which contains an inner and outer apse, a vestibule, the font, an inside and outside doxal, the pulpit, an inner and

20 For Verhoeven, see: Mette Zahle, ed., *Jan Verhoeven, 1926-1994. Exponent van het structuralisme* (Rotterdam: Bonas, 2012).

21 See the explanation in the archive of Boon in the Dutch Architecture Institute (NI), BOON k81-10.

outer triforium, the clocks and more. The designers opted for a habitable altar, in which and around which the inside and outside will and can always change as in a game or like a theatrical proscenium. This altar was a screen that functioned as a dividing feature between inside and outside. A sort of tent hovered over it covering only a part of the outside space. As the newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* wrote: “Boon made a remarkable combination of lower church and upper church, twelve high pillars, as it were, contained in a core block box with symmetrically arranged glass balconies around”.²²

The jury felt that everything in this design had become too much a space for play. In her opinion, the ordinary, everyday, was given much less chance than intended. It is constantly flooded and dominated by this architecture. The visual arts have acted as a catalyst for architectural thought. However, the jury was of the opinion that “the plastic power of the architectural threatens to level the plastic in its own sense” [Fig. 16].²³ His project shows that Van Roojen made a pattern for the floor design and that Visser made some sculptures and had an influence on the general appearance of the “altar” that certainly was an impressive feature of his proposal. Also, the kaleidoscopic drawings were interesting and showed his interest for a structuralist approach. Vriend, writing for the progressive weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, was sceptical about the possibilities of creating something new in light of the complexities of the times. He was, however, of the opinion that ‘despite all the (enormous) differences of opinion, the six designs have one thing in common: a complete break with all traditional and routine notions. The designs primarily do not aim at an aesthetically “successful” design but at breaking open into a new world of thought’. He was especially critical about the design of Boon. He wrote: “I really cannot take Boon’s plan seriously as it is all too dominated by the influences of modern sculpture (Carel Visser). He clearly shows that his origin from the *Forum* group sticks annoyingly to his work”.²⁴ As a sort of explanation for his design Boon had written a poem that was ridiculed by Vriend, and not only by him. After the completion of the competition Boon would keep on working on his plan that

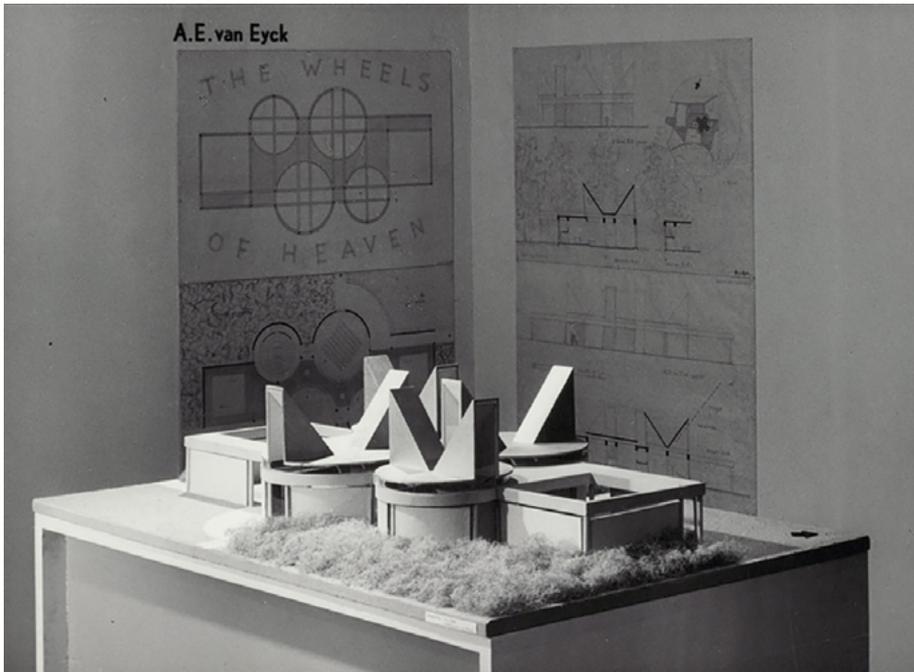


22 “Zes architecten praten en denken over kerk en maken ontwerp,” *Het Vrije Volk*, April 28, 1964.

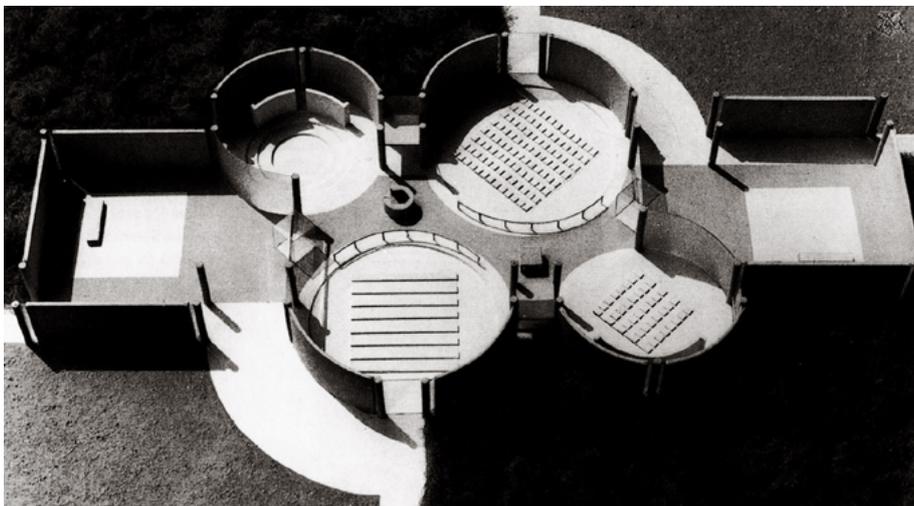
23 “Zes architecten praten en denken over kerk en maken ontwerp”.

24 J.J. Vriend, “Vis-à-vis – een kerk in ontwerp,” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, May 2, 1964.

Fig. 16
Drawing of the plan of the project of Boon (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Boon).



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was, however, never executed.²⁵ Later in his life he would complain: “We have them, thousands of plans, on paper, cupboards full, all of which failed. There is always some reason or other, or endless deliberations, or wanting too much; it’s called unfeasible”.²⁶

Van Eyck, the oldest of the invited architects but the one with the most prestige, who was born in Driebergen named his project poetically The Wheels of Heaven [Fig. 17]. It was never executed. Nevertheless, the design has had a major influence on the evolution of Dutch church building. This time Van Eyck had not chosen for a strong configurative ground plan like in the case of the Orphanage in Amsterdam. The design of his church consists of a rectangle with bulging circles on all four corners of 12.5 and 10 meters in diameter respectively. The different circles had their own atmosphere and could be used for

Fig. 17
Photo of the section of Van Eyck in the exhibition (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

Fig. 18
Photo of the model of the project of Van Eyck, without the roof (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

25 See: Hans Ibelings, *Gert Boon* (Amsterdam/Montreal: The Architecture Observer, 2013), 30-32.

26 www.somewhereiwouldliketolive.com/2015/10/gert-boon.html (Last view August 2024).

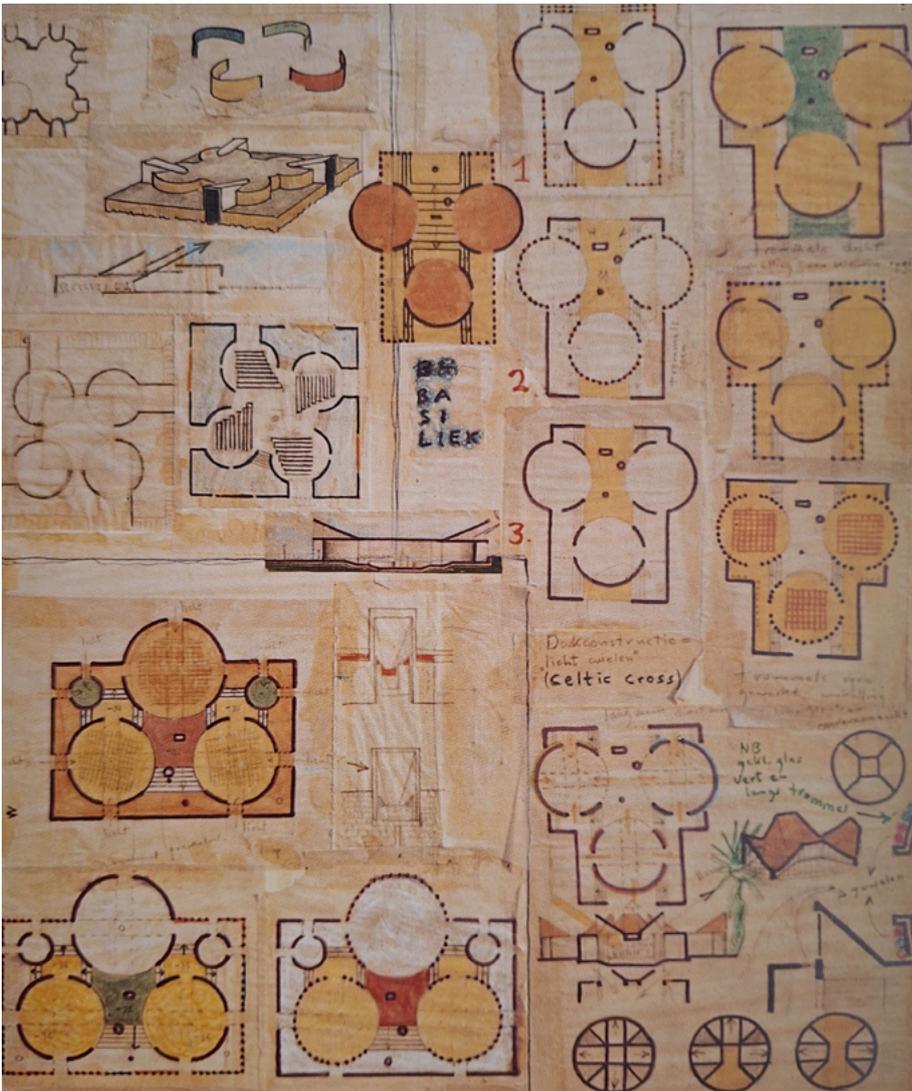
various meetings. Skylights illuminate the circles. From below this gave the image of four gears interlocking, hence the name Wheels of Heaven. On the floor plan there is a 'road' between these 'wheels', which connects the building from door to door and continues into the park on both sides. The two gaps between the "way" and the "wheels" give space to the two liturgical focal points: a place for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (commemorating Christ's Last Supper) and a place for the sermon [Fig. 18].

Van Eyck's design ensures that there are various points in the church on which attention can be focused. Depending on the seat, each visitor would experience the space or church service in their own way. Van Eyck had written a poetic text explaining his design. He had created a place where during the weekdays only a few churchgoers could worship and on Sunday a couple of hundreds, a 'space, in which takes shape, what is available in space of faith and unbelief, sin and grace, doubt and hope'.²⁷ His proposal gave way for Van Eyck to think about, what he called, twin phenomena "as inside-outside, open-closed, far-near, alone-together".²⁸ The project illustrated how that could be achieved. Important to understand Van Eyck is to know that his father was a well-known poet and later professor of Dutch language and literature in Leiden. Aldo had received his education in England and spent the wartime in Switzerland where he became friends with art historian Sigfried Giedion and his wife. There he became acquainted with modern abstract art that highly influence him. The way that he explained architecture was always in a poetic way with much attention for the values of abstract art. The explanation of his project reveals this in a clear manner. It was an opportunity to illustrate how his poetry could be used to empower the spiritual qualities of his project. For Van Eyck horizontal movement was fundamental for understanding his project that in crux was a place of transition, a "doorgangshuis" (House of Transition), as it was called in the report of the jury, where one could be alone or together with others. In the projects of the other invited architects it had become a moment of stasis and reflection, only Hertzberger had translated the concept of elevation and freedom of positioning oneself on a chosen level, but in a vertical way. A comparison of the plans of the different competitors show that the relation with the world has been dealt with in different ways.

Whereas almost all contenders had chosen to design a central space with smaller rooms, or stairs woven around it, Van Eyck was the only one who propose a totally different scheme, in which one moves through the church. He had taken the liberty in interpreting lyrically the wishes of the foundation. In contrast to Van Stigt, Verhoeven and Jelles, who had all made proposals in which there is no place for doubt, no uncertainty, Van Eyck had opted for a completely different solution. Already in his text he envisioned his attempt to break down

27 Quoted in: Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of Relativity* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 1998), 487.

28 Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven, eds., *Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles and Other Writings 1947-1998* (Nijmegen: SUN, 2008), 476.



hierarchies and to give the visitors different choices. Between tall trees of cylindrical concrete columns; between these, screen-like walls and low over column and wall, a frame work of concrete beams spanning horizontally and carrying four circular skylight structures, the configuration of which seen from below, he named "The Wheels of Heaven", a potent metaphor with both religious and secular connotations, that is evoked by the ground plan, that Van Eyck drew multiple times in his presentation drawings. The four circles together have two points of focus. They are situated in the undulating "path" which passes through the entire building from door to door and beyond through the courts into the park and which seem to be dictated by the cover of the regulations of the competition. One "encounters" two essentially ambivalent places: one for the sacrament of Lord's Supper, the other for the spoken word. As to the complex diagonality, he thinks it assists the idea of multi-centrality. The seating arrangement (only a suggestion) exploits the various implicit directions such that each person may experience the same space in a different way according to which group he chooses – including proximity, according to individual inclination, accentuating the personal power of decision. Where the diagonals cross there is, for once just space! One of the circles is amphitheatrical; it can be used for small

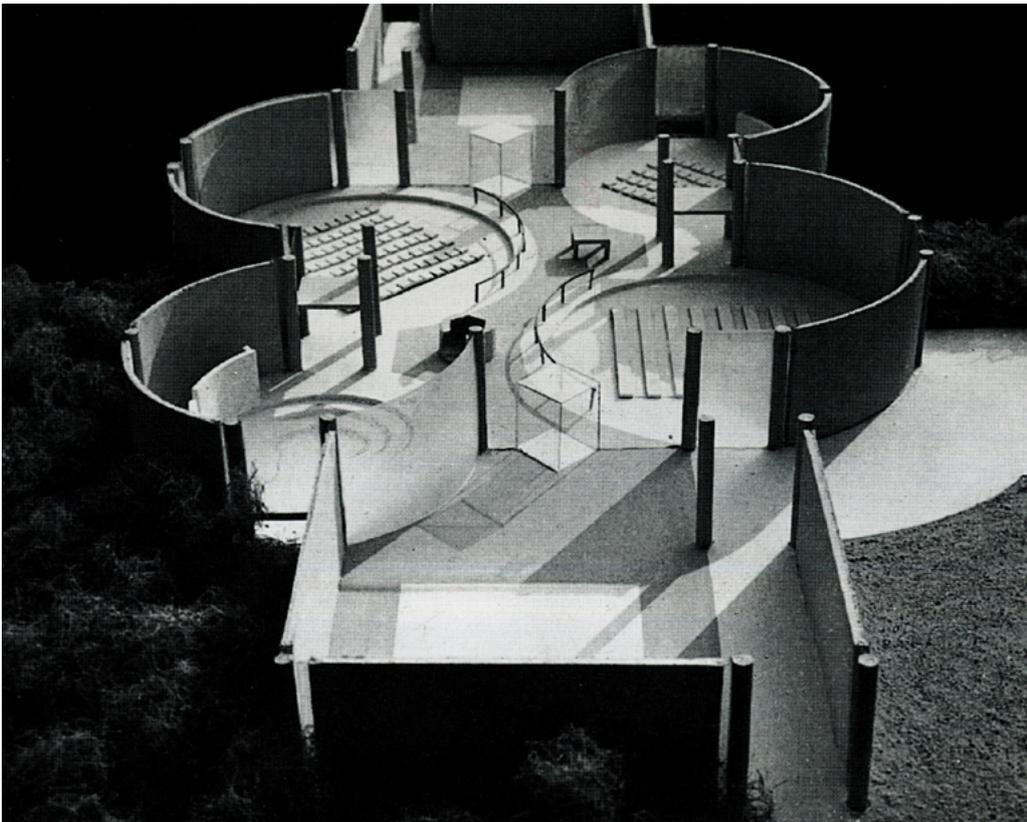
Fig. 19
Panel with the drawings of the
ground plan of the project of
Van Eyck

gatherings during wedding days, baptisms, marriages or choir. The other three circumscribe mildly without asserting their centres. The chapel opens upwards suddenly different directions taking in the treetops but also downwards here and then towards the soil. In-between it tends in-wards – churchwards – and is translucent rather than transparent. This is what Van Eyck clarified in his explanation.²⁹ Already with his evocative language Van Eyck had added something special to his proposal and given power to his design. In a way the core of his proposal consisted of a path that led through the church. With Hertzberger he was the only architect who considered movement as an important issue in the experience of the qualities of the space, as a social phenomenon. Both want, in their own but authentic way, to free themselves from the conventions of the static church but did not arrive at a solution for a new kind of church. One seeks to ascend – the staircase is a characteristic meeting place in all of Hertzberger's work, and the path that, while avoiding obstacles and distractions, must be taken in order to get through to the experience. In the other projects the church has just become an assembly room where one can listen to the sermon, while looking at nature, as in the case of Jelles, or being oriented towards what can happen in the inside space. The lightning in each project is totally different but Van Eyck is the only one that gave it a mystic and mysterious value.

Beyond the entries on two sides and the configuration of the volumetric elements, the simplicity of the proposal of Van Eyck becomes apparent when one studies the many drawings that he made of the project [Fig. 19]. The in fact paradoxical desire for both openness and seclusion of an open church, as the institute clearly imagined itself, was sublimely met by Van Eyck. Four cylinders of different sizes form the core of the building. Light only comes in from the windows in the huge triangular dormers – tree grabbers or squirrel windows as they were poetically called - that give the building its particular and remarkable silhouette [Fig. 20]. In the middle of the diagonal pathway through the building stands the elevation of the pulpit that is clearly visible from each circle. In contrast to the proposals of the other contenders Van Eyck has chosen for a one storey solution. One of his inspiration sources that is acknowledged on one of the colourful competition panels is the basilica. This was considered as the archetype for such buildings of faith. The Wheels of Heaven project can be regarded as an illustration of that what Van Eyck will shortly later call "labyrinthine clarity". This should not be confused with what the American architect Robert Venturi was pleading for, namely contradiction and complexity. In his famous book, published in 1966, he criticises the idealisation of the primitive and the elementary, in addition to the favouring of simplicity over diversity. With his project Van Eyck had already given an alternative to this view. This alternative can also be considered as a critique of the orthodox architecture of the modernists of the previous generation. As the art historian István Szénássy wrote, the use of round forms was still in an early stage.³⁰ He was afraid that too much liberty with the round

29 Vincent Ligtelijn, ed., *Aldo van Eyck, Works* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1999), 122.

30 István Szénássy, *Architectuur in Nederland, 1960/1967* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema, 1969), 148.



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line could lead to a fashionable mannerism. This was the case with some Italian architects like Paolo Portoghesi or Marcello d'Olivo, but Van Eyck was capable of integrating the circle or the circle segment in his architectonic language.

In his piece in the daily newspaper *De Tijd – Maasbode* the architecture reviewer discussed the different projects and concluded:

“The last word has not yet been spoken about the architectural problems. One can only admire the love and dedication with which the architects have devoted themselves to the subject. A church for the ecumenical community is growing and that is a great profit, because these churches could have been designed within a catholic context. One is looking for a primal church”.³¹

The architects had on the one hand sought for new forms but on the other, and more important, they were also looking for a way to change the relationship between the clergy and the dedicated visitors who would be in search for a closer connexion between the church and the world.

Shortly after the exhibition in Amsterdam the magazine *Bouw*, published among other by the building industries and the Bouwcentrum (Building Centre) in Rotterdam, where the exhibition would be held in November later that year printed a severe critique by the architect Anne Buffinga (1929-1969). His article “Impulsen voor kerkbouw” (Impulses for church building) intended to be a contri-

Fig. 20
Photo of the model of the project of Van Eyck, with roof (source: Nieuwe Instituut di Rotterdam – NI, Archive Blijstra).

31 Marius van Beek, “«Vis-à-vis». Boeiende tentoonstelling over de hedendaagse kerkbouw in het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam,” *De Tijd - Maasbode*, May 16, 1964.

bution to the discussion on church building and took the exhibition not as a point of departure but as the conclusion of his reflections on the topic. He started with a discussion of different modern churches in which the chapel of Ronchamp of Le Corbusier remained a point of reference. He spoke very highly of this chapel. According to him Le Corbusier “had succeeded in finding an expressive form for a church building without leaning against traditional, accepted forms”. Lesser positive he was about the proposals of the architects for the competition in Driebergen to which he only dedicated one page of his five-page article. The one of Boon he saw as the result of a “total misunderstanding”. “This is just sterile and impotent artistry”. “Hertzberger’s terraced church would have a place in Baroque or with Frank Lloyd Wright – only more brilliantly. Now it’s Spielerei [a Gimmick]”. Also of the other projects Buffinga does not speak positively. Jelles had created nothing but an aesthetic grid, Van Stigt a meeting room but not one for a community, Verhoeven conformed to a Calvinistic tradition. Only Van Eyck was considered as an authentic proposal, “he has not taken the liberty of juggling the liturgy but has concentrated on the immediately comprehensible; being together, going to this meeting before God, making the interdependence visible”.³² Clearly Van Eyck hit a sensitive spot in the eyes of Buffinga.

What did the representatives of the Roman Catholics in the Netherlands think about the competition? The mouthpiece of the catholic architects, the *Katholiek Bouwblad*, dedicated attention to the proposals and the exhibition but their optic was different. The engineer V. van Hezik discussed the event. He does not criticize the proposals, but merely repeats the information that was given at the exhibition. He does state that the Roman Catholic world should also think about organizing something like this in order to achieve a renewal in church building. In his view “whoever enters the church ‘practices’ himself inside, which means: hearing the proclamation and celebration the communion at the table, celebrating the dialogue with the Lord in songs ad prayer”. He admitted that a church with a clear door and threshold fits this vision. His opinion distinguishes itself from that of the architects that participated in the competition because they saw the threshold as an in-between that should facilitate the passing from the outside to the inside. A critique of the Catholic church building had already been formulated by the Belgian art critic K.N. Elnó who stated provocatively that attention from abroad for Dutch church building was due to a ‘rich variety of failures’. He had wondered why renowned modernist architects such as Rietveld, Maaskant or Van Eyck had not designed churches. According to him Dutch Roman Catholic church building was too inward looking.³³

The outcome of the competition showed a broad range of interpretations of the brief. There is not really a common denominator in the projects. Although for the architects involved in the event the competition had been an crucial experience in clearing their thoughts about the spirituality of architecture and as such

32 A. Buffinga, “Impulsen voor kerkbouw. Bijdrage tot de discussie over hedendaagse kerkbouw naar aanleiding van de tentoonstelling Vis-a-vis,” *Bouw*, no. 24 (June 1964): 852. See also the critique in: “Zes architecten praten en denken over kerk en maken ontwerp”.

33 K.N. Elnó, “Huidige Nederlandse kerkbouw in een Vlaams vizier,” *Kunst en religie*, no. 2 (1961): 25-28.

it was a fundamental moment in the history of those architects which would later be considered as exponents of Dutch structuralism, a rather vague term, that tried to define architects whose work showed only some similarities.³⁴ Some of them, like Jelles and Van Eyck would explore the possibilities of church building further without taking into account any change in the liturgical service. But in general, the repercussions were minimal. The Netherlands were anyways moving towards a more secularized society, in which the churches were losing their political power. They were in crisis. Besides, strictly spoken, the results of the intended collaboration between architect and artist may not have been what the foundation had imagined. Some of the participants had rejected such collaboration from the beginning and entirely, while others were convinced that the architect himself was the principal artist and the beauty of the space could not be enhanced by a collaboration with an artist. Van Eyck profiled himself as an architect-poet who sought to realize beauty by himself. In the 'sculptural' project of Boon the influence of the artist was the most visible. Blom was the only one who fundamentally criticised the position of the church in the world of that moment. The Reformed theologians Hans Blankesteyn and Willem Overbosch, who had both been involved in the competition for the church in Driebergen, had already objected to the location of many new Protestant churches. In their book *A hut to hide in. Churches of now and of Morgen* (1964) they wrote that post-war urban planning had not always worked out well for the location of new churches. Due to the compartmentalized structure of the neighborhoods, the various church denominations had a difficult time to find suitable locations for their new meetinghouses. When different churches were located close to each other, then according to the two theologians that was one cynical symbol of the division between the denominations. Blankesteyn and Overbosch believed that a Protestant church building should adjoin a street or square near homes and a shopping center.³⁵ In that regard the Church in Driebergen would have been a bad litmus test. However, the event was an important moment in the work of almost all participants even if the impact on the course of church building was relatively marginally. The project of Van Eyck was recommended by many and considered to be the most promising for the questions and desires of the foundation, it never came to execution due to the bankruptcy of the Institution *Kerk en Wereld*. It did, however leave its traces, in his design of the Van Ars Church in the Hague and in the Sonsbeek pavilion in Otterlo in 1965 where circled spaces were conspicuous features that permitted visitors to find privacy in a public space.

34 See: Arnulf Lüchinger, *Structuralism in Architecture and Urban Planning* (Stuttgart: Krämer Verlag, 1980); Wim J.A. van den Heuvel, *Structuralism in Dutch architecture* (Rotterdam 010 Publishers, 1992); Bernhard Denking, *Die vergessenen Alternativen. Strukturalismus und brutalistische Erfahrung in der Architektur* (Berlin: Jovis, 2019).

35 Hans R. Blankesteyn and Willem G. Overbosch, *Een hut om in te schuilen. Kerken van nu en morgen* (Baarn: Bosch en Keuning, 1964).

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