Open Architecture:
Social dynamics within The Meerpaal and the Southbank Centre

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Abstract

This research investigates how the architecture of two mid-twentieth century cultural buildings - The Meerpaal in Dronten (1967) by Frank van Klingeren and the Southbank Centre in London (1968) led by architect Norman Engleback - facilitates social interaction within their communal spaces. A comparative historical research will demonstrate how, through the lens of the architect, a building can facilitate community engagement, thereby creating a deeper understanding across various cultural contexts. Frank van Klingeren, envisioned the concept of nuisance, incompleteness, and spatial openness as tools to facilitate community engagement. He believes that through the rejection of spatial separations, people confront each other which leads to unintentional encounters and opportunities for social interaction. Van Klingeren welcomed nuisance, thinking that friction would stimulate a shared sense of belonging. In contrast, Engleback believed that architecture should serve as a democratic platform, facilitating inclusivity by designing accessible, multi-layered spaces that integrate public life. He advocates for a civic landscape that can support both formal cultural events and informal public life through expansive foyers, elevated walkways, and undefined public areas. In conclusion, despite their differences, both buildings share common ambitions: to democratize space, to stimulate spontaneous social interactions and to embrace the concept of unfinished. Creating an environment for social interaction in architecture is not a singular condition, but a spectrum of different strategies.

Keywords

Open Architecture, The Meerpaal, Southbank Centre, Social Interactions, Multifunctionality

5124 words

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Introduction

During the mid-twentieth century, a notable shift in architecture took place as both architects and theorists started to question the conventional, rigid designs that had historically characterized the built environment. This period marked the era of the open architecture typology, a design approach that rejected the rigid, function-specific spaces aiming to incorporate more flexibility and adaptability which can adapt to shifting conditions (Newman & Bakema, 1961). Key figures in this movement explored different interpretations of openness. "In the early 1960s, for instance, Oskar and Zofia Hansen together with self-pro-claimed structuralists designed open modular systems; Jaap Bakema tried to understand buildings and cities in relation to Henri Bergson and Karl Popper's definition of an open society; and Colin St. John Wilson split modernist architecture into open organicism and a closed abstract rationalism" (Hernandez & Komez-Daglioglue, 2023, p. 3) According to different authors, this concept was especially significant in the context of the post-war reconstruction, urban growth, and the rising cultural movements that focused on inclusivity and participatory design.

Cultural centre the Meerpaal in Dronten, The Netherlands, designed by Dutch architect Frank van Klingeren and completed in 1967, is a prime example of the open architecture philosophy (Figure 1). Van Klingeren's vision focuses on openness and encounters, the integration of functions, and the pursuit of an 'imperfect' architecture that accommodates flexibility and user-driven changes. (Van den Bergen & Vollaard, 2003, p. 10). "It renegotiates the roles of the architect and the resident, not only to overcome the gap between design and the various changing needs of its users but also placing his architecture in the service of building social relations and strong communities" (Sarıçayır, 2022, p. 146). The Meerpaal embodies this radical idea of the 1960s by creating a large open space without walls that accommodates different activities – cultural, recreational, and social – facilitating spontaneous interactions and a sense of community. "The concept: a variety of functional possibilities in and around a covered plaza, achieving more through minimal interventions, practising less architecture, enforcing less order, and reducing less subdividing" (Van den Bergen & Vollaard, 2003, p. 66). However, its open architecture not only questioned traditional limits but also redefined the relationship between spaces and their users.

Another prime example of a cultural building with a focus on community engagement is The Southbank Centre in London. The Southbank Centre, completed in 1968, exemplifies a more brutalist architectural approach to community participation (Figure 2). "It's a large 30-acre estate, located in the south of London next to the River Thames. It consists of an ensemble of four iconic modernist buildings and the public spaces around them" (Aelbrecht, 2017, p. 647). As one of the largest cultural centres in the UK, it offers a wide range of different activities, including art exhibitions, concert venues, performance spaces, library spaces, and cafés (Bradbury & Smith, 2024). Designed by the London County Council (LCC) Architects Department, and led by architect Norman Engleback, the complex is rooted in the post-war vision of space where culture and community connect.

The focus of this research is on how architecture enhances social interaction within communal spaces. Therefore, the main question of this research is: How does the architecture in the open-plan cultural building, The Meerpaal, and the multifunctional Southbank Centre enhance social interaction within their communal spaces? This will be investigated historically to demonstrate how, through the lens of the architect, a building can facilitate community engagement, while addressing the evolving needs of society. The Meerpaal, with its open-plan layout, focuses primarily on the local community, whereas the Southbank Centre, as part of a larger cultural complex, emphasize on multifunctionality and expansive outdoor spaces. Despite these differences, this research will create a broader understanding of designing a building to facilitate communal engagement across various cultural contexts, addressing a gap in architectural discourse.

The structure of this research consists of three chapters: Chapter I provides an overview of the historical background and characteristics of open architecture; Chapter II explores the architect's vision of the Meerpaal and how its open-plan layout enhances social interaction; and Chapter III provides an in-depth analysis of the Southbank Centre, focusing on how its layout and the public outdoor spaces facilitate communal engagement on a broader scale. To conclude, a comparative analysis will highlight the similarities and differences between both case studies, assessing their effectiveness in contributing to community engagement in contemporary cultural centres.

Figure 1: Interior space of The Meerpaal in Dronten, The Netherlands, Versnel, 1967

Figure 2: The main entrance on the upper level of the Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London, Donat, 1968

Chapter I
The Emergence of the Open Architecture Typology

The subject of this chapter discusses the history and origin of the open architecture typology and its impact on architectural discourse. It will highlight the four main trajectories of openness and a selection of architectural practices throughout the twentieth century. The last section will be about the philosophy of Dutch architect Frank van Klingeren, who was a key proponent of this architectural typology.

1.1 HISTORY OF THE OPEN ARCHITECTURE TYPOLOGY

Between the 1960s and 1970s, various architects explored innovative architectural forms and spatial concepts that could respond to evolving social, political, and cultural dynamics (Sarıçayır, 2022, p. 205). Both architects and theorists started to challenge the traditional, inflexible designs that historically defined the built environment. This period represented the emergence of the open architecture typology, a design approach that opposed the strict, function-oriented spaces to incorporate more flexibility and adaptability to changing conditions (Newman & Bakema, 1961). According to different authors, this concept was especially significant in the context of the post-war reconstruction, urban growth, and the rising cultural movements that focused on inclusivity and participatory design. As defined by Hernandez & Komez-Daglioglue (2023), open architecture refers to a concept characterized by flexible, adaptable, and incomplete architectural designs, mirroring more extensive cultural movements (p. 4). Other commentaries point open architecture towards a framework that extends beyond formal and structural innovations to include socio-political openness, emphasizing user participation, adaptability, and continuous transformation of built environments in response to changing societal needs (Akcan, 2018). Therefore, it can be concluded that open architecture not only transformed spatial organization, but also promoted collaboration, and adaptability, connecting architecture with wider societal and cultural changes.

1.2 SELECTION OF ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICES RELATED TO OPEN ARCHITECTURE

Key figures in this movement interpreted openness in different ways. "In the early 1960s, for instance, Oskar and Zofia Hansen together with self-pro-claimed structuralists designed open modular systems; Jaap Bakema tried to understand buildings and cities in relation to Henri Bergson and Karl Popper's definition of an open society; and Colin St. John Wilson split modernist architecture into open organicism and a closed abstract rationalism" (Hernandez & Komez-Daglioglue, 2023, p. 3). Other renowned architects, like Le Corbusier, aimed to break from the rigid, traditional layout of bourgeois homes by introducing the concept of the free plan (van Rooyen, 2022, p. 86). Furthermore, another notable example of openness is Constant Nieuwenhuys's project New Babylon in The Netherlands (1956-1974). Residents have the ability to personalize their environment by using adjustable floors, ramps, partitions, etc. according to their own needs (Wigley, 1998, p. 1). It can be concluded that open architecture has different interpretations, leading towards a more flexible environment.

1.3 FOUR TRAJECTORIES OF OPENNESS

Open architecture can be categorized into four distinct trajectories: structural, performative, procedural, and conceptual (Hernandez & Komez-Daglioglue, 2023, p. 4). Structural openness refers to architecture with flexible forms that allow for varied future uses and adaptations. A prime example is the Packaged House by Konrad Wachsmann and Walter Gropius, who created a prefabricated housing system featuring adaptable components to enable different configurations (İşbilen, 2022, p. 67). Secondly, the performative trajectory redefines buildings as an activation of social transformations – designed to adapt, engage, and empower collective participation while generating new cultural meanings. This is illustrated in Armando Rabaça's (2022) study of 'spolia', where reused historical fragments become tools for open-ended interpretation and shared memory (p. 41). Thirdly, the procedural trajectory sees architecture as a participatory process, where the architect becomes a mediator enabling collaboration, adaptability, and social engagement. A clear example is Esra Akcan's (2018) work on Open Architecture, where the architect advocated human rights, and inclusive design – especially for migrants and noncitizens (p. 9).

Lastly, the concept of conceptual openness challenges fixed meanings, disciplines, and methods (Akcan, 2018). This stance is exemplified in Apostolidis's (2022) article 'On the Open Style of Architectural Reasoning,' where architectural knowledge is reimagined through the lens of philosophical inquiry, embracing uncertainty, plurality, and continuous reinterpretation (p. 121).

1.4 THE OPEN ARCHITECTURE OF FRANK VAN KLINGEREN
Dutch architect Frank van Klingeren was a key proponent of the open architecture typology, well-known for his emphasis on openness, social interaction, the integration of functions, and the 'imperfect' architecture that would allow space for the unexpected and changes of its users (Vollaard & Van den Bergen, 2003, p. 10). He believed that architecture should provide a flexible, evolving framework that could accommodate shifting societal needs over time. His vision can be characterized by achieving more doing less – less architecture, less order, and less division." (Vollaard & Van den Bergen, 2003, p. 66). Different authors highlighted the human-centred design approach to create spaces that can be shaped by their users according to their evolving needs which aligns closely with the performative trajectory of openness, where Van Klingeren becomes the mediator enabling social engagement.

Chapter II
Social Dynamics within The Meerpaal, Dronten

The subject of this chapter will focus on how the design of cultural centre The Meerpaal, through the lens of the architect, has shaped social interaction within the building. In this regard, the building will be examined through its spatial organization and multifunctionality, focusing on how these principles promote communal engagement.

2.1 CULTURAL CENTRE THE MEERPAAL, DRONTEN
On December 8, 1967, cultural centre The Meerpaal in Dronten officially opened, a design that exemplified Van Klingeren's strong vision of the open, human-centred design approach (Figure 3). It was the first large-scale community centre that highlighted a period of innovative architectural design in The Netherlands facilitated by the welfare (Sarıçayır, 2022, p. 146). The building's concept consists of a variety of possibilities in and around a covered square, with the idea of achieving more by doing less. In this regard, Van Klingeren proposed a radical approach, integrating an open floorplan that encourages spontaneous interaction between visitors, combining recreation, culture, and community life under one roof (Van den Bergen & Vollaard, 2003, p. 66). "The observation of a new concept, a concept that has less to do with architecture and more with a vision of society. Sixty percent perfection, twenty percent nuisance, and twenty percent meeting. For us, the opportunity for this sociological experiment was so important and fascinating that we allowed ourselves to treat architecture as secondary." (Van Klingeren, Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1968, p. 57). Various commentaries highlight the significant role of the user in Van Klingeren's design of The Meerpaal, emphasizing the building's adaptability and the active involvement of its users in shaping the interior design (Sarıçayır, 2022, p. 148). His unique approach not only redefined architectural norms but also set how architecture could facilitate community and social engagement.

2.2 THE VISION OF FRANK VAN KLINGEREN ON FOSTERING SOCIAL INTERACTION

2.2.1 Greek Agora
The main concept of the Meerpaal was inspired by Greece, where Van Klingeren proposed a design that mirrored the communal and public life of the ancient Greek 'Agora.' (Metz, 1987). Agora, meaning a marketplace in Greek, was the first initial idea that was used to facilitate social interaction within the building (Gaz + Architecture, 1970). From ancient antiquity to the nineteenth century, all possibilities of a city were in its centre, such as a marketplace, a theatre, sports facilities, and restaurants (Gas + Architecture, 1970). However, the climate in The Netherlands is so completely different that a substitute must be found for the open market square, which still consists of the same opportunities for social contact. (Interbuild, 1966). As a solution to integrate the informal life of a city, he created a shed with a large-span roof and glass facades in the heart of Dronten (Figure 4) (De By, 1967). "The Meerpaal is nothing more than a large glass box, a 50x70 meter space that is covered and heated" (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1968). In northern climates, like The Netherlands, it is necessary to create conditions that exist naturally in Mediterranean cities.

2.2.2 Nuisance
The interior space of The Meerpaal consists of four distinct recreational functions – marketplace, sports, restaurant, and theatre – with the absence of interior walls. Based on these functions, a proposed schedule was made to create social activity at every day of the week (Gaz + Architecture, 1970, no. 32). However, this ambitious functional concept led to considerable disturbance within the building as activities overlapped, creating a chaotic environment. Nevertheless, nuisance is one of the main intentional aspects that Van Klingeren implemented in his design to create a sense of community (van Ruler, 1967). "Through de-clotting, removing walls, and mixing functions, Van Klingeren aimed to counteract this segregation density and create new opportunities for interaction and openness." (Vollaard & Van den Bergen, 2003, p. 8). In an interview he argued; "I welcome nuisance. By deliberately allowing people to disturb each other a bit, you will give them a sense that they belong together." (Van den Ende, 1967). Van Klingeren believes that through nuisance, people confront each other, which leads to unintentional encounters.

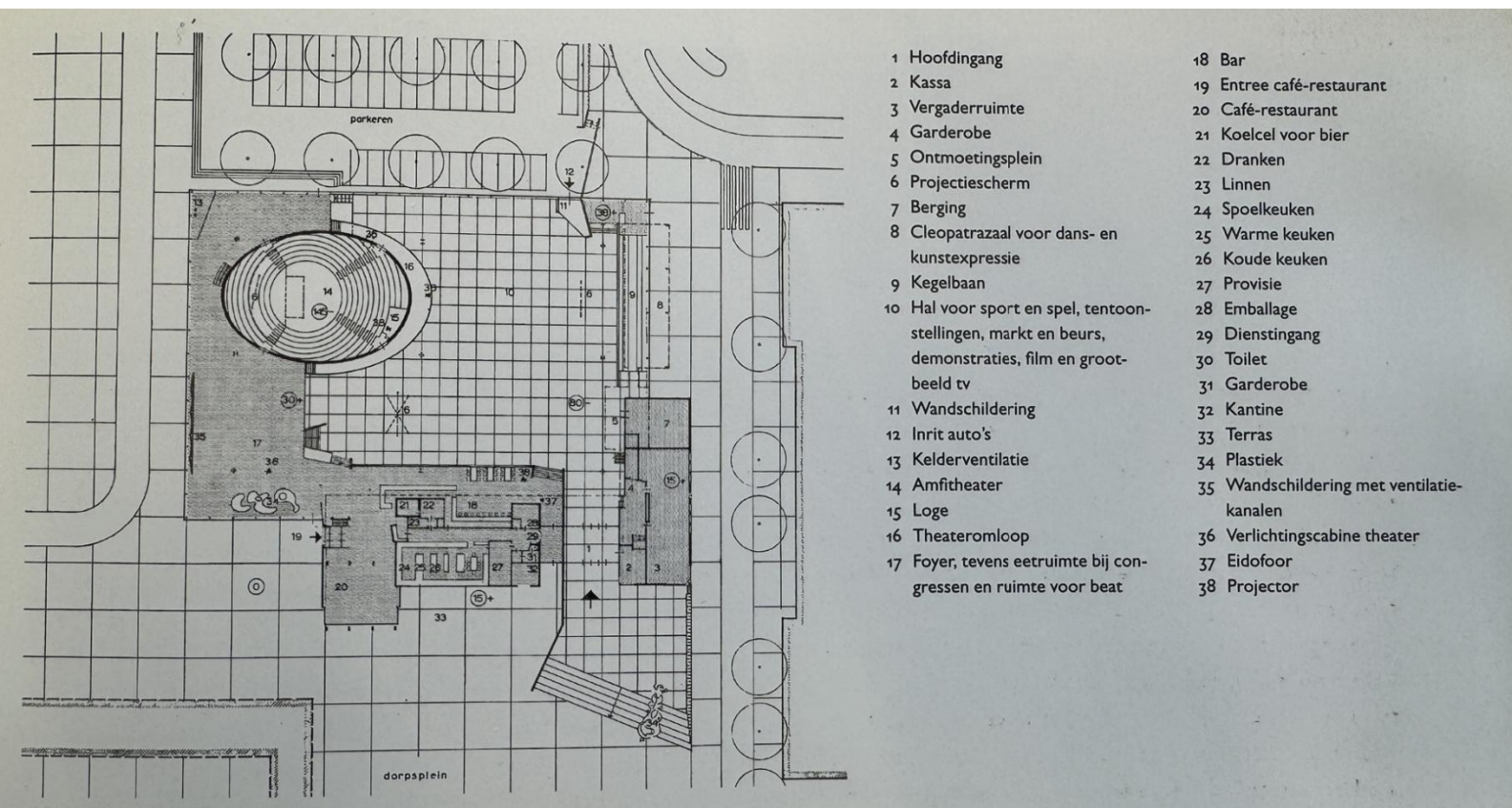*Figure 3: Back façade of the Meerpaal designed by Dutch architect Frank van Klingeren, Dronten, Versnel, 1967*

1 Hoofdingang	18 Bar
2 Kassa	19 Entree café-restaurant
3 Vergaderruimte	20 Café-restaurant
4 Garderobe	21 Koelcel voor bier
5 Ontmoetingsplein	22 Dranken
6 Projectiescherm	23 Linnen
7 Berging	24 Spoelkeuken
8 Cleopatrazaal voor dans- en kunstexpressie	25 Warme keuken
9 Kegelbaan	26 Koude keuken
10 Hal voor sport en spel, tentoonstellingen, markt en beurs, demonstraties, film en grootbeeld tv	27 Provisie
	28 Emballage
	29 Dienstingang
	30 Toilet
11 Wandschildering	31 Garderobe
12 Inrit auto's	32 Kantine
13 Kelderventilatie	33 Terras
14 Amfitheater	34 Plastiek
15 Loge	35 Wandschildering met ventilatiekanalen
16 Theateromloop	
17 Foyer, tevens eetruimte bij congressen en ruimte voor beat	36 Verlichtingscabine theater
	37 Eidofoor
	38 Projector

Figure 4: Plan view of The Meerpaal with the cultural functions (number 10) centrally located, Vollaard & Van den Bergen, 2003, p.101

2.2.3 Unfinished architecture

Lastly, imperfection and the concept of 'unfinished' are notions central to Frank van Klingeren's vision of the Meerpaal. Through these notions, he proposed that The Meerpaal will be shaped by its users, allowing them to adapt the space according to their own needs. "For instance, he urged architects to adopt imperfection, to welcome residents to co-determine the end product: 'You must dare to embrace imperfection, perfection is unaffordable… A kitchen is never good enough. Give people an unfinished house… You have to appeal to the skills and resourcefulness of the residents." (Sarıçayır, 2022, p. 150). By creating an open-ended building, Van Klingeren aimed to involve distinct groups of the public not only during the day but throughout the building's entire lifespan. It can be concluded that the concept of imperfection was not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate strategy to stimulate social dynamics where users take an active role in determining the space. "He aimed for a more or less spontaneous development, initiated by the residents themselves, and stimulated by the built environment" (Vollaard & Van den Bergen, 2003, p. 119). People can take their materials to configure the building according to their needs.

2.3 ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE MEERPAAL

2.3.1 Spatial organization

As highlighted earlier, the interior space of the Meerpaal is characterized by an open layout with the integration of various public functions. The absence of interior walls allows for continuous visual and physical connections, which leads to spontaneous interactions among visitors. A spontaneous interaction refers to an unstructured exchange that is not driven by a specific task and occurs naturally in everyday life (Raman et al., 2023, p. 2902). Individuals can navigate freely throughout the building, allowing for interactions that are neither scheduled nor structured. To take this a step further, Van Klingeren integrated visual openness not only within the interior but also in the exterior. All façades of The Meerpaal are made of glass, which creates a welcoming atmosphere blurring boundaries between the inside and outside.

However, the concept of visual openness is not comprehensively incorporated throughout the design of The Meerpaal. Van Klingeren proposed the idea of blurring visual boundaries and blending functions together. In contrast, he introduced variations in floor heights and incorporated a wall for the theatre (Figure 5). Implementing differences in floor levels still creates a spatial separation, challenging the radical approach of Van Klingeren. Furthermore, Van Klingeren designed interior walls and a roof for the theatre, as well as for the service rooms. The selective use of walls in The Meerpaal highlights the need for spatial enclosures to meet specific functional requirements, such as acoustic insulation and safety regulations. These goals could not be achieved within the framework of the wall-less concept.

2.3.2 Multifunctionality

The spatial zoning of the public functions within The Meerpaal reflects Van Klingeren's approach to openness and communal interaction. Instead of isolating social activities, the open layout is designed to create a space where functions blend together. The interior space is not assigned to one single specific function but accommodates various activities throughout the week (Figure 6). As a result, it can be argued that the building is adaptable to a changing society. This continuous use and diversity of activities keep the environment vibrant and engaging. Furthermore, through accessibility and blending functions, various social groups will be implemented in the design of The Meerpaal. As suggested by Van Klingeren, blending different functions will extend the lifespan of the building and create a sense of community.

Figure 5: Height difference of the restaurant and the use of walls for the theatre, Versnel, 1967
Figure 6: Adaptable use of the recreational spaces on enhancing social interaction, Versnel, 1967

Chapter III
Social Dynamics within The Southbank Centre, London

The subject of this chapter focuses on how the design of the Southbank Centre in London, after the redevelopment in 1968, facilitates communal cohesion. Inherent as the design of The Meerpaal, it outlines the architect's design approaches and how this perspective shaped social space. Compared to The Meerpaal in Dronten, the complex of the Southbank Centre is larger and in a more sensitive urban context, located in the city centre of London. Although the project is not related to open architecture, it provides a valuable understanding how different architectural languages of cultural buildings encourages social interaction.

3.1 ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE SOUTHBANK CENTRE, LONDON

The Southbank Centre, located near the iconic River the Thames in London, is a prime example of post-war modernist architecture in the UK, embodying innovative design principles of that time (Aelbrecht, 2021, p. 649). Designed by the London County Council (LCC) Architects department, led by architect Norman Engleback, the complex exemplifies a brutalist architectural approach with an emphasis on cultural engagement and community participation. "The setting, on the edge of the capital's great winding waterway, encapsulates a powerful sense of national optimism, yet also as a focal point – in many respects – for creative experimentation, embracing the arts, architecture and the wider cultural life of the country" (Bradbury & Smith, 2024). The complex of the Southbank Centre was built between 1951 and 1968 and consists of four distinct modernist buildings – the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Purcell Room, and the Hayward Gallery – interconnected through expansive public spaces (Figure 7) (Aelbrecht, 2017, p. 334). Furthermore, it encompasses a diverse range of different social functions such as an art gallery, theatres, festival halls, and a cinema (Bradbury & Smith, 2024). Through less architecture and the design of a vibrant outdoor space, an engaging environment is created to enhance social dynamics.

The Southbank Centre was constructed in two phases, beginning with the Royal Festival Hall, which was part of the Festival of Britain held in 1951 (Figure 8) (Grafe, 2010, p. 192). The Festival of Britain was organized by the Labour Party Government to revive the cultural and national spirit. Because of World War II, many people were left with traumas from their wartime experiences and the harsh realities they faced (Williams, 2018, p. 17). Therefore, they organized an exhibition of innovative designs, technology, art, and popular culture aimed at inspiring visitors and reviving public connectivity (Atkinson, 2012). In 1967, the Southbank Centre expanded further with the addition of the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room, followed in 1968 by the Hayward Gallery. Therefore, this analysis will focus on the redevelopment in 1967-68, which forms the core of this research to examine and validate the cultural centre The Meerpaal, constructed around the same period.

3.2 THE VISION OF NORMAN ENGLEBACK CREATING PUBLIC SPACE FOR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

3.2.1 Elevated walkways and platforms
The expansion of the Southbank Centre in 1967-68 marked a significant shift in architectural thinking regarding cultural spaces, reflecting broader trends in modernist urban planning. A defining element of this approach was the introduction of elevated pathways and terraces designed to create a clear distinction between traffic and pedestrians (Herring, 2009, p. 3). The elevated walkways linked various parts of the complex with the underground railway station, the river promenade, and the Waterloo Bridge, forming a network that encourages free movement between buildings (Williams, 2018, p. 149). However, they not only facilitate movement between the buildings but also serve as a dynamic social space. The design of the large, elevated platforms and walkways stimulates movement, meetings, and spontaneous interactions (Jones, 2016). The Southbank Centre Board aims to foster an experience that is "memorable and gives people pleasure" while establishing the Southbank Centre as a venue recognizable for its "hospitality, rich atmosphere, and spirit of democracy" (Grafe, 2010, p. 371).
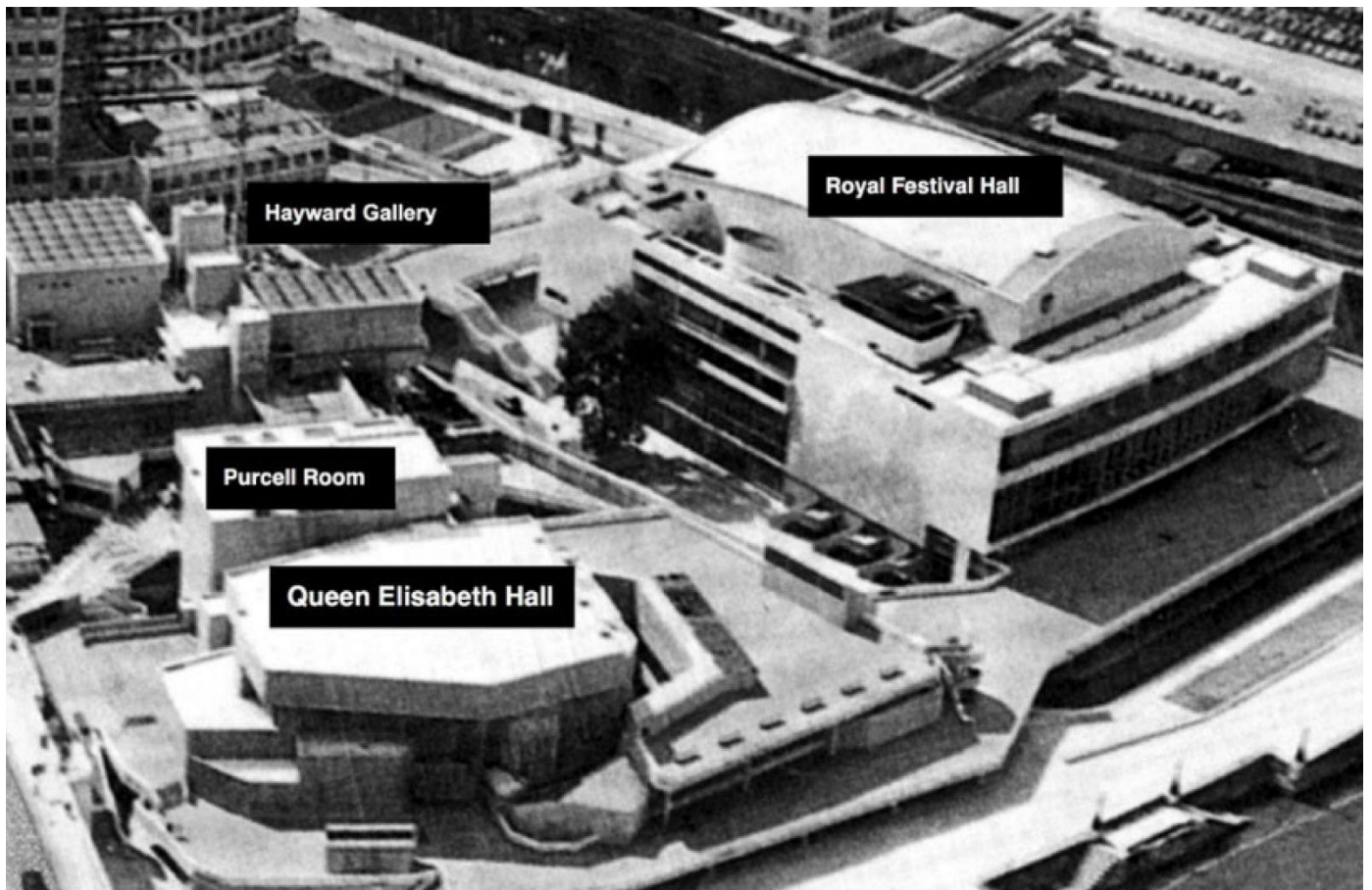
Figure 7: Aireal view of the urban landscape of the Southbank Centre, London, Aelbrecht, 2021

Figure 8: The riverside façade of the Royal Festival Hall before its redevelopment in 1967, Westwood, 1951

3.2.2 Inclusive foyer

Inclusivity at the Southbank Centre was not only facilitated through its outdoor spaces but also through the intentionally designed interior foyers (Figure 9). Christophe Grafe (2010) wrote about the foyer and stated, "The foyer effectively operates as a panorama of social diversity and temporary territorialisation, as each particular group occupies its own section of the space" (p. 20). Norman Engleback, the lead architect of the complex, envisioned the foyer as a transitional space integrated with democratic urban life and different social groups of various ages and ethnicities (Grafe, 2010, p. 22). In an interview, he argued: "To break down the buildings into their components, and expressing them" (Engleback, 1967). It can be concluded that the foyer of the Southbank Centre stands as a powerful architectural expression of post-war democratic ideals. Through this architectural fragmentation, Engleback attempts to break barriers and allows for the co-existence of culture and everyday life contributing to formal and informal connections. This spatial strategy aligns with urban theories that emphasize the importance of unstructured, spontaneous interactions, creating a sense of community among individuals (AL Haj Ali, 2024, p. 89).

3.2.3 Undefined spaces

The outdoor public space of the Southbank Centre was designed to remain undefined, allowing for continuous modifications in response to evolving societal needs. As Herring (2009) noted, "By essentially removing all undefined space, and infilling all the under crofts, the now largely reinstated ground level is a defined space where the user is appointed the role of consumer" (p. 5). Similarly, other commentaries point towards the same principle of a space shaped by its visitors. Williams (2018), highlights this notion, stating "The design was meant to be empowering to the visitor, enabling them to decide how to experience diverse spaces and move between them, including accessing different levels and using the elevated pathways" (p. 112). The different public spaces of the Southbank Centre – under crofts, pathways, and platforms – were intentionally left less defined, allowing space for different uses (Figure 10). Furthermore, the materials used in the complex of the Southbank Centre are simple and recognizable to, despite their differences in functions, easily be identified (Engleback, 1967). Therefore, it can be concluded that the architecture of the Southbank Centre accommodates informal, community-driven activities, enhancing social cohesion among diverse social groups.

3.3 ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE SOUTHBANK CENTRE

3.3.1 Functional zoning

The variety of functions within the complex of the Southbank Centre are distributed across separate buildings, each serving a distinct cultural purpose, connected through a designed urban landscape. Grafe (2010) stated in his research that: "The Southbank is occupied by an extraordinary mixture of flaneurs, tourists, amateur artists and the homeless who find what has become rare elsewhere in London: places which are freely accessible and not dedicated to commerce or consumption.". Despite the separation of functions, each building offers a wide range of secondary informal activities. Therefore, it can be argued that the variety of functions, the combination of different social groups, the open accessibility, and the vibrant outdoor space of the complex contribute to an inclusive and dynamic public realm, which ensures long-term durability.

3.3.2 Flexibility

The brutalist architecture of the Southbank Centre invites users to interpret the space according to societal needs. Instead of designing a space for how people should behave or move, this complex encourages personal interpretation and participation led by the users. This adaptability ensures that the complex remains relevant and responsive throughout its lifespan. Flexibility, together with brutalist architecture—often critiqued for its aesthetic appearance, plays a crucial role in ensuring social engagement. The lack of decorative hierarchy and harsh solid surfaces creates a sense of confidence and even appropriation (Grafe, 2010, p. 20).

Figure 9: The foyer in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Westwood, 1967

Figure 10: The Queen Elizabeth Hall with the elevated undefined platforms and walkways, ANL/Rex, 1968

Conclusion

To answer the question: How does the architecture in the open-plan cultural building, The Meerpaal, and the multifunctional Southbank Centre enhance social interaction within their communal spaces? The analysis of both The Meerpaal and the Southbank Centre will be examined and compared. The design of The Meerpaal (1966-67) and the renovation of the Southbank Centre (1967-68) are constructed around the same period, providing a relevant basis for comparison. While Van Klingeren advocated for a human-centred, open-plan approach, the design of the Southbank Centre highlights a complex, layered brutalist complexity. Despite their distinct architectural language, urban context, and scale, both projects demonstrate how architecture can shape communal life.

On the one hand, Frank van Klingeren, through his design of The Meerpaal, envisioned the concept of nuisance, incompleteness, and spatial openness as tools to promote community engagement. He believes that through the rejection of spatial separations, people confront each other which results in unexpected encounters and opportunities for social interaction. Thus, Van Klingeren welcomed nuisance, thinking this friction would promote a shared sense of belonging. Furthermore, he advocated for spaces to remain unfinished as a deliberate strategy to stimulate social dynamics and extend the lifespan of the building. It can be concluded that, in terms of the open architecture typology, this sociological experiment by Van Klingeren refers to the procedural trajectory, where the architect becomes the mediator enabling collaboration.

On the other hand, the Southbank Centre, designed by lead architect Norman Engleback, provides a more infrastructure-based and urban-scale approach to social space. Engleback believes that architecture should be a democratic platform that promotes inclusivity through designing multi-layered, easily accessible areas that integrate public life. He advocates for a civic environment that can accommodate both formal cultural events and informal public life through expansive foyers, elevated walkways, and undefined public areas. These spatial components were intended to highlight public participation. The integration of diverse social groups embodies his idea of openness, where architecture becomes a catalyst for social inclusivity.

The comparative analysis of The Meerpaal and the Southbank Centre reveals that both buildings, despite their differences, share common ambitions: to democratize space, stimulate spontaneous social interactions and embrace the concept of unfinished. The open, multifunctional, undefined configuration of The Meerpaal, together with the layered, interconnected public spaces of The Southbank Centre exemplifies a deliberate design approach of 'less architecture.' This architectural way of thinking facilitates accessible and inclusive environments that are open to interpretation and constant evolution. These features actively contribute to environments which stimulates social interactions, enabling connections that emerge naturally.

To conclude, this research shows that creating environments for social interactions in architecture is not a singular condition but a spectrum of different strategies— ranging from Van Klingeren's sociological experiment to Engleback's civic infrastructure. Ultimately, both the Meerpaal and the Southbank Centre demonstrate that architecture can meaningfully contribute to social cohesion, but in their unique way. Their commitment to facilitating social interaction differs in scale, expression, and spatial logic, yet both reveal how architecture design can actively shape communal life and enable inclusive, participatory experiences.

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