STADHUIS & MUZIEKTHEATER
STOPERA

The influence of architects, politics and the public on the design of Amsterdam's controversial city hall

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Colophon

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Cover image	The Viennese architect W. Holzbauer explains his winning design for the Amsterdam City Hall. (Source: National Archive, 1968)

Table of Contents

Summary

Public participation in building projects in The Netherlands is something which really evolved after the Second World War. Architects had a utopian vision for the city of the future, but the general population didn't find modernist designs attractive and became sceptic of modernist design. On top of that, the nation's post-war values of anti-traditionalism, openness, tolerance, and democracy suggested public participation should increase.

The origins of Amsterdam's combined city hall and music theater go back to the early 20th century, when Amsterdam's City council declared a need for a new city hall, since the old city hall at Oudezijds Voorburgwal, as well as the Royal Palace on Dam square were considered too small. A design contest for a city hall on Frederiksplein was held in the 1930s, with the winning design coming from architects Berghoef & Vegter. It was never constructed due to World War II.

A reworked design to be constructed on Waterlooplein by the same architects ended up being rejected due to significant criticism from the public and other architects, and a new design contest was held, the winner being picked in 1967. This time around, the winner was Viennese architect Holzbauer, proposing an L-shaped office volume, with accessible rooftop terraces and a prominent cantilever volume. Meanwhile, architects Bijvoet and Holt had been working on a music theater / opera in the neighbourhood of De Pijp since the late 1950s. Both projects were controversial and suffered from delays, primarily because Amsterdam lacked the funds to construct either project.

It wasn't until 1979 that a breakthrough came. The city hall design was rejected by the federal government, since it would consume too much energy. Holzbauer then got the idea to combine the city hall and the opera into one building, arguing that it would save both money and energy, as well as create a building that would be used during and outside office hours.

There were many protests against the design, both from architects and the public who demanded a different setup for the building. Holzbauer and the city council preferred however to keep the design mostly original and only make minor adjustments. Since the planning of the city hall and opera had taken so long already, they didn't want to create an entirely new design, but instead wanted to quickly start construction. The first post was driven into the ground in the summer of 1982, but not before protestors rioted on the building site first.

The opening of the Stopera was in 1986, and the event was overshadowed by protestors. Protests and criticism had been unable though to alter Holzbauer's vision for Amsterdam's city hall, and remarkably little was changed about the design to please critics. Today, the Stopera stands as a symbol to highlight that every project should be integrated into not only an urban environment, but also a culture in which everyone has different opinions. Finding a good middle ground to please everyone is a difficult task.

Introduction

At first glance, it is a simple building, but there haven't been many buildings in The Netherlands that have been as controversial as the Stopera, Amsterdam's combined city hall and music theater in one building. Nestled upon the grounds once inhabited by the Jewish neighbourhood of Vlooienburg, the Stopera witnessed a tumultuous journey through time, marked by political opposition, cultural dissent, and a design evolution spanning half a century.

From the very beginning there were doubts about the plans for a new city hall: did Amsterdam even need a new city hall? Wouldn't it be better to renovate the existing royal palace on Dam Square and build more housing instead? Where should such an important building be placed? And above all, who would bear the costs of it? The result was protests, criticism, redesigns and delay after delay.

The idea behind the Stopera of combining two functions in one building was meant to adress some of the concerns. It would keep costs down and would also lead to a more energy efficient design, compared to having two separate buildings. On top of that, it would give an increased perception of necessity, since Amsterdam, being seen as the cultural heart of The Netherlands, had been looking to build a music theater for a while. However, even after several design iterations, protests would still occur during the start of the building's construction and the opening.

While existing literature traces the evolution of the Stopera's design, a critical void remains in understanding the underlying motivations and the subsequent impact on the building's architecture and urban integration. This research embarks on a journey to unearth how citizens were informed about the design, how they were able to share their thoughts and give their input. The goal is to analyse how the design changed based on the input from several different sides, such as the public, the people from the city council and the national government, architects and other professionals.

This research, by diving into city and national archives, will analyse the relationship between public opinions, political decisions, and design choices, and aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of how large and impactful structures can be better integrated into the existing urban and cultural fabric.

In what ways have opinions and criticism from the public, politicians, and architects affected the design of the Stopera?			
Subquestion 1 Design process	**Subquestion 2** Urban integration	**Subquestion 3** Politics	**Subquestion 4** Societal response
How was the Stopera's final design selected/decided on and by whom?	How is the building positioned in the existing urban fabric?	What considerations did the Amsterdam city council and national politics have during the design process?	*How did the public and architects react to the different design proposals?*
Topics: - Site choice - Design contest(s) - Alternative designs - Jury members	**Topics:** - Size - Orientation - Access	**Topics:** - Site choice - Design process length - Costs	**Topics:** - Combining functions - Criticism from architects - Criticism from the public - Protests

Figure 1 | Research scheme

Literature Review

During any architectural analysis it is important to try and find the answer to three important questions: the what, the how and the why of the design. In the case of the Stopera, much has been written about the design already, and in order to position new research into the existing literature it is important to know which of these different aspects have been explored already.

Bakker (2015), who is a historian, provides a glimpse into the planning and design process, offering a visual journey through preliminary designs. This source serves as a global overview into the design process, unveiling the initial blueprints and conceptualizations that eventually shaped the building.

Architecture critic and writer Van Rooy (1986) goes a bit more in depth and gives a detailed description and photo report of the whole design and building process. It also includes quotes from politicians, architects, artists, protestors and builders.

Historian and writer De Liagre Böhl (2016) contributes a historical perspective, encapsulating the plans, discussions, and protests surrounding the Stopera's construction. This comprehensive work chronicles the narrative of dissent and approval, revealing the intricate dance between societal expectations and political decisions that paved the way for the Stopera's emergence.

De Viet's student thesis (2016) presents a detailed analysis of the early design process before and during the first design contest in the 1930s, unraveling the complexities of decision-making through different design iterations. This source offers a nuanced exploration of the various influences shaping the Stopera's initial form, bridging the gap between conceptualization and realization.

The piece from historian and architecture critic Bekaert (1968) adds a critical lens to the discourse, offering insights into the desire for a new city hall and the rejected designs. The critique of the contest for the city hall and analysis of designs contribute a valuable historical perspective, highlighting the socio-political undercurrents that influenced the Stopera's creation.

Magazine articles from De Architect (1986) published directly after the Stopera's completion provide a post-construction analysis. These articles, in two parts, offer a holistic view of the building's conception and construction. The first article outlines the broader architectural narrative, while the second delves into the intricate details of how the building is assembled, providing valuable insights into the marriage of design and engineering.

While some of these sources discuss "the what" of the design, and others also discuss "the how", none of the sources really discusses "the why". De Liagre Böhl comes close, in that he discusses how the building was designed and what the response was from society, but it doesn't put a concrete link between the criticism and the impact that it had on the design.

Methodology

In the exploration of the design process for a new city hall, literature, particularly magazines like Streven and news articles, serves as a key source. The focus lies in delving into the political intricacies that influence decision-making and the actual construction of such a significant civic structure. Through an analysis of literature, the aim is to trace the evolution of design decisions, revealing previous iterations and the political landscape that ultimately shapes the final design.

Considering urban integration, the examination broadens to original building drawings and news articles, notably those from Parool. Architectural drawings provide a lens into the architect's vision for seamlessly connecting the new city hall with its surrounding urban fabric. Meanwhile, insights gleaned from news articles shed light on how professionals interpret this integration, considering factors such as the building's size and its impact on the environment.

Turning to politics, insights from De Liagre Böhl's work and news articles are scrutinized to comprehend the political decisions made throughout the design process. Here, the objective is to discern the rationale behind the city council's decisions and how these choices are reflected in the final design. This investigation seeks to unravel the reasons behind the chosen design and the underlying motivations driving its selection. Archival material, such as municipal documents can help in this area too.

Examining societal response, newspaper articles and archive documents come into play. Through an analysis of public opinion expressed in newspapers and understanding the political process documented in archives, the aim is to explore the diverse viewpoints on various design iterations. Furthermore, this investigation seeks to uncover how these opinions influence subsequent iterations of the building's design, thereby shaping its future evolution.

1. Civil Participation

Nowadays, it's quite common for Dutch people to let their voices be heard in building projects. This wasn't always the case however. Analyzing the history of civil participation in building projects can help understand whether this process was normalised during the design phase of the Stopera, and whether it would have made sense for the designers of the Stopera to get the public involved early on in the design phase.

Participation before World War II

During the Dutch Golden Age (17th century), urban planning and design was a top-down process which was only supervised by committee members, well-recognized architects and treasurers, who evaluated the functionality, beauty and potential revenue of the plan. Some rich civillians could influence decisions as well. (Abrahamse, 2019).

Public-participation was highly restricted all the way through to the post-industrialisation period. For example, the general expansion plan in Amsterdam from 1934 was very much a top-down, utopian plan controlled by the Urban Development Department Division, which was a collaboration of architects, urban planners and economists, and supervised by the government. Visions for more flexible schemes were always avoided by the government, since those would obstruct the planning process (Kras et al., 1983).

Participation after World War II

After World War II, reconstructing buildings that were damaged or destroyed during the war became very important. There was a lot of optimism about building projects. For example, the bombing of Rotterdam allowed for the city to be rebuilt according to modernist principles. The city could look however people desired.

In the 1960s however, this optimism was replaced by scepticism. In the case of Rotterdam, people felt the new centre was barren, impersonal and cheerless. It needed to become more attractive, vibrant and greener, and especially, it needed more homes and recreational amenities (Post-war Reconstruction Community Rotterdam, n.d.).

The 1950s and 1960s also saw the expansion and creation of new cities, due to demographic and economic growth. Many of these urban plans attempted to create the "city of the future". It would soon turn out however that many people didn't want to live in this modernist utopian vision, which ended up attracting social problems (Provoost, 2013).

State-owned enterprises such as the postal service (PTT), railways, and the tax department served as significant clients for modernist designers, converging to convey the nation's post-war values of anti-traditionalism, openness, tolerance, and democracy. Closer to the 1990s however, Dutch modernism started to gain a negative reputation (Design Museum Den Bosch, 2019).

It was precisely because of these post-war values that public participation seemed like a natural aspect of design, as it is more democratic. However, it was also because people started opposing modernist design that participation became more important, allowing designers to create the type of urban environment that people want to live in.

2. Historical Background

Ever since the Amsterdam city council was ordered to vacate the Royal Palace on Dam Square to make room for king Louis Napoleon in 1808, the council needed a new city hall. The council would from then on use a building on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal as a city hall, but this building was considered too small for the municipality to fit all of its branches. In the 1920s, the municipality would start looking for a location where a new city hall could be built (Bakker, 2015).

Design competition

The Palace for Popular Diligence (Paleis voor Volksvlijt) burned down in 1929, which opened up its site on Frederiksplein to construct the the new city hall. At first, the municipality was still in doubt about whether to return to the Royal Palace, but

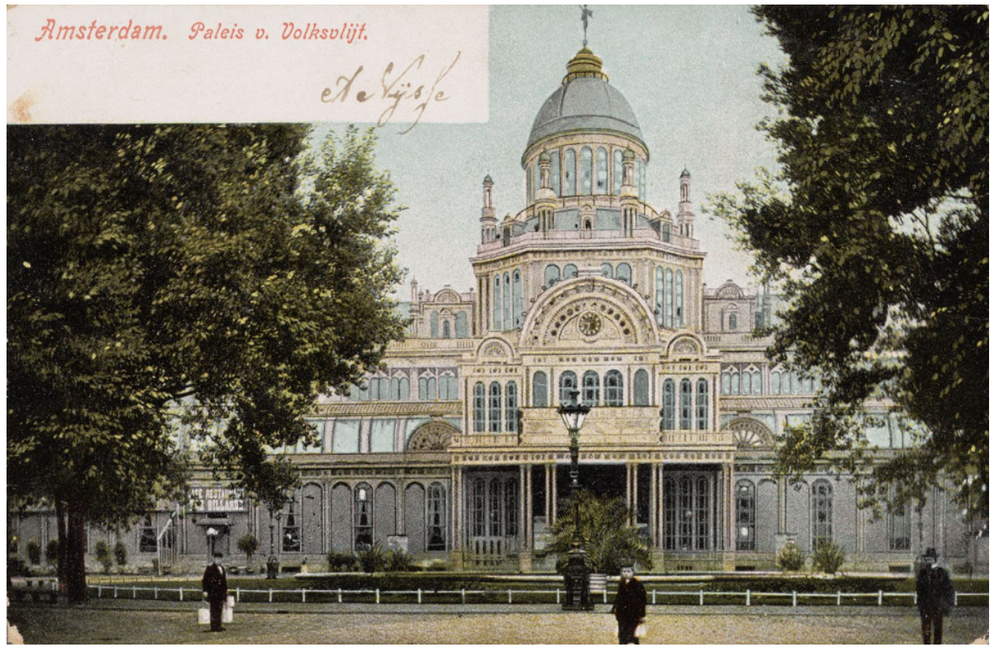


Figure 2 | Palace for Popular Diligence (Source: Amsterdam city archive, approx. 1920)

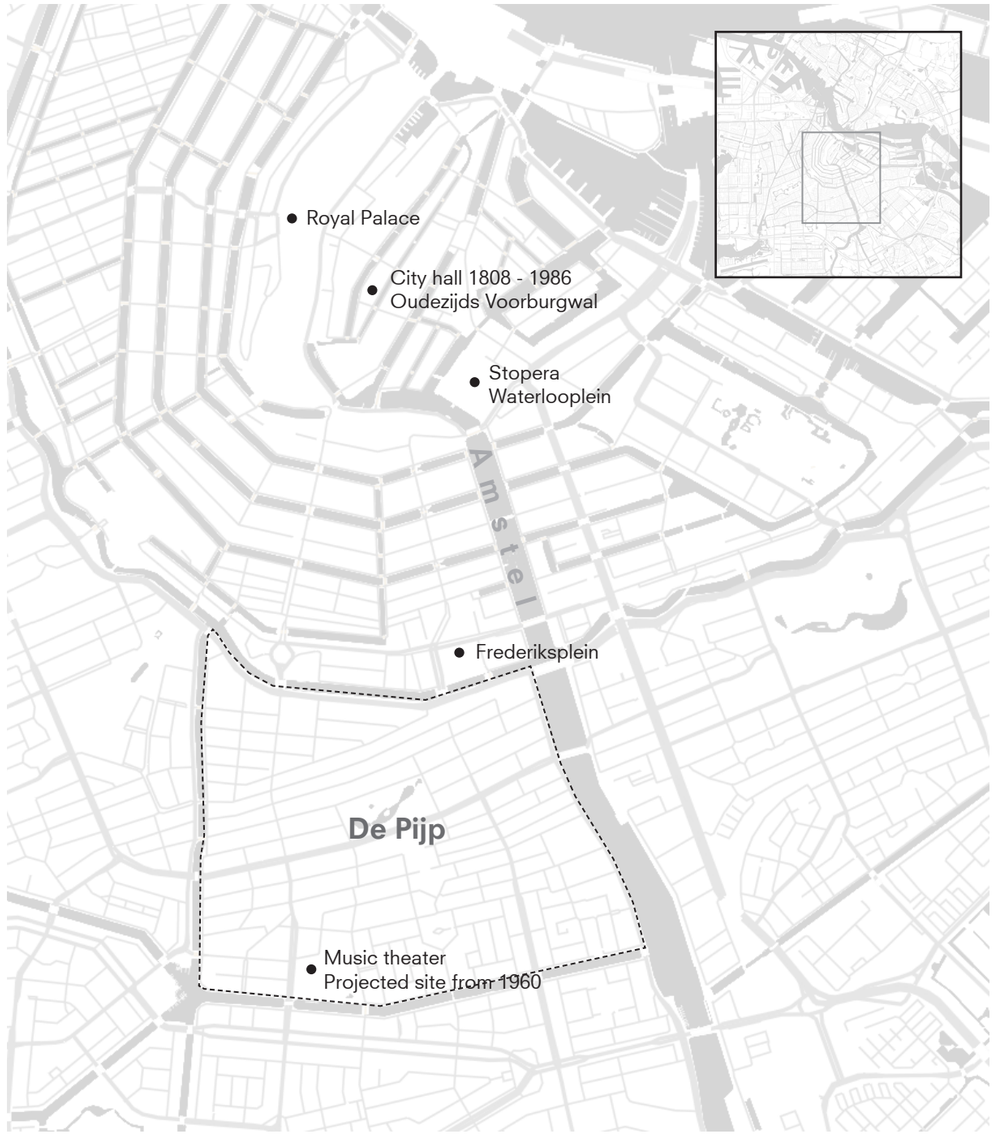


Figure 3 | Important sites mentioned troughout the chapters (Source: own work, 2024)

ended up selling that building to the state in 1935 for fl. 10.000.000. The municipality hoped to use this money to fund the construction of a new city hall. A contest to design a new city hall was held in 1936, in which only Dutch architects could enter (Bekaert, 1968).

225 architects ended up submitting a design. None of the designs were deemed good enough to win, but there were 4 designs that, with some changes, were seen as having potential. The jury, consisting of mayor Willem De Vlugt, Councillor for Public Works Salomon Rodrigues de Miranda, and a few architects, asked for these designs to be further developped. In 1942, the design called "Motto Belfort" from the duo Johannes Berghoef & Johannes Vegter was chosen as the winner (see figure 4), but since this was in the middle of World War II, the design couldn't be built (De Viet, 2016).

After the war, the primary focus was on restoring the damage from the war. Vlooienburg, a former Jewish neighbourhood, was damaged and largely empty, since the inhabitants were deported during the war.

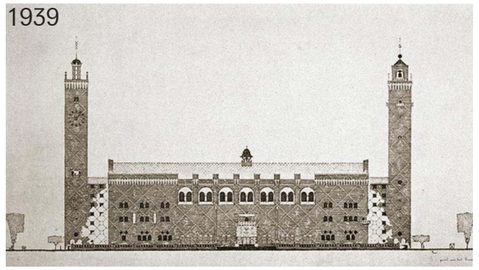


Figure 4 | J.F. Berghoef & J.J.M. Vegter; design iterations of 'Motto Belfort' (Source: De Viet, 2016)

It was seen as a more central location than Frederiksplein and redevelopment could breathe new life into the area. During the 1950s Berghoef & Vegter were asked to change their design to fit this location in Vlooienburg, next to Waterlooplein, as well as modernise it. The location on Frederiksplein could then be used for an opera, since the city wanted to build that as well (Bakker, 2015; De Viet, 2016).

After some feedback and redesigns, the definitive design was finished in 1961. The building had become more box-shaped and modernist. The city council was in favour of the design. Mayor Van Hall: "I am affected by the simplicity and sleekness of the new building and by the manner it adds to the image of the buildings along the Amstel with its contemporary architecture and construction method and by the way it opens up for the citizens" (De Volkskrant, 1961).

There was also a lot of criticism on the design however. Famed Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck called it "a sick setup" and "an unimaginably childish piece of provincial fascism" (Bakker, 2015). According to Jongeling (1962), the public had started calling the design "shoebox on the Amstel", while he himself criticises there being no visual distinction between representative spaces and offices.

An article from Algemeen Dagblad (1964) mentions a council meeting in which the final design is discussed as a result of all the criticism. "The building committee (an advisory organ) has come to the conclusion that the new construction plan of Berghoef and Vegter is open to so much criticism that it will not be possible to maintain it without further ado. It is even being considered to abandon the entire design and give a new assignment to others".

As a result of this advise, the cooperation between the city council and Berghoef & Vegter was ended. "Amsterdam will have to build a city hall that will withstand the test of centuries of criticism. At this stage, the Mayor and Aldermen have not deemed it responsible to continue the collaboration with the aforementioned architectural group" (Trouw, 1964).

28 years had gone by since the beginning of the design competition, and Amsterdam still didn't have a city hall. A decision was eventually made to hold another design competition. This time however, it would be internationally accessible.

3. The City Hall and the Opera

The city hall

In 1968, after 803 designs had been submitted, a winner was picked for the second design competition. This was a design from Viennese architect Wilhelm Holzbauer (see figure 5 and 6).

Holzbauer's city hall design consisted of an L-shape, in which the offices were located. These offices had a flexible layout, meaning they could be used as either individual office rooms or an open office plan. The ground floor contained a large entrance hall, with a publicly accessible terraced landscape on the roof of the lower part of the building. The idea was that this would mark a continuation of the street space into and onto the building (Holzbauer, 1985).

A prominent feature of the design was a cantilever volume, which protruded from

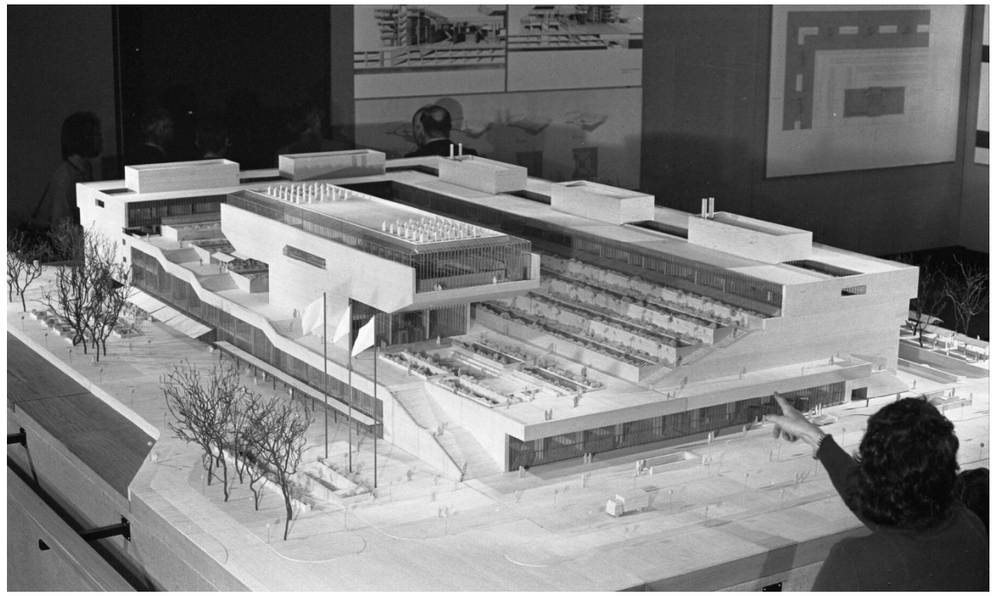
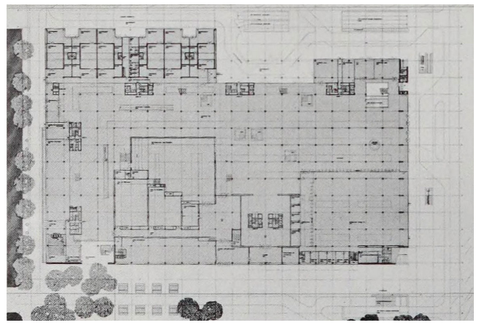
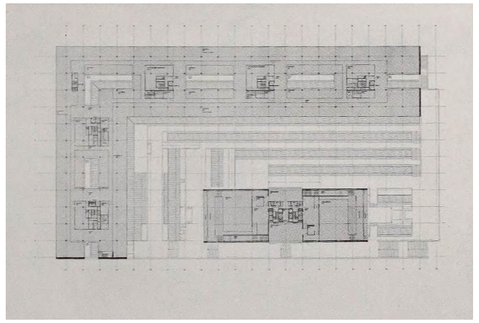


Figure 5 | W. Holzbauer; more elaborated model of the winning 1968 design (Source: Amsterdam city archive, 1972)



ground floor



3rd floor

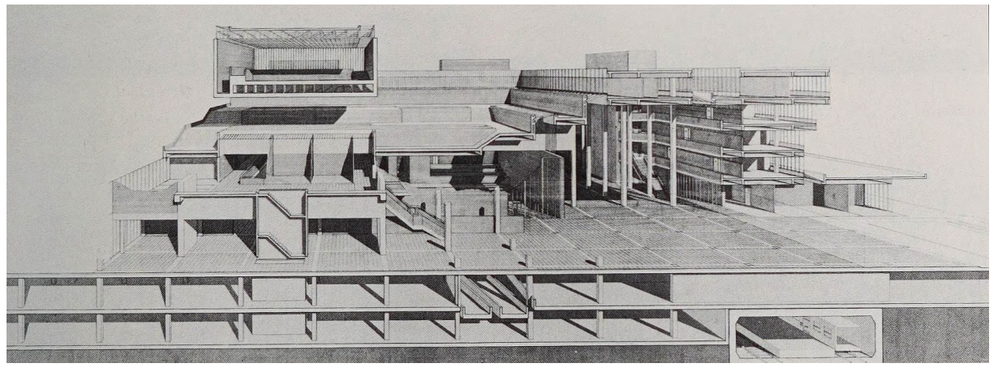


Figure 6 | W. Holzbauer; Two plans and a 3d section from his winning 1968 design (Source: Holzbauer, 1985)

the rooftop terrace. This space would house the council hall and plenary hall, which, in Holzbauer's own words would "symbolise the political presence of the seat of the city's elected representatives" (Holzbauer, 1985). He also argued that it would provide shelter on the terrace, and that by separating these rooms from the daily used offices would reduce nuisance. (Roth, 1972).

The jury praised the design for being well integrated in the urban fabric, without deminating and creating harmony between the council halls and the offices. They also praised the compensation for the impactful cantilever design element by going for an otherwise sober design, which would reflect the activities in the building. The city council, too, was very positive about the design. PvdA-faction leader Ed van Thijn called it an "epitome of transparency" and "symbolic for democratic governance". The council voted almost unanimously in favour of the design, despite the fl. 65 million building cost estimate (De Liagre Böhl, 2016).

Other architects and the public were less enthusiastic about the design. Especially

"The city hall may only dominate because of its symbolism, not because of its size."

- Wilhelm Holzbauer, 1968

the cantilever was controversial. People compared it to a fist or an anvil. Architect Tjeerd Dijkstra described it as "a block of council chambers full of intense and provocative symbolism, but without any functional comprehensibility". Architecture critic Wiek Röling Criticised the lack of windows and the small visitors stand, which only offered room for 100 people and couln't be expanded in the future. (Van Rooy, 1986).

Röling continues: "There are roof terraces which don't go anywhere. Sure, it might be nice to climb up and down, but it doen't lead anywhere. The clock tower (missing from figures 5 and 6, since it was scrapped in 1970) is standing lost beside the building and all in all I hope Amsterdam will find a better use for its energy than this outdated dream of a 19th century regent's bastion".

According to Heddema (1979), there was also citicism about the enormous size of the building. Holzbauer claims: "I tried making the building smaller. But that didn't work out. From an urban planning point of view it was not a sight, such a small town hall on such a large Waterlooplein".

The opera

Besides a city hall, Amsterdam also had the intention of building an opera, since the city didn't have one. Since the city hall was now planned to be constructed on Waterlooplein, the opera could then be constructed on Frederiksplein, and in 1956 an order to work on plans for an opera building on that site was given to the architects Bernard Bijvoet and Gerard Holt. However, in the 1960s, the site had been claimed by the Dutch Bank (Nederlandse Bank) to construct their office. It was then decided to find a location in De Pijp

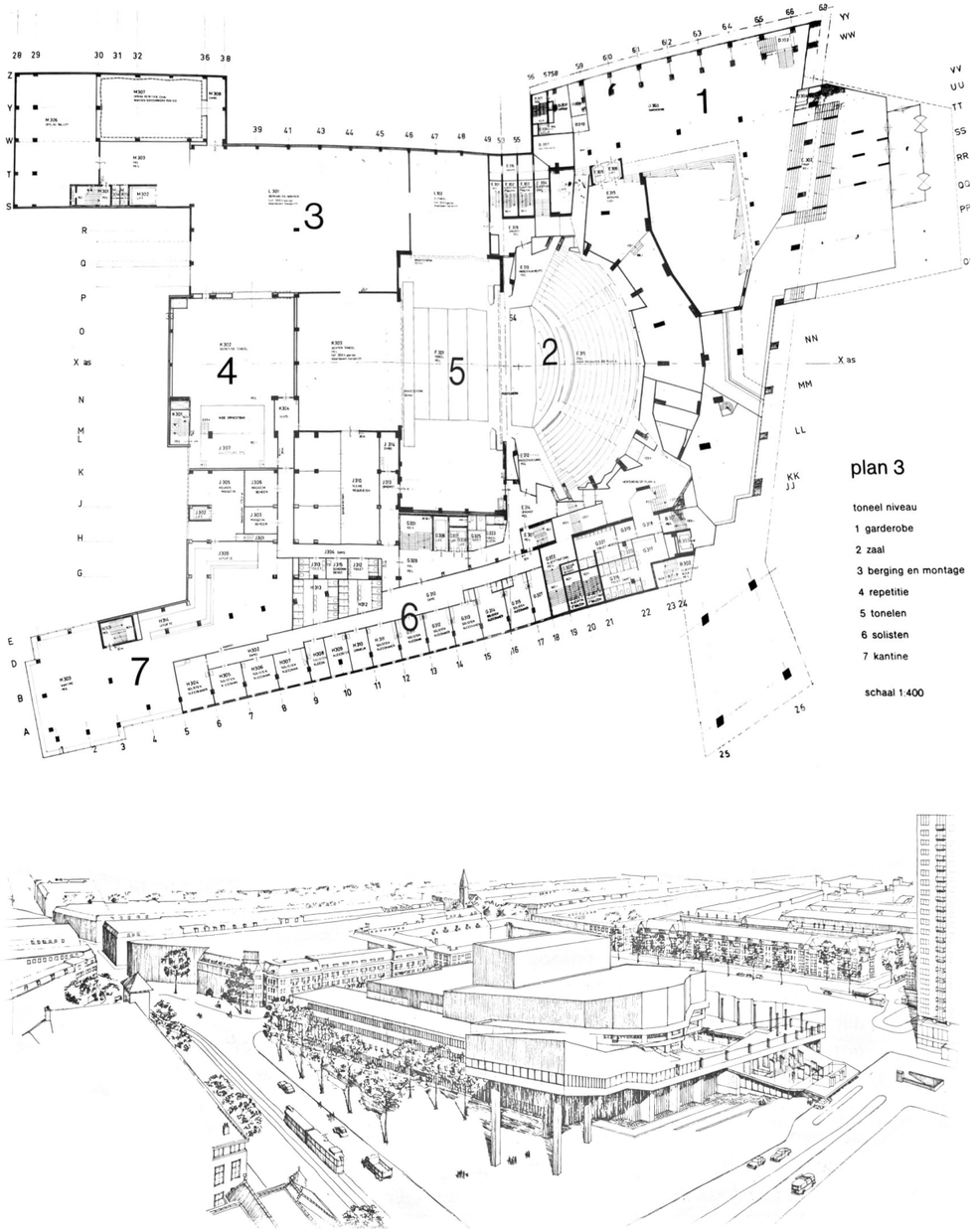


Figure 7 | B. Bijvoet & G. Holt; definitive design for a music theater along the Ferdinand Bolstraat in De Pijp (Source: National archive, 1972)

instead, a neighbourhood south of Frederiksplein (see figure 3), which was to be remediated. (Bakker, 2015).

From newspaper articles it becomes clear that this building had its own share of protests against the construction. Algemeen Dagblad (1960) reports that the city council wanted to have the building constructed on the Ferdinand Bolstraat, despite protests from citizens and the association of Dutch architects. A location was found at the site of the Old Rai, a convention center which was planned to be be demolished. The site was spatious, next to the water and could offer lots of parking space. Figure 7 shows the design from Bijvoet & Holt for the opera.

Figure 8 | Protest slogans against the opera, written on the façade of the Old Rai (Source: National archive, 1976)

An article from Het Parool (1976) reported that a gathering was held in community center Pax, after residents of De Pijp demanded more paricipation in the plans. They were still against the construction, fearing nuisance from increased car traffic. Residents also wanted more neighbourhood facilities instead, such as a swimming pool, a sports hall or green spaces. Councilor Pitt Treuman assured residents there would be plenty of space for other facilities next to the opera.

Deadlock

The city hall was meant to be a symbol of democracy, but was interpreted by the public and architects as an expression of power and authority. The music theater was designed as being for the people, but residens wanted a sports hall, greenery and housing instead. The sites for both projects were cleared in the 1970s, but as time passed without construction starting on either the opera or the city hall, it seemed as though both projects would be abandoned.

4. From City Hall to Stopera

In the end there were several reasons that caused the construction of both the city hall and the opera to be postponed. On one hand, the city didn't have the funds to construct the buildings (the opera's cost estimate had risen to fl. 140 million, while the city hall was expected to cost fl. 300 million by 1979). The federal govenment would subsidize part of it, but only if Amsterdam could show a balanced city budget, which they couldn't. On top of that, the large indoor spaces of the city hall meant that the building would consume too much energy.

A change of plans

On April 9, 1979, Dutch prime minister Dries van Agt announced that the plans for Amsterdam's city hall were rejected as a result of his new energy saving policy for government buildings. Amsterdam mayor Wim Polak was annoyed by this decision, since the plans were already decided on. An alternative idea was already on the table however. Holzbauer got the idea to break the deadlock on both his city hall design and the opera, by combining the two projects into one building. It would save energy, as well as reduce the total costs for both projects by fl. 80 million (De Vries, 1979).

The idea was that, since the city hall is used during office hours and the opera outside of office hours, the two functions wouldn't interfere, but rather create a building that's always alive. Spaces can be shared by both functions. Cars from the office personnel are replaced by cars from opera visitors. The restaurant gets visitors all day, but in the evening it's a different crowd than during the daytime.

Mayor Polak and alderman Jan Schaefer were impressed by the angle presented by Holzbauer, and immediately gave him the order to elaborate the design. Prime minister Van Agt would agree "if Amsterdam can prove it is a good idea". Holzauer informed Bijvoet and Holt, architects of the opera, about his idea. They were hesitant, but ended up agreeing to it, and the three of them started working on the combined plan. Bijvoet passed away in late 1979 and Holt's son-in-law Cees Dam would take his place in the design team. Holt would leave the project soon after (Van Rooy, 1986).

Figure 9 | Holzbauer and Dam present the design for the combined city hall and opera (Source: National archive, 1981)

The municipality had the desire to increase involvement from the public in policy and decision-making in the project, as evidenced by a municipal magazine from October 1979 (National archive, 1979a). Important actors identified in the document are the future users of the building (such as the Opera Foundation and The National Ballet), interested organizations, citizens of Amsterdam and residents in the immediate vicinity.

The new design

In 1980, the preliminary design was ready (see figure 11). In the new plan, the cantilever volume, large indoor hall and rooftop terraces would make room for the opera, which in terms of volume would be about as big as in the old opera plan. The city hall would be 100.000 m^3 smaller, but offer slightly more office space, which would make the city hall more of a municipal office (Heddema, 1979).

The new design contained only one

Figure 10 | Indoor street in the Stopera (Source: own image)

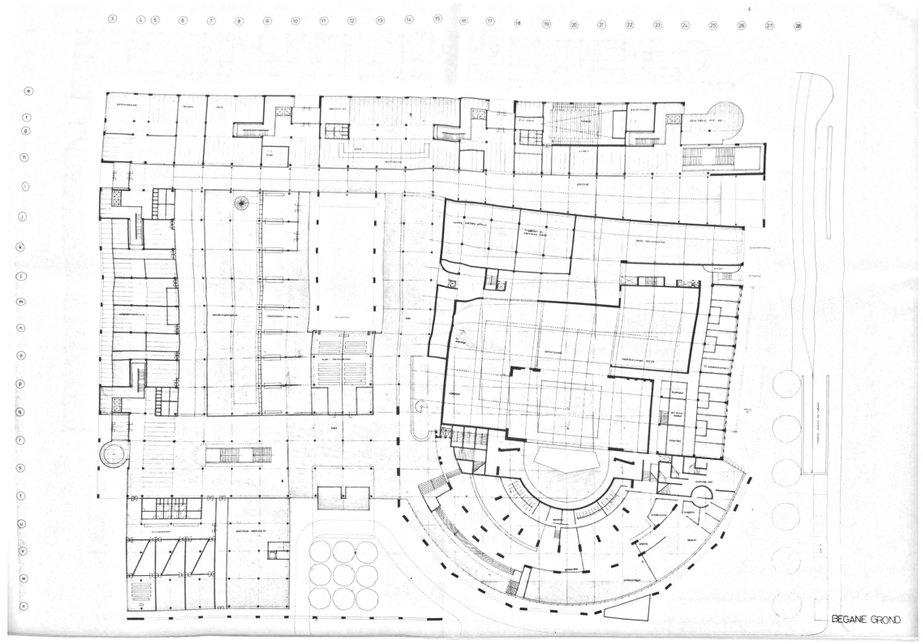
council hall, while the plenary hall was scrapped from the design. The council hall was positioned on the west side of the building, at the end of the L-shaped office complex as a semi-indepentent space, overlooking the Amstel. In order to adress previous complaints about the size of the building, the new design contained an indoor street through the building, meaning people could walk through the building to get to the other side, instead of having to go around it (see figure 10).

Criticism and alternatives

Opposition against the new plan quickly arose from the management of the Okura hotel, which was constructed in the early 1970s in De Pijp, with the promise that the opera would be constructed next to it. Management claimed they would've chosen a different site and shape for the hotel, if the opera hadn't been promised to be constructed right next to it (Trouw, 1979).

Several political parties, especially left wing, had their doubts with the new plan as well. The Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP) called for the existing city hall to be renovated and build housing on Waterlooplein instead. The Communist Party of The Netherlands (CPN) and Political Party Radicals (PPR) were worried the building would exceed the fl. 230 million budget. The PPR was also a ferm proponent of setting up new program requirements, with plenty of participation opportunities for the public (National archive, 1979b).

It was around this time that the term "Stopera" arose. It was an ironic term made up by action groups against the building, combining the words "stadhuis" (city hall) and "opera". The irony comes from the word "stop" being in the name



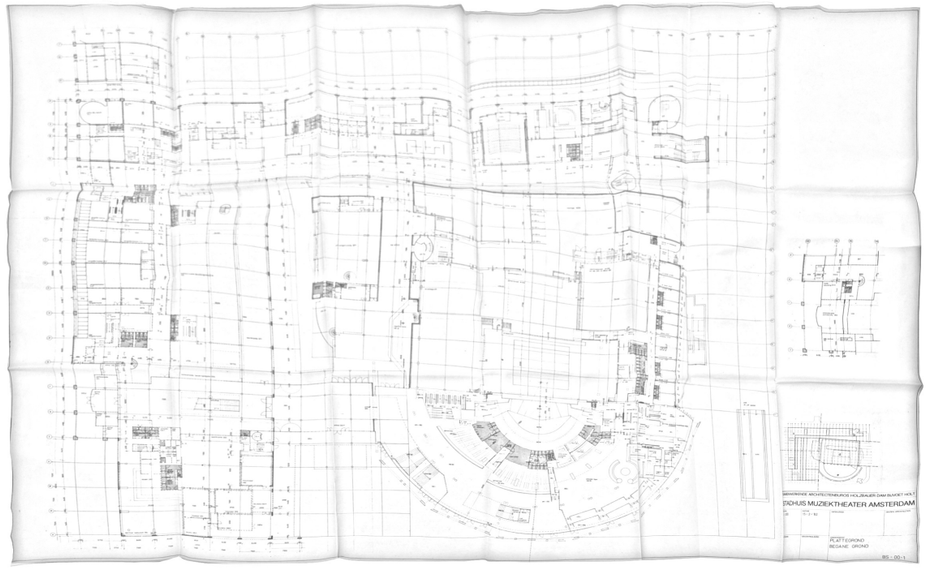


Figure 11 | W. Holzbauer, C. Dam; Preliminary (top) and definitive (bottom) design drawings of the Stopera's ground floor (Source: National archive, 1980; 1982)

as well, making it “stop opera“ (De Vries, 1985).

On September 11, 1980 there was an information meeting in the information centre of the spatial planning department. Records from this meeting highlight how the architects designed it, as well as some of the criticism people had with the design. People wanted there to be room for a market on Waterlooplein, visual separation of the long façades, and more integration with the street and surrounding environment. In response to this, the College of Mayor and Aldermen set up a working group for the design of the area (National archive, 1980).

Salomons & Van Delden (1981) report that a group of over 70 architecs and another group of civil servants from the spatial planning department had both written a protest letter to the city council, calling for the plans to be changed. Salomons calls the Stopera plan a “poor building, that will certainly not radiate the desired prestige and that has no connection with its surroundings“. Het Parool (1981) reports that Holzbauer and Dam changed the design based on this criticism, although they had different ideas about what to change exactly. Dam and the critics preferred a more radical redesign of the interior and façade, leaving more room for other functions around the building, while Holzbauer and the city council preferred small and subtle changes, which would be “clearer for the public “.

Suggestions for alternative designs were published in newspapers, such as from Rudy Uytenhaak (see figure 12) or Floris Guntenaar (see figure 13). Many of these alternate designs suggested splitting up the building into different volumes with different functions, which would, according to critics, better integrate the structure into the urban fabric. They also

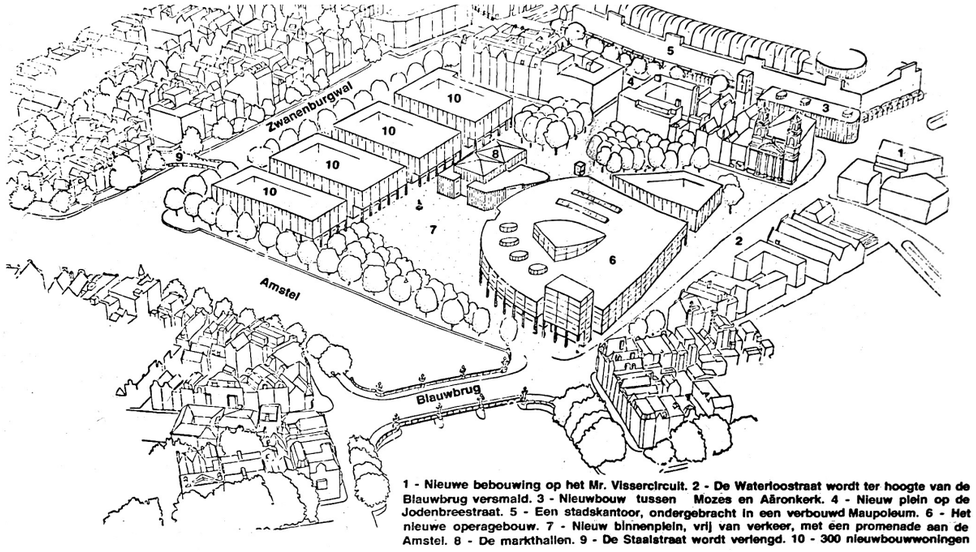


Figure 12 | R. Uytenhaak; Alternative design for the Stopera, which suggests splitting into different volumes and making room for other functions (Source: Het Parool, 1981)

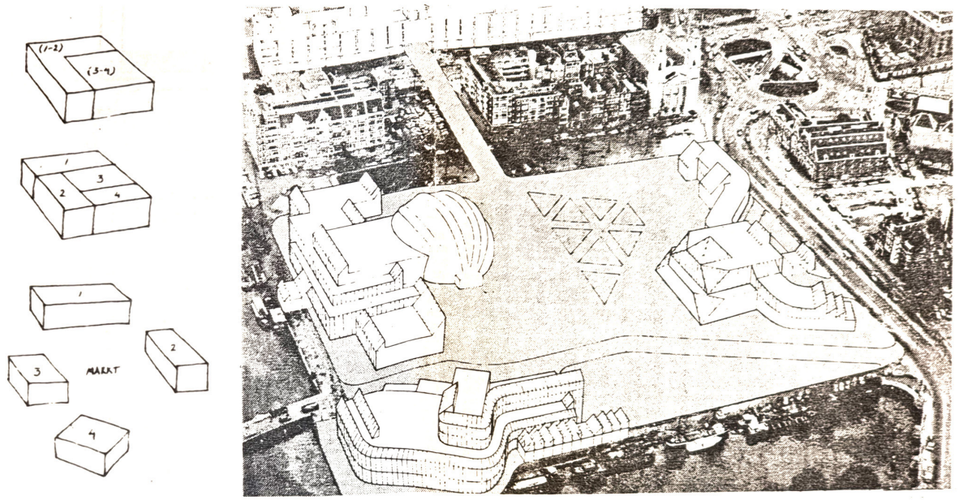


Figure 13 | F. Guntenaar; Alternative design for the Stopera, which also calls for splitting up the volume (Source: NRC Handelsblad, 1982)

suggested adding more housing, since there was a significant housing shortage in the 1980s, as opposed to when the building was initially planned in the late 1960s.

Holzbauer's approach of only making small adjustments was chosen in the end however. The Stopera, as it was going to be built, would not become a separation of volumes with room for housing and a market in between, but would instead be a colossus with room for a market next to it, but not for housing. The definitive design in 1982 ended up being very close to the preliminary design from 1980, with the primary elements of the building remaining largely unchanged, despite so many protests.

5. Building Phase and Beyond

In early july of 1982, after almost half a century of designs, rejections, redesigns, protests and delays, construction of Amsterdam's city hall annex opera was finally about to kick off. The site had been cleared, construction machinery had arrived, and the green light was given. It seemed as though nothing could stop the building from being realised anymore. That is, until the protestors showed up at the scene.

The start of construction

On July 5, 1982 the first post would be driven into the ground. Two days earlier however, protestors showed up at the building site. They forcefully gained access to the building site, pulling down fences that were supposed to keep them out (see figure 14). During the protest, several construction machines were lit on fire (see figure 15). Police didn't intervene in order to prevent further escalation. In the end, protestors caused for fl. 1.000.000 in damages, while the official start of construction was delayed by several days (Algemeen Dagblad, 1982).

A few days later construction was able to start, and continued until 1986 without any major incidents. However, Trouw (1986) reports that the city council cancelled an

Figure 14 | Protestors try to gain access to the building site at Waterlooplein (Source: Amsterdam city archive, 1982)

Figure 15 | Protestors have set construction machines on fire at Waterlooplein (Source: Amsterdam city archive, 1982)

Figure 16 | The Stopera under construction (Source: Amsterdam city archive, 1985)

art manifestation against budget cuts for non-established theaters, which was to be held on the Stopera's building site, out of fear for disturbances. "There are signals that riots are to be expected during the demonstration, because (old) opponents of the Stopera and squatter groups have called for this, including in pamphlets."

The opening

On September 23, 1986 was the official opening of the Stopera. Prominent guests, such as prime minister Lubbers and minister Deetman had trouble getting to the main entrance of the building, since it was blocked by a group of protestors. Queen Beatrix and Prince Claus even had to enter through a side entrance. Meanwhile, residents in the area were playing sounds of sirens and pile drivers, to protest the noise they had to endure from the construction for several years (De Telegraaf, 1986).

"Mayor Van Thijn, what a friendly city you have, such a shame."

- Queen Beatrix, 1986

There was also a lot of press present at the opening of the Stopera, both Dutch and foreign. Reporters were positive about the acoustics of the opera and about the foyer, which was elegant and provided beautiful views over the Amstel. There were however mixed feelings about the building's architecture. Some liked the simple and modest expression, while others felt it looked a bit dated and compared the building to a neighbourhood cinema. Music critic H.C. Schonberg was especially critical of the city hall portion, calling it "an unappealing, unspecial, rectangular lump of stone.

Nobody seems to have a good word to say about it" (Heg, 1986).

And the criticism continues

A somewhat famous image was published on the cover of magazine "Muziek & Dans" in 1986. On it, architect Herman Hertzberger sinks his teeth into a cake

Figure 17 | The cover of Muziek & Dans, showing Herzberger eating a Stopera-cake (Source: Muziek & Dans, 1986)

shaped like the Sopera, with the caption "The Stopera has ruined Waterlooplein" (see figure 17).

Hertzberger was very critical of the Stopera: "In terms of urban planning, the Stopera is a disaster. It is positioned incorrectly, the wrong materials have been used, again red brick, sad windows, a gray back. For a while I thought it was still under construction. Really and truly". He is also optimistic however, stating that previous controversial building projects, such as Centre Pompidou in Paris, have also not turned into the predicted disasters, and in some cases even became beloved (Lagerwerff, 1986).

Writer Ron Kaal describes the building's one sidedness: "Along Zwanenburgwal and Waterlooplein there is nothing to see but elongated brick shoe boxes, archive bins for the bureaucracy. There is no view from here possible on the rest of the complex, especially not on what is apparently intended as the face: the Music Theater". Aldo van Eyck described it as "a huge, simply painted sandwich place" (Kaal, 1986).

None of this criticism mattered anymore, however. The project was finished, Holzbauer had gotten to realise his vision (albeit with some changes) and Amsterdam finally had a new city hall, as well as an opera. And it only took 50 years.

Discussion

When analysing the different designs for a city hall, and comparing them to the opinions that different actors had of them, it becomes clear that the Stopera's long design process was a complex interplay between various stakeholders—ranging from the public to politicians and architects—whose opinions and criticisms significantly influenced the design process. By delving into the implications of their involvement, light can be shed on the decisions made and their impact on the final outcome.

The incorporation of public opinion into architectural projects emerged as a significant aspect of Dutch urban development post-World War II. This newfound emphasis on public participation marked a departure from previous eras, signifying a democratization of the design process. As evident in the case of the Stopera, public sentiment played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the project from its inception to completion, even if Amsterdam's politicians were having trouble adapting to this change.

From the political perspective, a pattern emerges. The only reason Berghoef & Vegter's design was never realised was initially WWII, and later due to how polarising the updated design was. Holzbauer's original design was never realised due to financial and climate performance issues. The city council was in favour however of both Berghoef & Vegter's design in 1964, as well as that of Holzbauer in 1968.

From the perspective of architects, it seemed to be quite the opposite. They always seemed to be critical of any design that was on the table. Granted, every architect had a different vision as to what the city hall should become, judging by the 803 designs that were submitted during the second design contest, so criticism to whatever design would win was almost inevitable. Especially for a building this important.

Among the public, there were mixed feelings about the city hall. First of all, some people questioned wether Amsterdam even needed a new city hall, and saw it as a political prestige project more than anything. Especially as the 1980s came closer and there grew a sig-

nificant housing shortage in Amsterdam, voices began to rise, calling for more (social) housing to be built instead.

And then in the middle of all of this commotion was an architect with a vision, who wasn't really willing to deviate too much from his idea. After all, it was the reason he won the design contest in 1968. His best response to all the criticism was probably in 1980, during the information meeting at the spatial planning department, where he stated: "Everything one makes in the architectural field is subjective. The words nice, pretty, beautiful, etc. are used subjectively. No extensive sociological research is required for the building in question. The entire history of architecture is full of buildings that were created in just a few hours. I can name hundreds".

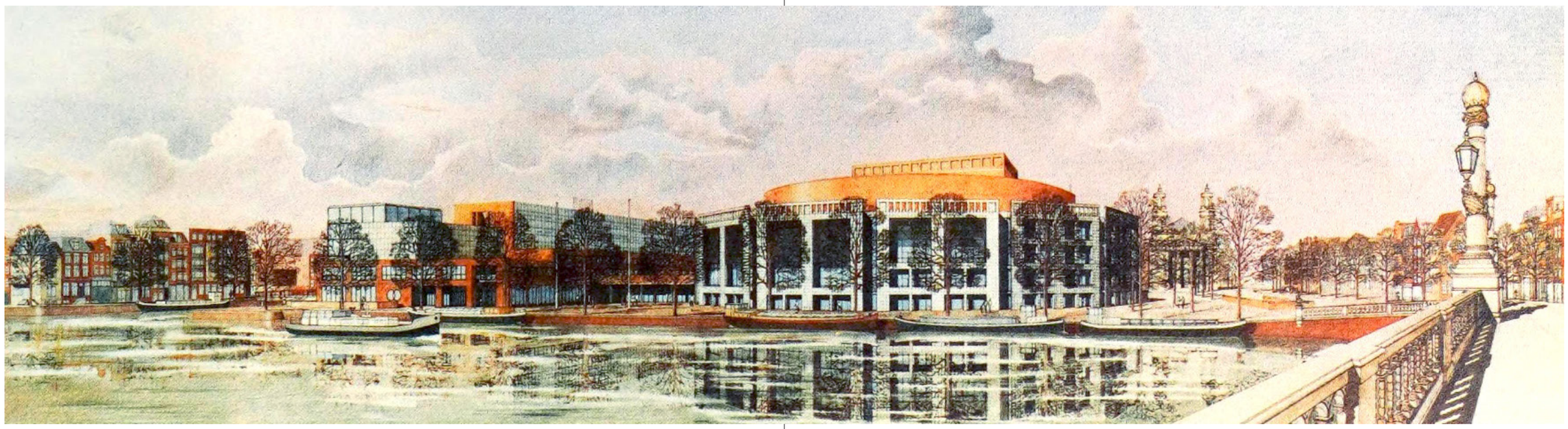


Figure 18 | Holzbauer & Dam; visualisation of the Stopera from the opposite side of the Amstel (Source: Holzbauer, 1985)

Just because extensive sociological research isn't required doesn't mean the opinion of the citizens is to be ignored however. Just as described by Herzberger in Muziek & Dans, any decent architect will of course first ask questions to everyone involved in the design process to clarify their vision. That includes the public and residents. Though to give Holzbauer some credit, the discourse surrounding the Stopera exemplifies the dynamic interplay between subjective perceptions and objective realities in shaping architectural endeavors. It highlights that there are many opinions, and pleasing all of them is an impossible task.

Conclusion

The design and realisation of Amsterdam's city hall and opera falls into a timeframe when public participation became increasingly important, and Amsterdam's city council had difficulties adapting to this change.

The first design contest for the city hall was a top down process, being organised and judged by members of the city council, though some architects were involved as well. For the redesign after the war, it was again the city council trying to shape the building into something they saw fit. At no point during the process was the public asked for their opinion on what the city hall should be, even though one could argue a city hall should represent the people.

When the design from Berghoef & Vegter was ultimately rejected, Amsterdam essentially went on to make the same mistake again. The jury once again consisted mostly of council members and some architects, while the public weren't able to voice their opinions on the design. The result was that the public and architects who hadn't heard about the reasoning and symbolism behind the design started judging it based on what they saw. Was the cantilever volume really trying to make democracy visible, or was it a more authoritarian symbol?

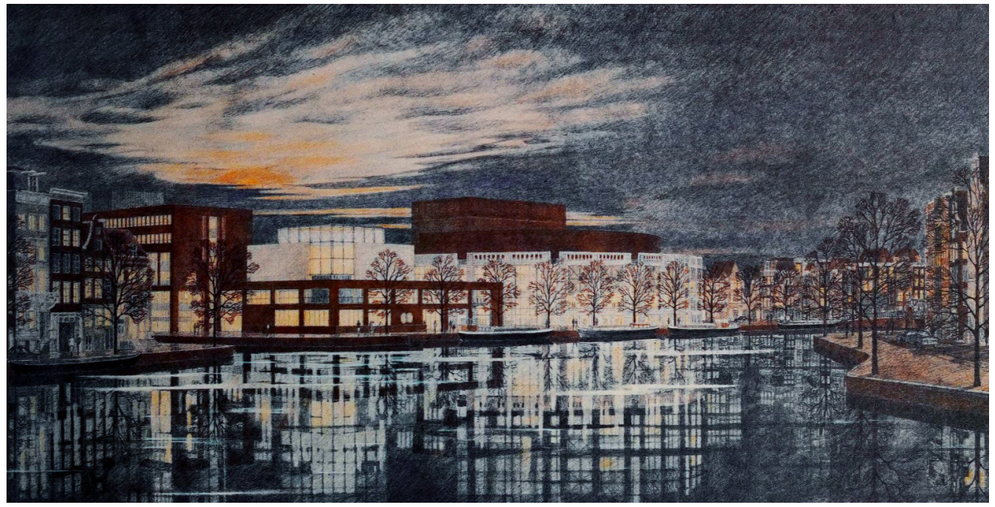


Figure 19 | Holzbauer & Dam; visualisation of the Stopera from Muntplein (Source: Holzbauer, 1985)

Then there were the people who believed Amsterdam didn't need a new city hall at all, seeing it as a waste of money, which could be spent better on renovating and building homes, especially as a reaction to the housing shortage in the 1970s and 1980s.

It also didn't help that Holzbauer was very firm on what he believed the city hall should become. When he proposed for the city hall and opera to be combined, the city council tried to increase participation and wanted to let critics be heard more. Holzbauer however, with the support of the city council, preferred to keep his vision as original as possible, only making minor adjustments to adress the worst of the criticism.

Every person, every politician, every architect, every voice has a different opinion as to what the built environment should look like. In the case of the Stopera, perhaps a more democratic process to select a winning design should've been executed. Maybe finding out what the vision of the citizens of Amsterdam was before designing anything would've been better than throwing a design at the wall and seeing if it would stick. Then again, it is impossible to say whether that would've resulted in a less controversial design. And after all, isn't the whole idea behind western democracy to elect people to make these difficult decisions for us?

Figure list

Cover: National archive. (1968, December 10). The Viennese architect W. Holzbauer explains his winning design for the Amsterdam City Hall.

Figure 1: Own image. (2024). Research scheme.

Figure 2: Amsterdam city archive. (approx. 1920). Palace for Popular Diligence.

Figure 3: Important sites mentioned troughout the chapters. (2024). Own work.

Figure 4: De Viet. (2016). J.F. Berghoef & J.J.M. Vegter; design iterations of 'Motto Belfort'

Figure 5: Amsterdam city archive. (1972). W. Holzbauer; more elaborated model of the winning 1968 design.

Figure 6: Holzbauer, W. (1985). W. Holzbauer; Two plans and a 3d section from his winning 1968 design.

Figure 7: National archive. (1972). B. Bijvoet & G. Holt; definitive design for a music theater along the Ferdinand Bolstraat in De Pijp.

Figure 8: National archive. (1976, January 20). Protest slogans against the opera, written on the façade of the Old Rai

Figure 9: National archive. (1981). Holzbauer and Dam present the design for the combined city hall and opera

Figure 10: Own image. (2024, February 22). Indoor street in the Stopera.

Figure 11: National archive. (1980; 1982). Preliminary and definitive design drawings of the Stopera's ground floor.

Figure 12: Uytenhaak, R. (1981, September 16). Alternative design for the Stopera, which suggests splitting up the different volumes and making room for other functions. Het Parool.

Figure 13: Guntenaar, F. (1982, April 16). Alternative design for the Stopera, which also calls for splitting up the volume. NRC Handelsblad.

Figure 14: Amsterdam city archive. (1982, July 3). Protestors try to gain access to the building site at Waterlooplein.

Figure 15: Amsterdam city archive. (1982, July 3). Protestors have set construction machines on fire at Waterlooplein.

Figure 16: Amsterdam city archive. (1985, February 11). The Stopera under construction.

Figure 17: Muziek & Dans. (1986, September). The cover of Muziek & Dans, showing Herzberger eating a Stopera-cake.

Figure 18: Holzbauer, W. (1985). Holzbauer & Dam; visualisation of the Stopera from the opposite side of the Amstel. Wilhelm Holzbauer: Bauten und Projekte, 1953-1985. Residenz Verlag.

Figure 19: Holzbauer, W. (1985). Holzbauer & Dam; visualisation of the Stopera from Muntplein. Wilhelm Holzbauer: Bauten und Projekte, 1953-1985. Residenz Verlag.

Backcover: Holzbauer, W. (1985). Axonometric drawing of the Stopera. Wilhelm Holzbauer: Bauten und Projekte, 1953-1985. Residenz Verlag.

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