

# Gazing Station: Hierarchy and Surveillance in Amsterdam's Former Post Office



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This article endeavors to explore the Stationspostgebouw, a former post office in Amsterdam that is also known under the names of Districtposgebouw, Stationspostkantoor, and Post CS, crafted by Dutch architects; Piet Elling (1897-1962) and Benjamin Merkelbach (1901-1961). While various studies have been already conducted on Elling and Merkelbach architecture, especially their post station, none have tackled the edifice through the lens of hierarchy, surveillance, and control. This paper employs a theoretical framework, which first scrutinizes the Panopticon system of control, and explores how it exploits surveillance as a tool to heighten efficiency by establishing a systemized hierarchy among its users. Subsequently, post-Panoptic surveillance theories will be briefly described to facilitate a better understanding of surveillance and hierarchy in contemporary Western societies and their prevalence in architecture. lastly, an in-depth analysis of Stationspostgebouw through this conceptual framework will be conducted, in order to see how this architecture employed surveillance as a mechanism to benefit the institution. This case study aims to unveil how architecture can influence users' freedom, and affect their behavior by observing, controlling, and finally manipulating them through design capacities. In a broader context, this study seeks to demonstrate how certain design choices can shape our conduct and encourage more practitioners to do extensive research on the topic of hierarchy and architecture. This article is written using archival research, secondary data analysis, video analysis, and interviews.

## A NEW POST STATION

Just as PTT or the Dutch national post was established in 1928,<sup>1</sup> the Netherlands was amidst a period of profound transformation. The process of industrialization, which was delayed until after the Great Depression in 1930,<sup>2</sup> was gradually changing the industrial and economic landscape of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Despite the Netherlands being altered; this alteration was extremely slow-paced compared to the neighboring countries like Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Germany.<sup>4</sup>

Albeit story of the post in the Netherlands predates the events discussed. Economic growth and extensive use of railroads in the 19th century elevated the importance of the national post, founded in 1799, to the Dutch nation. Local and regional post stations once deemed unnecessary, became a crucial part of the national infrastructure. Although the canals were a reliable way of transporting goods across cities<sup>5</sup>, the advent of railroads with trains for mail carriage and its delivery to remote locations; catalyzed the establishment of a network of post stations and services. This revolutionized the history of communication not only in the Netherlands but also around the globe. The Silhouette of King Willem III graced the first letter stamp in 1852,<sup>6</sup> followed by the first parcel delivery in 1882, and finally, an increased literate Dutch nation who embraced extensive written communication culminated the Dutch post industry to its peak.

Amsterdam was encountering a significant growth in postal traffic during the 20th century. This escalation from 250 million letters and 7.5 million parcels in 1925 to double the amount in 1950<sup>7</sup> signaled the inevitability of a new post station to accommodate the flourishing industry. The existing post station being incapable of handling this growth, prompted the PTT to start an investigation in order to find a new location for its post facilities. The desirable location needed to be capable of facilitating all the post-industry in one region, facilities for unloading, sorting, and other compartments, in addition to the headquarters. Oosterdokseiland, being adjacent to the Amsterdam Central train station, and incorporating the railroad made the location ideal for homing the new post station. The partially vacant Oosterdokseiland with almost 28,000 square meters<sup>8</sup> of open field, was perfectly capable of homing post station.<sup>9</sup> In 1953, Piet Elling and Benjamin Merkelbach were commissioned to design the building and by doing so they changed the face of Oosterdokseiland and its reputation to PTT Island in a short period.

The Stationspostgebouw, the summit of Elling and Merkelbach's career, was erected between 1960 and 1968 and opened in November 1968 after the death of both architects. Although the Briefpostgebouw or the letter post building as one of the two principal buildings of the island started operating earlier in 1965. The opening of the post station by Prins Claus of the Netherlands was a testament to the importance of the post station for the Dutch.<sup>10</sup> The low and stretched Briefpostgebouw was the sorting hall for letter post and was the third construction in the west-to-east direction, the first one being the bridge that connects Stationplein to Oosterdokseiland, and the second, the 400 meters

1 «The royal history of PostNL,» <https://www.postnl.nl/en/about-postnl/about-us/history/> (Delivering special moments for 220 years).

2 Herman Jong and Jan Zanden, «Debates on Industrialisation and Economic Growth in the Netherlands,» *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 11 (06/15 2014), <https://doi.org/10.18352/tseg.133>.

3 «Netherlands | History, Flag, Population, Languages, Map, & Facts,» *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Netherlands/Economy>.

4 Jong and Zanden, «Debates on Industrialisation and Economic Growth in the Netherlands.»

5 Augustus J. Veenendaal, «Railways in the Netherlands : a brief history, 1834-1994,» (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001).

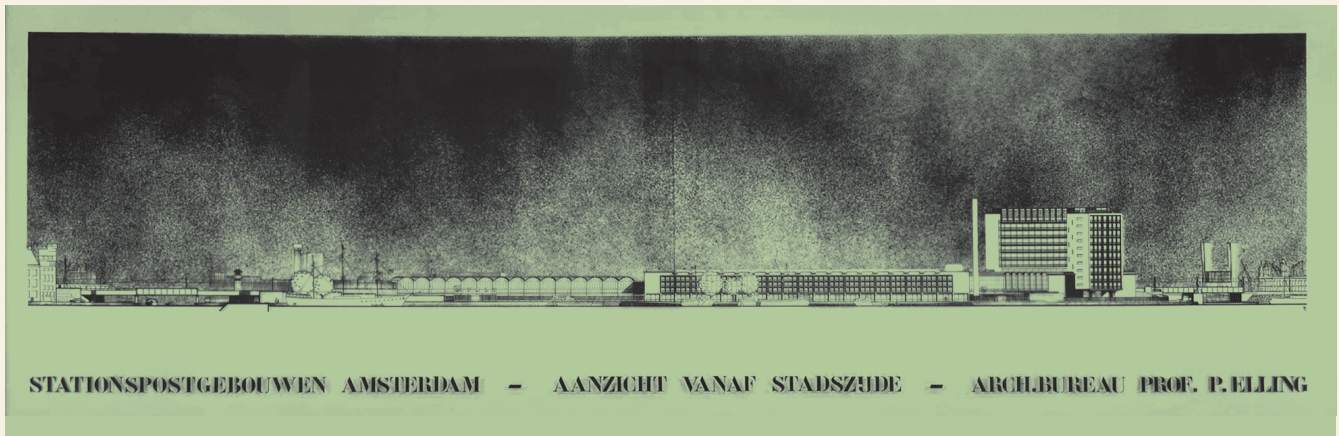
6 «Timeline of Post Stamps in The Netherlands,» <https://www.postzegelontwerpen.nl/postzegels/jaar>.

7 «The royal history of PostNL.»

8 HNI-MELKd121.1 - Merkelbach, Benjamin and Elling, Piet. *District Postkantoor Oosterdok*. Report. (1956)

9 Peter-Paul de Baar and Carolus van Doornen, «Oosterdokseiland uit de schaduw: Van stille dijk tot stadse 'hotspot',» (2007). <https://onsamsterdam.nl/oosterdokseiland-uit-de-schaduw>.

10 «PRINS CLAUS STELDE SIGNAAL IN WERKING Nieuw gebouw PTT officieel in bedrijf,» *Het Parool* (Amsterdam) 1968, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ACDD:010838695:mpeg21:p015>.



**Figure 1** Stationspostgebouw south elevation, by Elling.  
Source: HNI-MELKt121.96

long loading and unloading shelter. The fourth and last building was Pakketpostgebouw or parcel post building.<sup>11</sup> A slender 55 meters tall building that was the home to parcel post sorting, and administrative sections. Parcel post building also known as the Post CS building stood boldly along the edge of the island as a statement in the Amsterdam skyline and became a sign of the glory of the post in its most glorious days. The parcel post building was the last building to be demolished in 2010,<sup>12</sup> concluding a period of nearly half a century being the main post station in the Netherlands. The demolition marked an end to a complex that once had a reputation for being the largest post office in the Netherlands and the most modern one in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

The evident transition in the style of post stations in the Netherlands throughout the 20th century is clear in a comparison between the former main post station in Nieuwezijds (Figure 3) and the Stationspostgebouw. The Nieuwezijds post station with its Neo-Gothic characteristics and a generous amount of ornaments exemplified Dutch architecture before modernism. This can indicate how not only the Post CS building was a new facility for growth in postal traffic, but also part of a revolution in the architecture of Dutch public buildings. The Stationspostgebouw structures (Figure 2) with their minimalistic and brutal qualities were an indication of Dutch modern architecture. This architecture as so-called Dutch Functionalism was a part of the movement “Nieuwe Bouwen”, which brought about a series of innovative and radical changes in Dutch architecture from 1915 to 1960.<sup>14</sup> Piet Elling was a little-known architect in this movement. A movement with a bold manifestation that a “modern man” in the “machine age” can only find the answers to contemporary dilemmas through modern architecture.<sup>15</sup> As such, Stationspostgebouw was designed in accordance with Dutch functionalism, with scant ornamentation and a grey-colored exterior. Nonetheless, interior spaces showcased a fusion of architecture and visual arts. Artworks by artists such as Peter Struycken, André Volten, and Jan Wolkers,<sup>16</sup> using only black, white, and primary colors for the interior spaces, especially the dining hall of the building (Figure 9),<sup>17</sup> were references to the Dutch De Stijl movement, especially Bart van der Leek artworks.

- 11 «Stationspostgebouw, Oosterdokskaade - Amsterdam 1966-1990,» 2017, <https://amsterdamopdekaart.nl/1966-1990/Oosterdokskaade/Stationspostgebouw>.
- 12 «Stadsgezichten: Postgebouw/Post CS,» 2010, <https://www.parool.nl/kunst-media/stadsgezichten-postgebouw-post-cs~b94dd2d0/>.
- 13 Wim de Wagt, Piet Elling 1897-1962: Een samenstemmende eenheid (The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Thoth 2008).
- 14 de Wagt, Piet Elling. Pp. 12
- 15 de Wagt, Piet Elling.
- 16 HNI-MELKd121.6 – “Elling postuum, het postgebouwencomplex bij het Centraal Station in Amsterdam”. Museum journal series 13. No. 6. Pp. 316-320. Journal. (1968)
- 17 HNI-MELKd121.2 – Lyrisch purism van Elling, struycken en volten. Nieuwe Rotterdam Courant. Newspaper Article. (21 December 1968)



**Figure 3** Post and telegraph building approx. 1910. Source: Netherlands Nationaalarchief

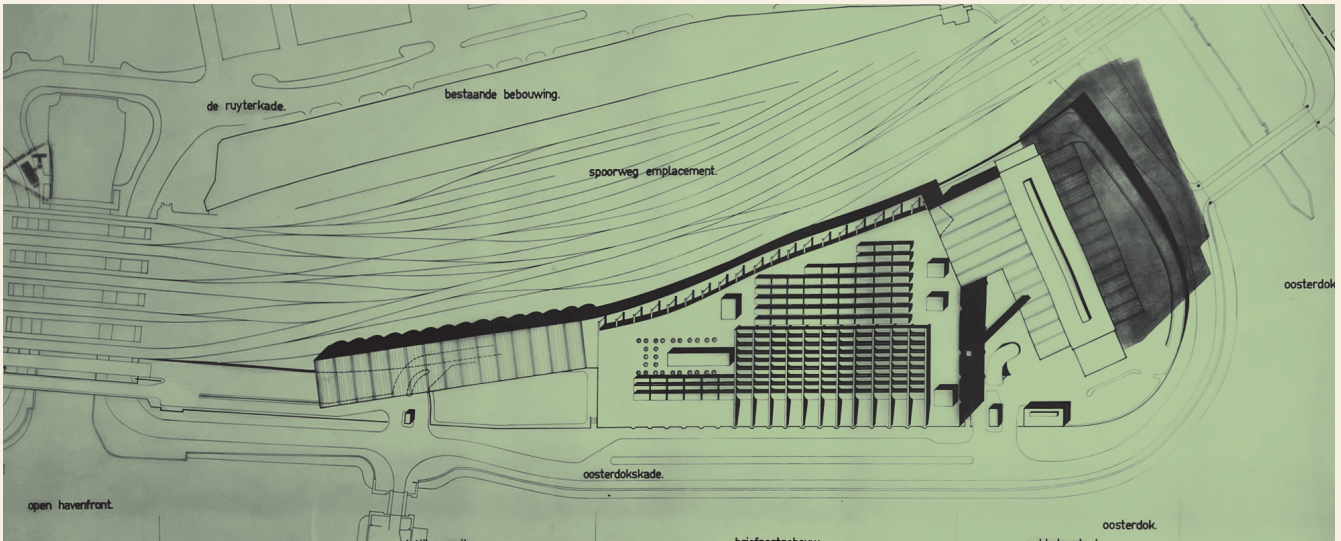
18 de Wagt, Piet Elling.

**Figure 2** Post CS Building, by Elling and Merkelbach. Source: HNI-MELkf1214

The Briefpostgebouw, also known as the letter post building, was a large structure spanning over 240,000 square meters. It had a two-story design with additional mezzanines<sup>18</sup> and followed an irregular trapezoid floor plan that aligned with the dominant lines of the site. Its dimensions were 160 meters in length, 50 to 100 meters in width, and 17 meters in total height, adhering to the municipality's height regulations. The rectangular part of the ground floor was indicated to office spaces, mailboxes, a drop-off counter for large quantities of mail, and the letter post delivery service. On the floor above, there was a letter sorting hall measuring 150 by 40 meters with a height of 9 meters and a column-less span of 100 meters. The sorting hall was character-



ized by its 57 by 350 centimeters prestressed concrete beams, spaced 7.5 meters apart. The curved infill roof between these beams was designed to capture northern light and provide a well-lit environment for sorting letters.<sup>19</sup>



The Pakketpostgebouw or parcel post building, a high-rise structure spanning a total area of 150,000 square meters, was erected at a right angle to the rail yard. In order to mitigate its dominance in the city's skyline and have the thinnest façade visible from the city center, which was predominantly comprised of low-rise buildings, the building's longitudinal axis was oriented parallel to the waterway on the eastern side. Moreover, the building was divided into two distinct parts, with the lower section being wider than the upper portion to make the high part as narrow as possible.<sup>20</sup>

The first five stories, with a width of 48 by 80 meters, housed the parcel post sorting hall, where packages were sorted and forwarded, while the upper section, spanning from the sixth to the eleventh floor, measuring 20 by 100 meters, was reserved for clearance, post district management, administrative services, and a dining hall situated on the top floor that housed various artworks in De Stijl style. Two terraces in the front and back of the building provided stunning panoramic views of the city center on one side and the port area on the other.

Despite the bourgeoisie criticizing the building as bland and tasteless, many architects appraised its refined and cleverly made architecture.<sup>21</sup> Limestone façade claddings, hand-picked by Elling himself from a mine near Pouillenay in France<sup>22</sup>, were an indication of Elling's commitment to the project and the importance of the material to him. While Elling wanted to cover the facades using uneven stone pieces, the limits of the stone company prevented him. When the mine provided them with smaller slabs the design changed to a much simpler arrangement in the façade. All window frames from anodized aluminum and insulated glazing created the transparent part of the facades, partially equipped with mechanical external sun blinds that indicate the technology that was applied to keep the post buildings cool and lower the energy consumption.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 4** Oosterdokseiland site plan containing all four structures. From left to right: the bridge, loading/unloading area, Briefpostgebouw, Pakketpostgebouw. Source: HNI-MELKt121.3

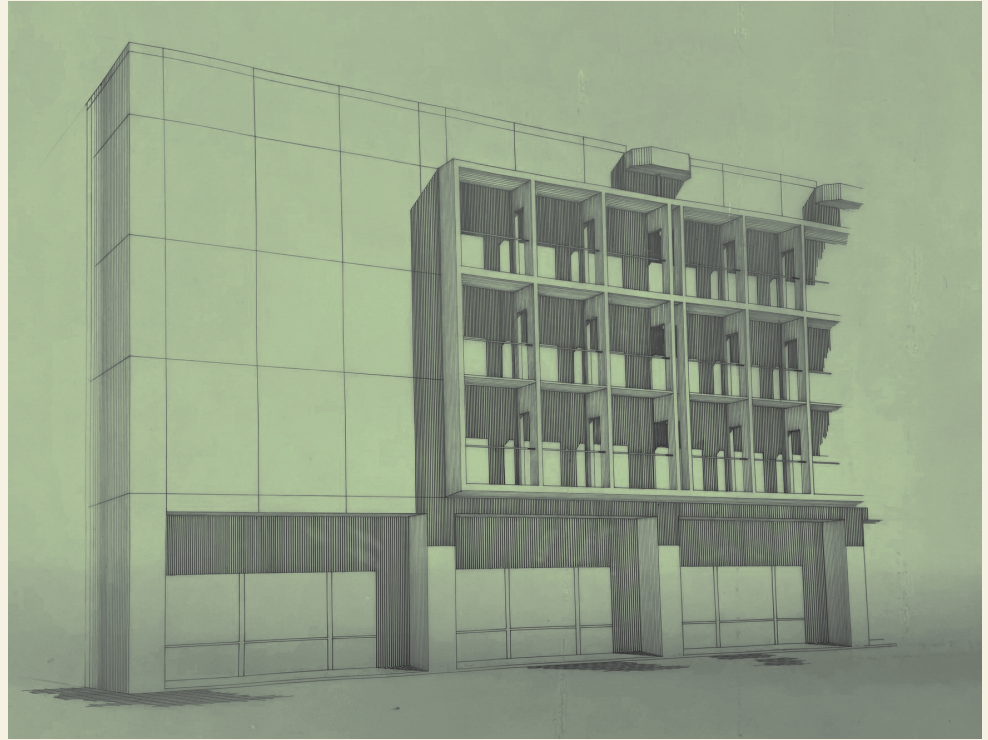
19 HNI-MELKd121.1

20 de Wagt, Piet Elling.

21 Jaap Huisman, Post CS: Het Boek, ed. Melanie Imming (Het blauwe oog, 2008).

22 de Wagt, Piet Elling.

23 HNI-MELKd121.1



The architecture of the loading and unloading shelter was characterized by its distinctive arched roof that was comprised of thin curved concrete slabs, created a sense of fluidity. The ground floor was cleared and lifted by a floor to provide adequate space for the movement of trucks and facilitate the loading/unloading process. Above the piloti was filled with large horizontal window panels, paired with smaller windows in a grid-like pattern on the topmost section of it, adding a diversity of patterns to the minimal flat façade of the building. It is possible that the curvature of the roof was meant to be a subtle reference to the Amsterdam Central Station, perhaps to establish a sense of connectivity between the two adjacent infrastructures.<sup>24</sup>

The letter post building, in contrast, included a more complex façade than what we can see in the loading and unloading area, especially in the south. The southern façade featured a series of cubic protruded slabs extruded from the window frames, mainly concentrated in the central partition of the façade. The rest of the façade was followed by a margin of limestone cladding with square cuts, which was further accompanied by trapezoid ornaments on the parapet that gave a finishing touch to the building's brutalist aesthetic. The northern side, by comparison, was simpler, with a series of T-shaped columns, and the space in between these columns was filled with glazing in a minimal way. A single dominant canopy in the centerline of the building height is the only extra element on this side of the functional building's façade.

**Figure 5** Southern façade of letter post building, detailed drawing, by Elling and Merkelbach.

Source: HNI-MELKt121.91

Moving to the west façade of the parcel post building, one can find a continuation of the arched roof design used in the loading and unloading area with only one difference, this shell roof used to be self-supporting, while the loading area arches were supported by cross-beams.<sup>25</sup> The façade consisted of a central glass part for office spaces and two solid margins at both ends homed the vertical shafts and lifts. The two topmost stories featured vertical and double-height curtain

<sup>24</sup> de Wagt, Piet Elling.

<sup>25</sup> de Wagt, Piet Elling.

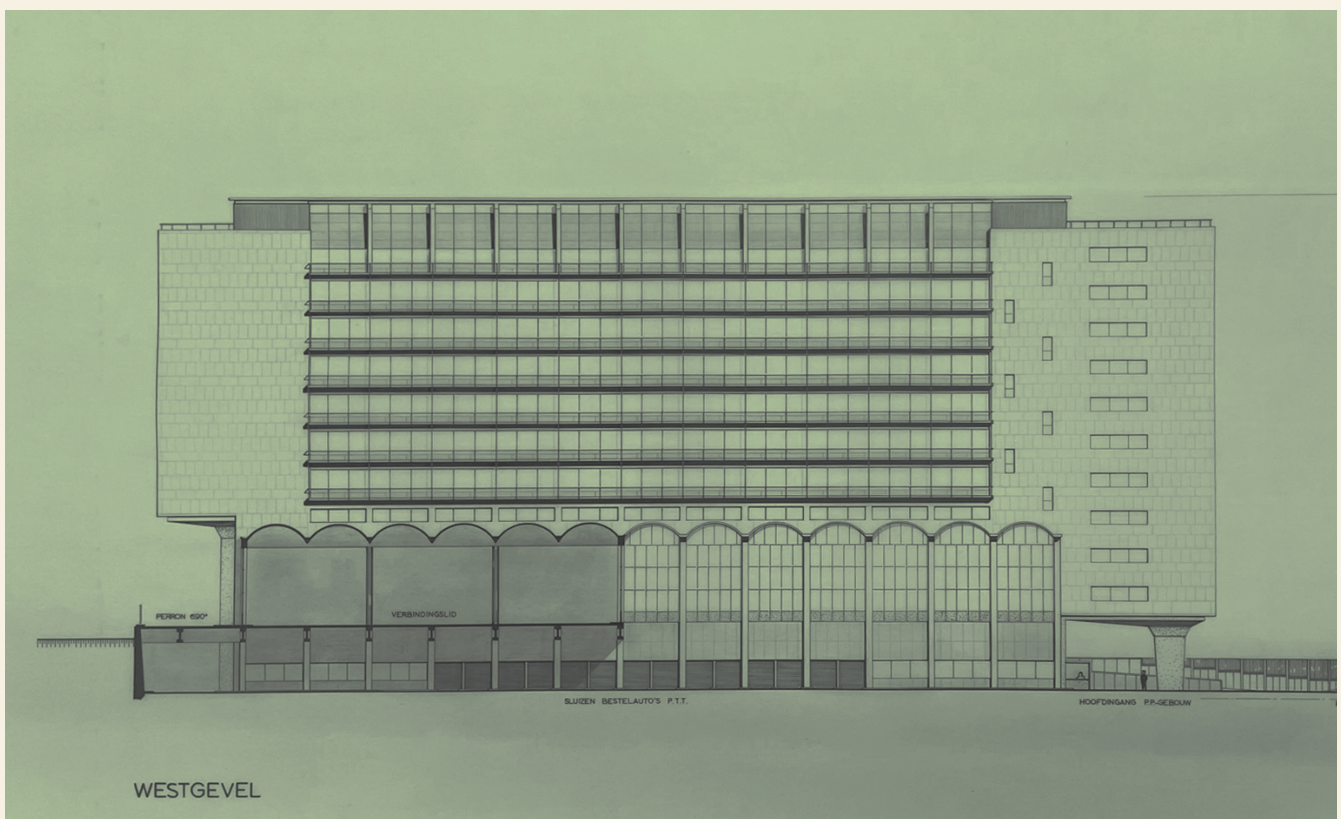
walls that bathed the dining area with natural light and gave a unique character to the building. The wider bottom part was adorned with arches that were supported by tall columns, which were again filled with a grid of glass. Two sides of the upper building had an overhang. However, the south end, boasted a greater overhang on the street, laying on top of two bulky and gigantic columns.

Finally, the northern and southern façades of the Post CS building were designed with a gridded cubic set of extruded slabs similar to the southern façade of the letter post building. These thin layers of concrete frames not only acted as shading and protection from the sun but also aid the cleaners, to clean the windows in the safest manner. The façades of the building overall distinguished its modernistic and functionalist character and highlighted the building as an industrial post station. Moreover, this can lead to a realization of what happens inside the building as well, this post station was a metamorphosed post station that revolutionized the post in the Netherlands. This modernization was also characterized by the machines used in the sorting hall and through the working processes.

Postal traffic overload called for expeditious, and extremely efficient mechanized systems to keep up with the swift workflow of the post station. Furthermore, the absence of elevation to facilitate gravity as a mode of transportation, compelled the designers to come up with an intricate and complex system of internal transportation mechanisms in the building. Only the conveyor belts in the letter post building consisted of a staggering 570 elastic tires stretching across a distance of 18 kilometers.<sup>26</sup>

26 HNI-MELKd121.1

**Figure 6** Western façade of Post CS building, by Elling and Merkelbach.  
Source: HNI-MELKt121.91





27 de Wagt, Piet Elling.

**Figure 7** PTT workers sorting the mail in the sorting hall of the former Amsterdam post station.

Source: HH-1916.01

Picture of the hoarded sorting hall of the Amsterdam post office captured in 1916 (Figure 7) sheds light on several crucial details regarding the working atmosphere of the post station's sorting hall and the changes it underwent over time. The photograph showcases a wide sorting table, with masses of letters piled on top and workers positioned around the table in a genial manner. It clarifies a stark contrast to the mechanized *Stationpostgebouw* sorting hall, which features lengthy rails that transfer letters to the workers who are confined to their individual booths (Figure 8).

The former figure depicts a symposium of sorting letters with workers who are granted a certain liberty to perform their work in their preferred manner if they complete a certain task within a certain time-frame. However, the latter figure shows a working rhythm that seems unstoppable. Mechanized machines transfer the mail to the workers, and they have to adapt to the speed of machines in order to match the relentless flow of mail in this highly functional post station.

The letter post building, as an eminent establishment in the systemized Dutch post industry, relied on mechanized rails to transport mail from the loading/unloading areas to the main sorting halls, where the mailbags were opened. Then the next set of conveyor belts transported the mail to the workers who sorted them in a specific order. Following this process, the mail was transferred to the halls, where letters were sorted based on their intended destination before being loaded onto trains or cars to reach their final destination. <sup>27</sup>

This system was designed to require minimal expertise or mastery in the field, with the goal of breaking down tasks into small, simple steps that could be executed by operators with limited experience and training. This approach is referred to as “labor-saving” in the description of the building.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, in this building, the thinker and masters at work were degraded to operators who repeated a task in order to maximize efficiency. However, this system also had the potential to malfunction and produce errors if any of the operators failed to perform their tasks correctly in a practical sense or timewise. The key to preventing such issues was to implement robust surveillance measures, which could be done through the architectural design of the surveillant facilities. This design should have enabled effective governance of workers and ensured that they adhere to industry standards and regulations.

The dominance of surveillance and hierarchy in Stationspostgebouw identified by Aart Oxenaar, a professor of architecture in the Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment of the Delft University of Technology, showcases the surveillant qualities that Stationpostgebouw used to maintain its integrity. He worked as a part-time employee in the sorting hall of the letter post building, in December 1978. A shortage of employees in one of the busiest periods of the year was the motivation for the post industry to hire temporary workers. Aart explains how in the sorting hall of the letter post building only women used to sort the mail and transfer them to their specific slots to be sent to their final destination.<sup>29</sup> As a result of this segregated working distribution, he was placed in a different position than sorting mail. In the process of sorting mail, sometimes stamps fall off the letters, with an insignificant value each stamp is still a valuable object and belongs to the nation, therefore it was necessary to collect and recycle them. Aart was thus given the responsibility of collecting these fallen stamps.<sup>30</sup>

Aart Oxenaar’s approach to leaving the job for a coffee break makes the groundwork for this thesis. Suddenly, a guard descends from the floating glass room designed for surveillance and informs him that leaving the job is not allowed. A memory that highlights the influence of architecture on human behavior. Highlighting how the design of a floating glass room in the building contributes to a disciplinary atmosphere. This situation invites a more thorough examination of contemporary surveillance theories such as the Panopticon system of control, to better comprehend how architecture can facilitate surveillant systems. It encourages us to observe the built environment beyond architecture and explore them through sociological themes.

28 de Wagt, Piet Elling.

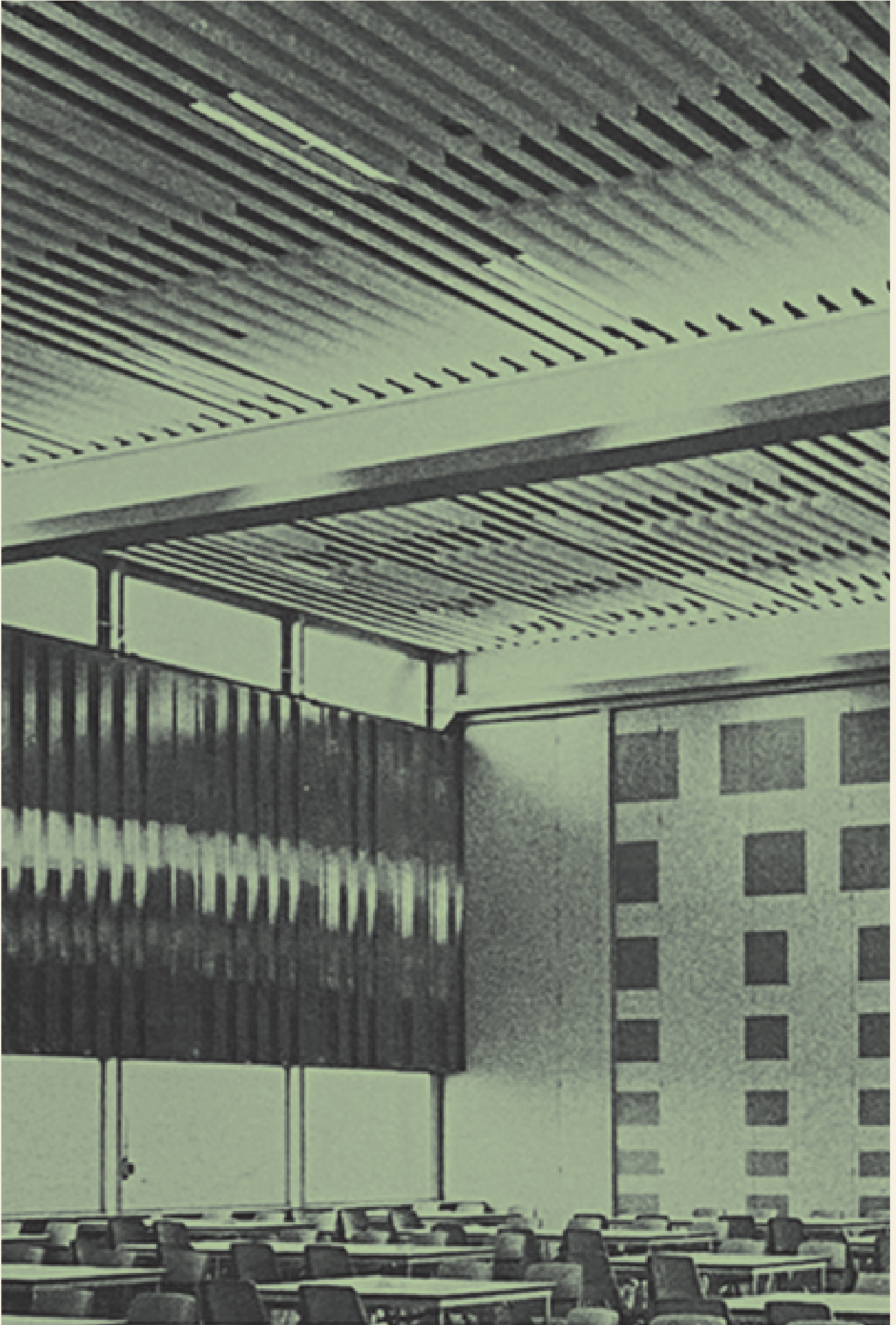
29 Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid, “Nieuw postkantoor,” (1968). <https://openbeelden.nl/media/680112#download>.

30 Aart Oxenaar, “Personal Communication,” interview by Sepehr Asadi, 2023.

**Figure 8** Briefpostgebouw sorting hall. Source: Geluid, “Nieuw postkantoor”



Figure 9 Post CS building (Pakketpostgebouw), interior of dining hall with De Stijl artworks, by Elling and Merkelbach. Source: HNI-MELKd121.108



## SURVEILLANCE THEORIES

Panopticon is the architectural depiction of a surveillant society; probably the most used metaphor for surveillance.<sup>31</sup> An idea first proposed by philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century. The structure consists of a round tower in the center of a rotunda, a prison, which is home to only one guard; empowered to monitor a vast number of prisoners. Prisoners have been placed in cells on the perimeter of the rotunda with two windows. One on the external side of the building, and the other on the inside door that enables the guard to observe the prisoners at any time through it.<sup>32</sup> Despite the practical difficulties posed by monitoring a large number of inmates, the system is remarkably efficient owing to the fact that prisoners remain oblivious to when they are being monitored.<sup>33</sup>

Bentham owes his notoriously widespread recognition of the Panopticon system to this day because of Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In this work, Foucault describes his interpretations of the Panopticon, beginning with the story of a city under the Plague's influence. A city that is harmed and benefitted in a contradictory sense by this disease. Quarantine and strict regulations to monitor people in order to save a city from the disease, on one hand. An idealistic hierarchical society, which is relatively easy to control and govern on the other hand.<sup>34</sup> Foucault calls this duality "the political dream of the plague"; that leads to the "utopia of the perfectly governed city".<sup>35</sup> In this city, people get a daily routine of inspection by guards through their windows. Guards who make sure that society will not be harmed by keeping a person under influence of the disease, free and uncontrolled. It enables us to see how the emergence of such a horrendous disease can make a "compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" through encapsulation, observation, and examination of people in a constant manner.<sup>36</sup> This brings extensive control over their bodies and categorizes every person as a prisoner on a city scale. Control in this sense is shaped through two factors that Foucault calls "Division" and "Branding". Branding involves the categorization of individuals under names like "Lepers", while division requires them to be kept apart from the rest of society or what is considered "normal".

In subsequent chapters, Foucault elaborates on Bentham's Panopticon as an architectural embodiment of this metaphorical system of control. Panopticon in his viewpoint is a spatial arrangement that helps observe, control, and subjugate prisoners, school children, and most significantly for the purpose of this research: workers in a factory or institution such as a post station. In a Panopticon, each silhouette in a cell is an individual actor in the scene of a prison; thus, is an object for observation. What Foucault calls "an object of information" as opposed to a "subject in communication". What makes the users, an object of information is the virtue of being visible without consent. This stands in stark contrast to the dungeons that were common in the medieval ages (Figure 11).

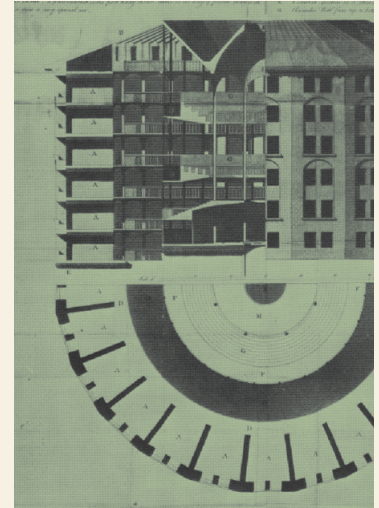


Figure 10 Panopticon Prison by Jeremy Bentham 1791, Source: ResearchGate website

31 Maša Galić, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops, «Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation,» *Journal Article, Philosophy & Technology* 30, no. 1 (13 May 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-016-0219-1>.

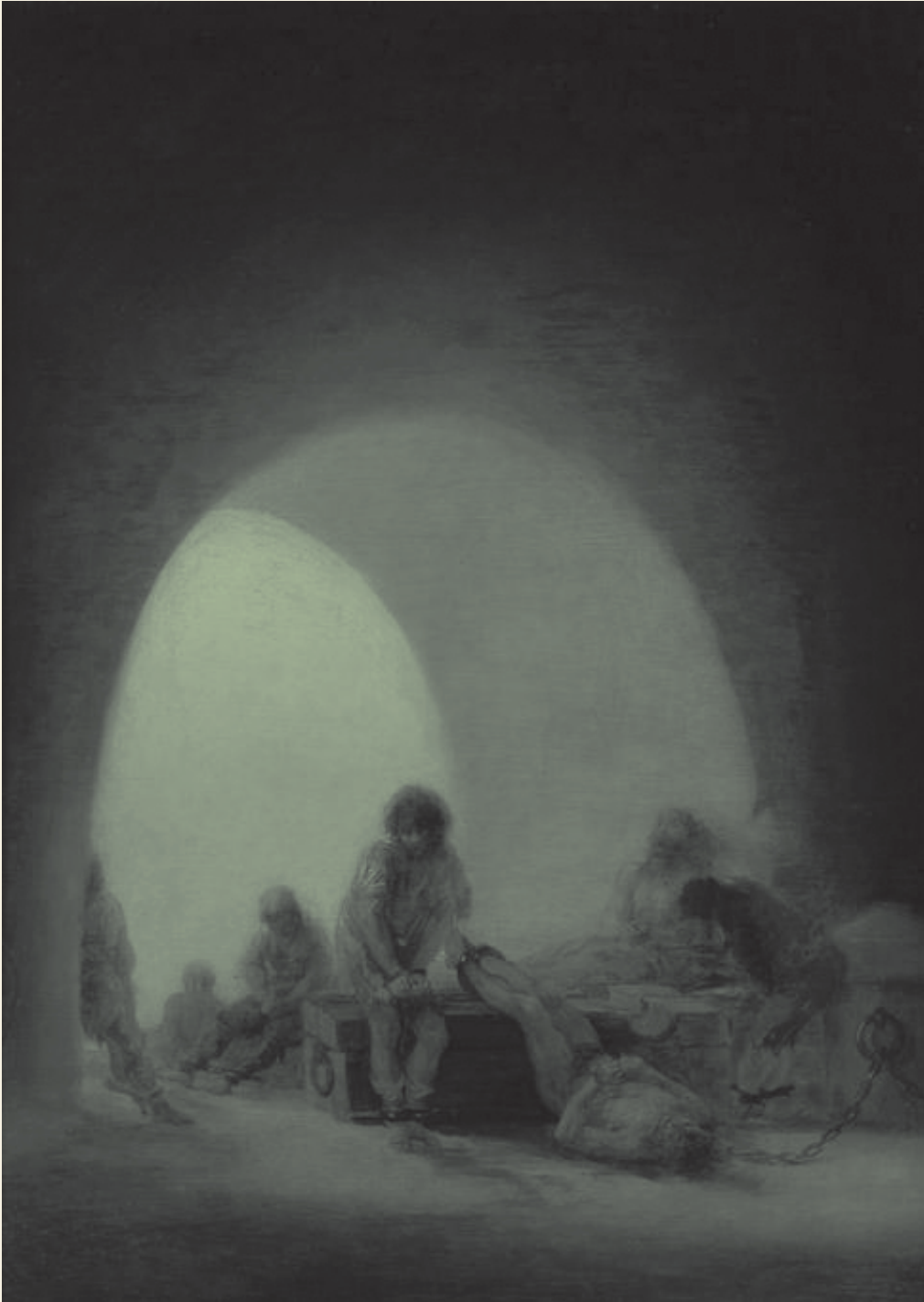
32 Michel Foucault, «Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,» *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (1926).

33 Foucault, «Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.»

34 Foucault, «Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.»

35 Foucault, «Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.»

36 Foucault, "Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison."



**Figure 11** A prison scene by Francisco Goya. Source: Wiki-art website

The Panopticon functions by creating a self-empowering source of power that operates at maximum efficiency, irrespective of who is in charge, thereby establishing a system of control through the use of hierarchy as its primary tool.<sup>37</sup> According to Bentham himself, two factors empower this system mostly; “invisibility” and “unverifiability” of this surveillance. However, in order to make it invisible, some design is needed. In order to make the observer ultimately invisible, one needs to cage them in a damp and dimmed room; with several elements like curtains and shutters that hides them. What makes the system so powerful, is that without any use of force or any need for permanent observation; one can make workers of a factory for instance, more productive by manipulating their own psyche against them.

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, “Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.”

On the other hand, Brunon-Ernst, a researcher who works on Bentham and Foucault's interpretations of him, provides a contrasting perspective on the Panopticon. Unlike Foucault's work, her narrative is more supportive of the Panopticon idea. She states that Bentham designed four panopticons instead of one, and the study of these buildings can introduce us to Bentham's actual ideas that have been unjustly interpreted by Foucault.<sup>38</sup>

She argues that the Panopticon does not aim to create a "society of control" that perpetually observes and control people. Instead, it works as an internalization of the observation, in order to gradually reduce the need for an observer. This system aims to transform punishment from a physical act to a preventive measure by using the fear of being watched as a deterrent.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, she suggests punishment and observation can vanish totally after a while since this system acts as a reformation for the user's behavior.<sup>40</sup>

What Brunon-Ernst called the "panoptic paradigm" shows us that the Panopticon system can be observed as more than what Foucault tells us. Three other panopticons that Ernst describes can show us more of what she means by this term. Pauper Panopticon, Chrestomatic Panopticon, and finally Constitutional Panopticon.

Although the Pauper Panopticon and Chrestomatic Panopticon share similarities with the Prison Panopticon, the Constitutional Panopticon stands out as a distinct departure from the conventional model.<sup>41</sup> Rather than being characterized by a few individuals surveilling many, the Constitutional Panopticon flips the scheme by having numerous citizens observe a group of governors in a single building. This reversed Panopticon, which can be referred to as an "anti-Panopticon," facilitates a different structure and function. It serves as a means of ensuring that those in power conduct themselves in a proper manner, employing a bottom-up approach that contrasts with the traditional top-down power dynamic. Interestingly, modern media, such as television, have similarly enabled the general public to scrutinize leaders in a way that was not previously possible.

What makes Foucault's observation of Bentham's panopticon important, is not solely the fact that he studied and explained Bentham's prison as a building. Nonetheless, it is his broad view on panoptic society and finding the Panopticon roots in modern Western societies. He argues that this idea has emanated in the fibers of daily life and made an immanent surveillant system. He states that when everyone is a subject of surveillance, the surveillance will become an internalized value among them, and subconsciously makes them create a set of morals in order to maintain the system themselves.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it leads to the creation of flows of power within society. Flows that categorize people, brand, and govern them. Flow is a term that Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) French philosopher and Felix Guattari (1920-1992) French psychoanalyst coined in this meaning. When there is no centralized source of power in a democratic society, the form of observation is changed from what Bentham suggests; to a mixture of flows that spread throughout the society and each and every individual or institution uncourteously

38 Galič, Timan, and Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond."

39 Anne Brunon-Ernst, *Beyond Foucault: New Perspectives on Bentham's Panopticon*, ed. Brunon-Ernst (Routledge, 28 February, 2012).

40 Philip Schofield, *Bentham: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), *Philosophy / Political*.

41 Galič, Timan, and Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond."

42 Galič, Timan, and Koops, "Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond." Pp. 16

is a part of the flow and under influence of a vast network of power. Hierarchy and surveillance are irresistible features of this system.

What Foucault calls “normation” is a process in which predefined norms are created and spread in society by flows of information. Foucault believes that in order to have a utopian normalized society, one society is required to discipline the citizen’s individual body through the “norms”. For instance, a hospital, a school, a factory, or any other corporation evaluates people based on so-called scientific methodologies and prescribed criteria created by norms. Also, by bureaucratic ways and according to norms, people get their “bodies” disciplined. For instance, in school, people learn how to use a pen properly, or in a factory, they become familiar with the working methods that are normalized and considered as proper techniques.<sup>43</sup> In order to maintain order within these institutions, the use of surveillance is often employed. This normation process and surveillance is integrated into all institutions of a society to the extent that creates “docile bodies”. A term that identifies people who became socially aware of the observation that they are exposed to, to the extent that they lose their capacity of resistance to the surveillance.<sup>44</sup>

Gilles Deleuze argues the institutions which Foucault shows us no longer exist or at least, not as they used to. A shift from what he calls “disciplinary societies” to “societies of control”. He identifies institutions such as schools, hospitals, or factories as corporations that instead of disciplining a society; prioritize short-term progress with the aid of Surveillance.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the focus is shifted from the constant observation in the Foucauldian discourse to invisible and opaque networks of discipline and power that are not visible to each individual but are flowing beneath the surface of society. What is crucial for this society is not merely the act of individual observation, but it is the normation of every individual through flows. Thus, the system works with individuals and their tasks in society as a data body instead of a unique personage. What Deleuze calls “dividual” in contrast to “Individual”.<sup>46</sup>

Kevin D Haggerty a sociologist from the University of Alberta, and Richard V. Ericson a professor of law and sociology From the University of British Columbia are two of the earliest and most dominant critics of Foucault.<sup>47</sup> They argue what Foucault did as an analyst of surveillance, was merely an observation of discrete technologies or social practices that are not relevant to surveillance in modern society anymore.<sup>48</sup>

Building on Deleuze and Guattari’s arguments, they introduced a concept that they coined “surveillant assemblage”. Assemblage is a complex amalgam of heterogenous objects that are united just under the virtue of functioning as a whole.<sup>49</sup> However, this is not the whole complexity of an assemblage, it is the fact that every assemblage consists of sub-assemblages that are multiple by themselves. These assemblages, make a “state form” that tries to striate the space in which it reigns.<sup>50</sup> Flows that are sources of information and are prevalent in society in many forms, get stabilized and are fixed temporarily and spatially by these assemblages.

43 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.” Pp. 17

44 Albert Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, “Encyclopedia of Case Study Research,” (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010), under “Docile Bodies.” <https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/casestudy>.

45 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.” Pp. 19

46 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” October 59 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>.

47 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.” Pp. 20

48 Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, “The surveillant assemblage,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (2000), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1994.11007058>.

49 Paul Patton, “Metamorpho-Logic: Bodies and Powers in A Thousand Plateaus,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 25, no. 2 (01 January 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1994.11007058>.

50 Haggerty and Ericson, “The surveillant assemblage.” Pp 608

Then they introduce us to the “desire”, which brings a surveillant assemblage together and makes it function. It is an inner stimulus that helps a system advance.<sup>51</sup> For instance, the desire for control, governance, security, or profit as they state can motivate a system to become surveillant in order to keep its boundaries.

These Assemblages however are more than a network between humans. They consist, of a lot of other mediums like signs, knowledge, institutions and etc. Galič also calls these assemblages a “recording machine” in order to record these flows and reproduce them when needed.<sup>52</sup> Then they make a “data double” out of the people that are in the system. A data double is a categorized version of a person based on different criteria, using different assemblages and data flows. What they call a flesh-technology-information amalgam.<sup>53</sup> These data doubles lead to an organization of people that separates groups and makes it easy to observe, study, control, or identify them.

Finally, they introduce “rhizomatic surveillance” a concept that shows how this system regenerates and grows simultaneously and engages more people within its organization.<sup>54</sup> A rhizomatic system that grows through multiplying its uses and making modules of hierarchy.

Modern surveillance is not about disciplining people in a certain prison or factory to reform them. It consists of a network of forces and desires. Almost all institutions have surveillance systems in them in order to categorize people and classify them into different hierarchy levels. Each person with a different financial background, education, or lifestyle is categorized into a different subgroup and hence requires a different mode of surveillance.<sup>55</sup> It is about a self-empowering system that almost leaves no one out of the boundaries of surveillance.

- 51 Haggerty and Ericson, “The surveillant assemblage.” Pp 609
- 52 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.” Pp. 21
- 53 Haggerty and Ericson, “The surveillant assemblage.” Pp. 611
- 54 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.” Pp. 22
- 55 Haggerty and Ericson, “The surveillant assemblage.” Pp. 618

**Figure 12** Mycelium Rhizome  
by Richard Giblett 2009,  
Source: Galerie Dusseldorf



## *SURVEILLANT POST STATION*

Numerous methods can be executed in order to unfold and apprehend ideas behind a building. Architectural studies through using physical and practical measures are capable of helping architects better understand the discipline and expand their knowledge of theories and try to gain an unbiased understanding of the history of their practice. Nonetheless, the study of hierarchy in a building can also help us tackle the sociological aspects of the built environment. Stationpostgebouw as a product of architecture can also be studied through the theoretical framework of surveillance and acknowledged through its hierarchical characteristics.

Aart Oxenaar's Interpretation of the sorting hall reveals an alternative dimension of the post station<sup>56</sup>, offering insights into how users experienced this building. This viewpoint can help us expand the research beyond observing the mere design process and the architects' intention. It can help us study the inhabited life of the building after the design process is over. In order to delayer hierarchies and create a more equitable and homogenous distribution of power in architecture, it is crucial to conduct an extensive investigation of how a self-empowering, surveillant system can be formed within a corporation. And how it can lead to a division of people into categories, that can contribute to the existing hierarchy of a building.

In Stationpostgebouw, workers and observers have undoubtedly diverged. Some minorities are empowered with the authority to monitor and control the rest, while the other group has been dominated by this control. This is evidence of a "dividual" process that decodes people into data doubles and subsequently brands them as members of a bigger group.<sup>57</sup> For instance, workers in a factory, people who observe these workers, or managers who direct everyone in this hierarchical system are all coded figures and categorized entities.

The surveillance in such organizations does not aim to observe and approach users in a disciplinary method, not to punish them or control and subjugate them. Nevertheless, to monitor them in order to make the industry the utmost benefit at the end of the day. As Bentham suggests, surveillance can contribute to an investigation of how every individual functions, in order to determine how they should be compensated. Nevertheless, Foucault describes that in a factory workers can be objects of surveillance; in order to reduce the risk of a disorder, theft, or collision that can lead to an "imperfection".<sup>58</sup>

The colossal sorting hall of the letter post building was the host to the control rooms that were suspended above the ground and fixed just under the ceiling (Figure 13). To ensure unobstructed movement of the workers, and homing the conveyor belts, two third of this hall was designed without any columns. In the video report of the building's opening<sup>59</sup>, the narrator highlights how the expansive and open hall helps the movement in space and eases the building's operation, but also enables spectators to have a clear view of the workers. An indication of why and how architecture can help surveillance take place. A single column in this hall could have been a threat to the industry by providing a concealed location for workers to have a short unofficial break.

56 Oxenaar, interview. See page 9.

57 Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control."

58 Foucault, "Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison."

59 Geluid, "Nieuw postkantoor."



The observation room hovered in the sorting hall of the letter post building and acted as the architectural manifestation of surveillance or a contemporary metamorphosed Panopticon rotunda in a post station. The control room was positioned right below the ceiling, with a slight offset toward the hall (Figure 13), a room that was capable of accommodating spectators to observe the workers below. It was covered with indoor curtain walls to ease the gaze, and the strategic offset provided the observer with an unobstructed, panoramic view of the entire sorting hall from any vantage point. The rest of the narrow and stretched room adjacent to the one mentioned, visible on the left side of the picture was a relay chamber for the observers. The relay chamber had horizontal windows while the protruded control room had vertical curtain walls that expedited a clear view of the sorting hall. A guard placed in this room ensured that no worker is concealed behind massive sorting shelves and belts in the area. Every employee was thus “an object of information” as Foucault describes<sup>60</sup> and should have been monitored feasibly. Foremost, the heavy workload made it impossible for workers to turn their heads and sneak a glance upwards. The heavy workload played the role of a non-physical obstacle, rather than using a physical obstacle that camouflages the observer. This new obstacle made the post station a Panopticon with blurred definitions.

The provision of a dedicated staircase leading to both the control room (Dutch: *bedieningsruimte*)<sup>61</sup> and the relay chamber (Dutch: *relaiskamer*)<sup>62</sup> for the observers (Figure 18) led to supplemental segregation between the workers and observers. The observers were granted exclusive access to the relay chamber and control rooms from the ground floor. The relay chamber and control room are showcased

**Figure 13** Sorting Hall of Briefpostgebouw, by Elling and Merkelbach. The floating control room and laying chamber can be seen in the left side of the picture. Source: Piet Elling by Wim de Wagt

60 Foucault, “Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.”

61 HNI-MELKt121.1

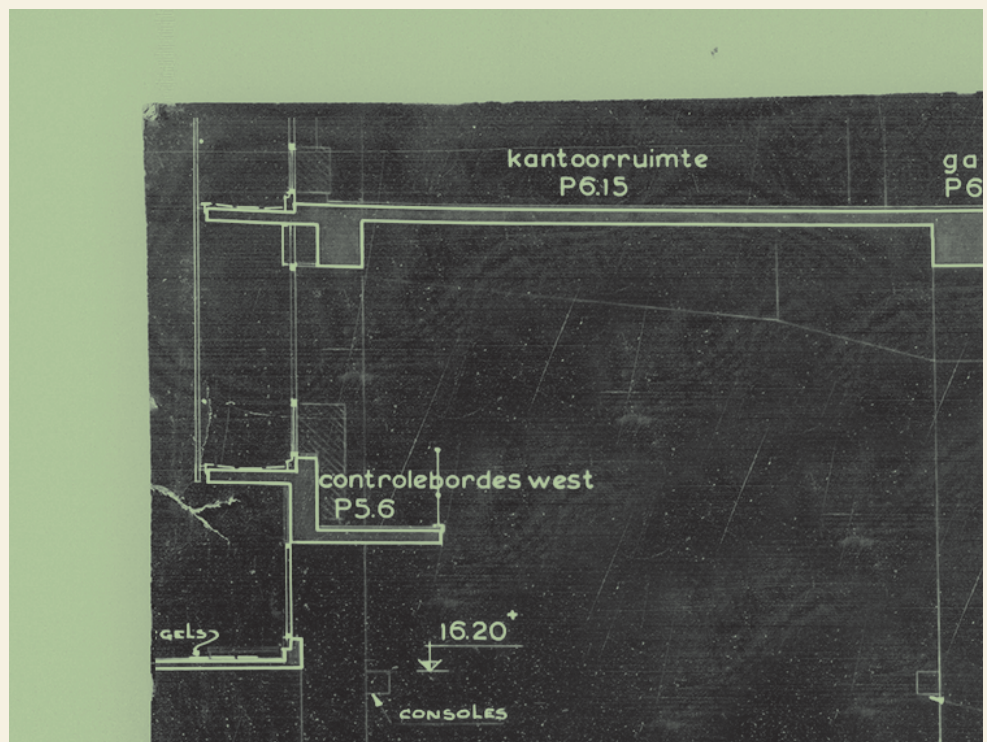
62 HNI-MELKt121.1

- 63 HNI-MELKt121.93  
 64 Ernest Burden, *Illustrated Dictionary of Architecture*, 3rd edition ed. (United States: McGraw-Hill Education, 2012).

on the floorplan as a wide highlighted part on the bottom side of the drawing (Figure 16). The relay chamber featured horizontal windows that ensured an observer seated there remained shielded from workers' gaze. Consequently, the observer assumed a position of superiority, with the ability to observe the workers without being observed in turn, since the workers situated on the floor below solely had a view of the ceiling of the relay chamber. In contrast, when an observer was stationed in the control room, the curtain wall afforded a clear view of all workers. Thus, this building clearly embodied a hierarchical arrangement that underscored the differences between individuals, resulted in noticeable differentiations in the manner in which each group moves, rests, and works.

Drawings of the parcel post building serve as a piece of further evidence of the surveillant mechanisms in this building. Figure 14 shows the cross-section of the sorting hall in the parcel post building. Positioned on the upper side of the hall, to the east and west there are compartments called control platforms (Dutch: *controlebordes*)<sup>63</sup>. Which were mezzanines intentionally designed and installed by the architects to facilitate control and surveillance. A mezzanine is a low-ceiling story located between two main stories<sup>64</sup>. Although using a mezzanine as a platform to observe is not an utterly uncommon use, designing a mezzanine under the name and intention of a control platform is however critical and reinforced the hierarchy in this building. Everyone can get drawn to stand by the railings of a mezzanine and take a look at the life happening on the floor below. Nonetheless, creating control platforms in this building called for employing observers to wander on them, which created a new group in the hierarchical settlement of the corporation. A new group that maybe could have been redundant in the first place and could have been laid off.

**Figure 14** Section of Pakket-postgebouw showing control platforms (Dutch: *Controlebordes*).  
 Source: HNI-MELKt121.93



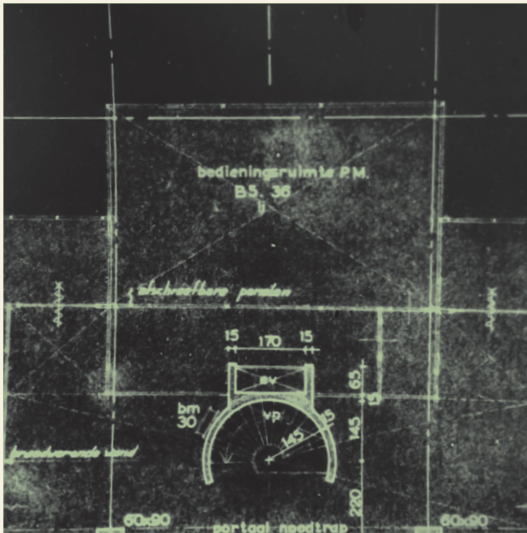


Figure 15 Close-up of the control room of the letter post building. Source: HNI-MELkt121.1

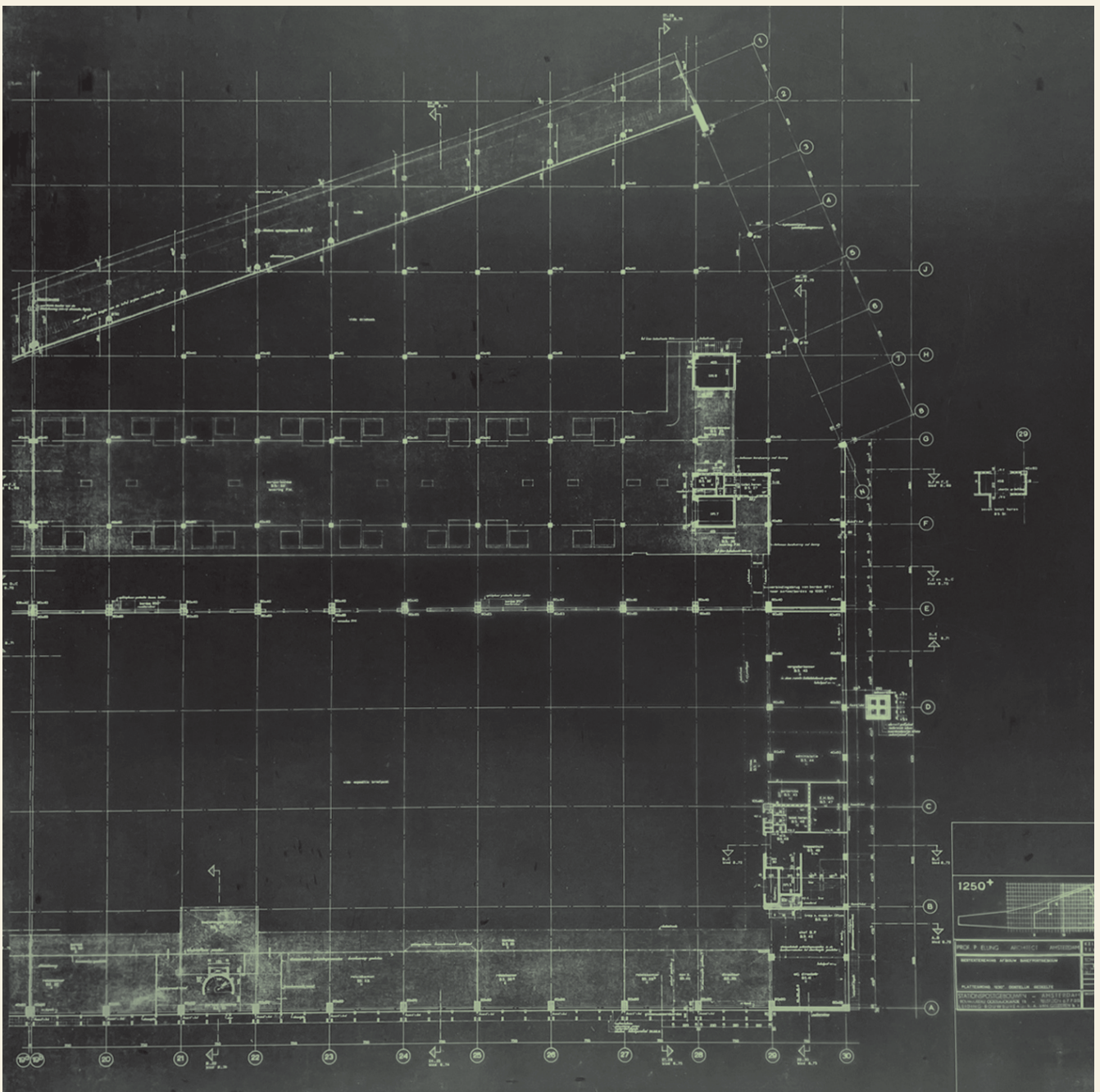


Figure 16 Letter post building: second floor plan. Source: HNI-MELkt121.1

65 Foucault, "Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison."

Differences in the pattern of movement between the workers and observers can be explored through a careful examination of the space each group was granted in the building. Workers' area used to be limited to their booth, shelves, or machines delimited by a margin that they could have operated in, which most probably adhered to the Neufert standards. Thus, limited their movement to a turn or twist on their designated chair within their booths. While the observer had a relay chamber as wide as the whole column less part of the sorting hall, almost a hectometer in length. Moreover, the mode of relaxation also manifests a marked divergence between the two groups, workers had a dining area with resting and sports facilities on the last floor of the other building, the parcel post building. However, to access this area, they were required to go to the ground floor of the letter post building and exit and re-enter the parcel post building to reach its topmost floor. While observers had an interconnected resting and working area.

The deliberate design of these surveillant facilities inside the building made the hierarchy and surveillant a dominant aspect of the architecture of this building. Unlike what Brunon-Ernst stated, observation and control are not gone after a while. Nonetheless, they are more chartered as they have even dissolved into more hidden layers of society by the mid-20th century and continue to be much more extensive and deeply ingrained in society in the current times. However, what Deleuze and Guattari suggested is closer to how the former Amsterdam post station building could have homed hidden layers of flows and assemblages that marked people and divided them into different categories. These divergences had the potential to create varying atmospheres for different employee groups, whether consciously or unconsciously, as evidenced by the contrasting resting patterns between two groups of employees in the post office as an official governmental building in the 20th century, not so long ago.

According to Foucault, surveillance and control are deeply embedded in the fabric of modern Western societies, resulting in the creation of systems that perpetuate power dynamics even in the absence of active participation from individuals.<sup>65</sup> In this context, the act of

**Figure 17** Control platforms placed on both sides of the parcel post building.  
Source HNI-MELKt121.93



branding is used to separate those who are entitled to a permanent resting area and those who must commute to the designated areas and lose a significant amount of their break. These changes are not initiated by any single actor but are rather the byproduct of the working climate and assemblages that defines them, and mark individuals based on various criteria.<sup>66</sup> The architecture in this phase reinforces this differentiation and hierarchy.

The working procedure within the building can also add crucial information on the system and mechanization that the industry performed through. The procedure can be characterized as follows: initially, the trucks unloaded the bags of letters and parcels in the unloading area. Then, a team of male workers<sup>67</sup> emptied the bags and put them into their containers to be sent to the respective buildings. In the letter post building, letter bags got piled on tables where again male workers divided them based on certain criteria and sent them to the chutes that brought them to the next step. Subsequently, a row of female workers sorted the letters and placed them on conveyor belts to be sent to their destination. The mechanized system at this phase sent them to the designated shelves based on the label on each box, where female workers sorted each letter by hand according to their ultimate destination. Simultaneously, male workers in the parcel post building unloaded the parcels and threw them in their corresponding containers. The parcels were then hung on mechanized claws that and with aid of an operator one by one got inspected and labeled to be released in their own chute. Ultimately, they were loaded on the train and trucks to be sent to their final destination.<sup>68</sup>

As the procedure indicates, each worker was employed to perform a specific task in the most efficient way. Thus, the systems needed operators capable of doing certain and predefined tasks. Somehow this can be interpreted as a mechanized human worker in a modernized post station. In this corporation, the operator needed to do something like reading tags on a mail in the most efficient way today and something else tomorrow if the work required it. As long as the task could have been taught and mastered in a short period by temporary workers, there was no need to employ masters that were harder to manipulate. Workers who do these simplified tasks are what Deleuze calls a “coded figure” in a corporation.<sup>69</sup> A coded figure is subject to doing a certain task within certain criteria and by means of certain movements.

Foucault believes that whenever there is a need for us to impose a certain task in a certain way or with a particular behavior on a group, the Panopticon schema may be useful to this organization.<sup>70</sup> It is its self-producing and self-empowering qualities, that make any “apparatus of power” more intense. Hence, this machine, this system or organization that acts as the source of power regardless of who is in the lead can increase the production by its own capabilities. This is why applying Panopticon qualities has helped this case study: Stationspostgebouw to be more productive, by identifying the workers as objects of observation; or coded figures, then providing them with a certain task and finally monitoring using supervisors to ensure that nothing can go wrong.

66 Galič, Timan, and Koops, “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond.”

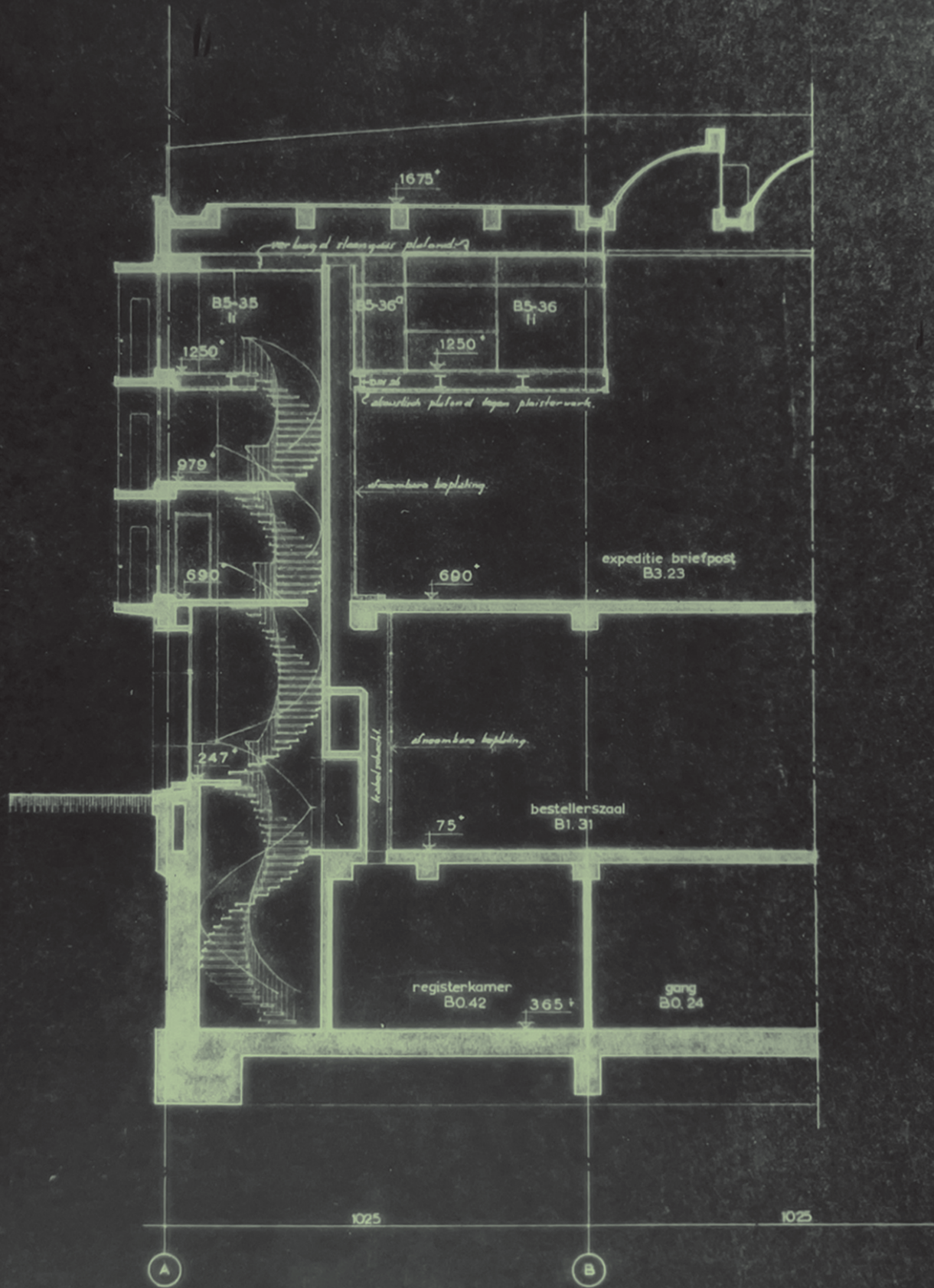
67 Oxenaar, interview.

68 Geluid, “Nieuw postkantoor.”

69 Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”

70 Foucault, “Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.”

Figure 18 Letter Post Building, Section of the control room, and the private staircase that leads to it. Source: HNI-MELK121.1



DOORSNEDE OVER TRAVEE 21-22

According to Brunon-Ernst, the Panopticon aims to achieve behavioral refinement and subjugation through constant surveillance, using a sense of fear of being watched in its users as a drive. In contrast, the Stationpostgebouw employs surveillance as a means of ensuring task completion and order. This study reveals that hierarchy, surveillance, and user manipulation are central themes in this building, though they may have received less attention in the former studies of Elling and Merkelbach architecture.

The analysis presented in this paper sheds light on the common approaches to surveillance in the built environment and thoroughly examines how they are applied to the Stationpostgebouw. Comparing the Panopticon and Stationpostgebouw highlights a significant difference in their power production methods. The Panopticon's design conceals the observer's identity and presence from the occupants through carefully crafted architectural elements. In contrast, the Stationpostgebouw features a prominent observer who oversees the space from an elevated deck, emphasizing their authority and control over the area.

This study aims to uncover hidden themes in architecture, such as surveillance and hierarchy, and explore their possibilities in the former Amsterdam post station. With many possibilities to explore in every building and environment, such studies can be extremely helpful to reduce the impact of hierarchy and surveillance on the users' behavior and promote more equitable and democratic spaces.

In conclusion, this paper serves as a call to action for further research on the architecture of Elling and Merkelbach, in order to determine whether the themes identified in this article are consistent throughout their work or unique to this particular project as the client PTT might have been the drive behind it. Such investigations can help to promote a more nuanced understanding of architecture and its impact on society. Hoping to achieve a more homogenous architecture and less hierarchy in the future of the architecture discipline.

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