



Delft University of Technology

## **Define and Let Go**

### **An Interview with John Habraken**

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#### **Publication date**

2017

#### **Document Version**

Final published version

#### **Published in**

Facing Value

#### **Citation (APA)**

Havik, K., & Teerds, H. (2017). Define and Let Go: An Interview with John Habraken. In M. Lauwaert, & F. van Westrenen (Eds.), *Facing Value: Radical Perspectives From The Arts* (pp. 313-320). Valiz.

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Maaïke Lauwaert &  
Francien van Westrenen (eds.)

# Facing Value

Radical  
perspectives  
from the arts

Valiz

# FACING VALUE

## Radical perspectives from the arts

Maaïke Lauwaert &  
Francien van Westrenen (eds.)

Valiz, Amsterdam  
Stroom Den Haag





Yto Barrada, *Briques (Bricks) (Backsteine)*, 2003/2011

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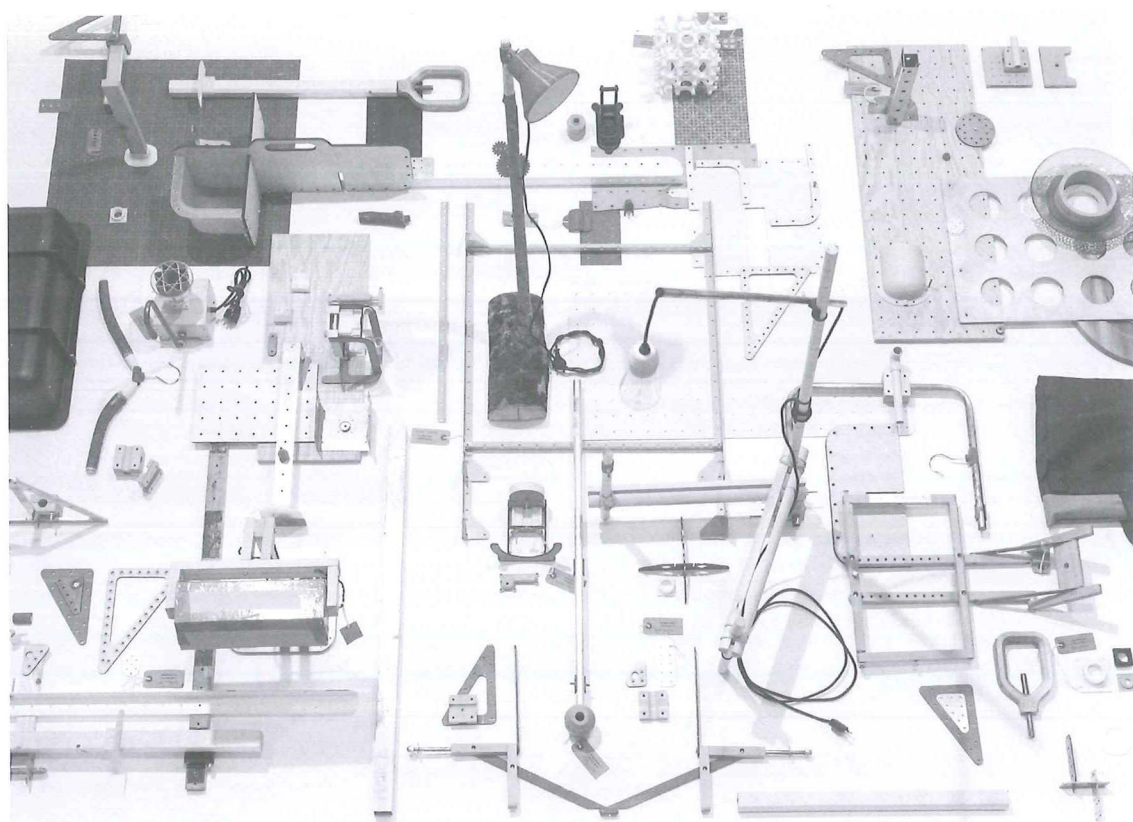
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# DEFINE AND LET GO: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HABRAKEN

## Klaske Havik & Hans Teerds

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Thomas Lommée, *Rethink the modular*, 2015

5 INVITE AND PARTICIPATE: Reprinted texts

The name of John Habraken will always be associated with the distinction that he made between 'support' and 'infill' in architectural and urban development projects. In *Supports: an Alternative to Mass Housing*,<sup>1</sup> he argued that it is people themselves who 'make' their surroundings, with the support making it possible for them to do this within the broad sociocultural context of society. By extension, the support allows for changes in layout and use over the course of time. Fifty years later, it seems that Habraken's message has still not lost any of its importance and his thinking is more popular than ever. Particularly with the contemporary conditions of rapid change and economic uncertainty, under which the future of an architectural or urban development project is uncertain, designers are forced to search for approaches in which the factor of time can play a role in the design. So there was every reason to speak with John Habraken himself and discuss his ideas about time, changeability and the role of the designer in the light of recent architectural and cultural developments. On a wintry December afternoon we visited Habraken at his house in Apeldoorn, a house he built for his mother in the 1950s: a low-lying bungalow in the woods, in which a structure of columns and beams pronouncedly frames the interior. It is logical to limit

the distinction of support and infill to the separation between the structure, the base building, and a more or less flexible infill, but that is just a fraction of what Habraken meant by his distinction.

### 1. ON SUPPORT AND INFILL

JH:

I'm well aware that people often think of the support as if it were a skeleton that you can fill in, but if architects talk about mutability then they are actually referring to flexibility. They do not mean a separation of decisions; they still want to do everything themselves. That has nothing to do with what we are talking about now; we're talking about a separation of control, and that is precisely where architects' resistance to the idea lies, as well as the key. My definition is: the support is the communal. The collective space, the entrances, the corridors, the stairwells, spaces for meetings, you name it. All these are collective spaces, and that is the architect's responsibility. A support cannot be neutral, because then you are doing a disservice to the process. This means the design can be highly specific, and so it should be. That's not the point; it's about the process. You mustn't take in hand the things that are better left to other people. You must do what is good

<sup>1</sup> N.J. Habraken, *Supports: an Alternative to Mass Housing* (London/New York: The Architectural Press/Praeger, 1972); originally published as *De dragers en de mensen: het einde van de massawoningbouw* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema, 1961).



for the community—that is our domain. By this I'm not saying that an architect provides solely the structure, which has to be filled out by others, or that he should not be allowed to concern himself with the aesthetic outcome. Quite the contrary. Frank Bijdendijk [director of the Amsterdam-based Stadgenoot housing association, KH/HT] rightly contends that a building must be something that people cherish. It is thanks to the building's expression, the architectural manifestation, that it lasts a long time. People become attached to the environment where they reside and live. That is also the reason why cities endure for a long time. If people are attached to their surroundings, there is less need to radically alter a square or a city.

Architecture is, of course, first and foremost about space, but for me the introduction of the dimension of time was crucial. At the time we naturally realised that the idea of separating support and infill was actually the first introduction of the dimension of time in architectural thinking—and likewise that this concept actually went against the grain, against the ideology of architecture. Yet by thinking about time you start to see the built environment in a totally different way. In my book *The Structure of the Ordinary*,<sup>2</sup> 'change' is the key to grasping the essence of the built environment. By recognising changes as an essential characteristic of architecture, we were in fact acknowledging the significance of the dimension of time in the built environment. That simultaneously makes the dilemma of the exercise of power urgent: who has control over the design and construction process, and the period thereafter, of course.

However, this prompted resistance straight away. The greatest opposition came from architects, even though residen-

tial construction was foreign to them from an historical perspective. They felt they were being deprived of something, since architects had to produce the monuments that would be able to withstand the teeth of time; they did not want any aspect of their creation to be altered. There were in fact some housing associations that were willing to experiment, but the first positive reactions came from the construction sector. I remember a building contractor who popped in and said, 'If you make architects think about structures, then that will open up new possibilities for us in the building industry.' This builder was, of course, an exception. After all, since the introduction of the Dutch Housing Act in 1902 there has been a very top-down system, an order that establishes the role of all the parties involved: designers, building contractors, commissioners, housing associations, banks—the whole system is founded on the fact that the inhabitant does not take part.

## 2. ON THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

KH/HT:

But didn't the 1960s, when you published your ideas, also see the emergence of resident participation?

JH:

That was certainly in the ascendant at the time, but that was not what we meant. You were suddenly confronted by a culture of people who championed participation, but then they said: 'We will, however, be taking charge of that participation process.' But nobody had any idea who the future residents would be, so they tried to bring together some people and talk with them. Ultimately it was an implicit given that the

professional took the decision and not the residents. We actually said that we didn't want any *involvement* from the residents, but their say-so.

KH/HT:

In your plea to allow greater leeway for the infill of the users themselves, you were limiting the role of the architect: an important part of the elaboration and fitting-out of the interior was left to the user. Weren't you afraid of marginalising the architect, or did you see a different role for the architect?

JH:

You would think that was the case, but I'm convinced that it makes our work much more interesting. What we proposed was to produce a building block without floor plans, while from a professional perspective the floor plan was the first thing that needed to be established. And that was then multiplied however many times. Once that floor plan was established everyone could decide: where the mains and wiring would run, what the structure had to be like, what it could cost and so on. So if you eliminate the floor plan you actually radically reverse the process. And that makes it more interesting for the architect, because you are rid of the carry-on with those little floor plans. The idea that a building is a multiplication of a floor plan is, of course, absurd! Just the idea that all the professionals would busy themselves with that one little floor plan which had been vetted down to the very last 10 cm by the ministry . . .

KH/HT:

So you liberated the architect from the floor plan?

JH:

Yes. I did in fact steer the architect towards what it all boils down to. Architects have always been concerned with the communal, and the support is the communal: that is the genuine architecture. That is what the people have in common, and it is not only the building but the public space as well, inside and outside, and that is what architects are good at. You see, an urban planner isn't concerned with the architecture of the buildings that are realised within the city; he produces a *framework*, a context in which architects can work. That insight led us to the concept of *levels*, which became a guiding principle for us: wherever you are working you are always busy working within something that has already been made by someone else, and what you make becomes a context for someone else. If that's not the inhabitant, then an interior architect. And if you concentrate on your own level then you can also be much more open towards unexpected changes, you can improvise more. I've always thought that was really important in education as well. With a large project, the way you structure the architectural principles in such a way that you can still use them to proceed in different directions is crucial. That is also related to the attitude of the designer, who must have a clear-cut vision for the crux of the project. With this you can head in different directions, and dealing with what was not foreseen makes the profession even more exciting! In short, as a designer you do not need to have a vision of the end point; but you must find a way to state or erect the things that you find important. How precisely that will be combined in a particular situation is something that only evolves during the course of the process.

2 N.J. Habraken, *The Structure of the Ordinary: Form and Control in the Built Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).



KH/HT:

So according to you the architect does not have to maintain control over a project from A to Z?

JH:

No, that's just ideology. It's not for nothing that architects love designing villas most. Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Rietveld: their best works were villas. The history of modern architecture can actually be written on the basis of villas, because that is where an architect has full control. The moment you become involved in producing a much larger building that becomes a ludicrous stance.

A decade ago we were stuck in an ideology, in which self-expression and the originality of the architect were declared sacred. For a long time that was the very cornerstone of the profession. Luckily that era now lies far behind us. Now, happily, there is a revival of interest in the question that we posed about the communal system, in which everyone is personally free. And those two things are then also inseparable. I can only manifest myself if I fit in somewhere, in the same way you will only be understood if you speak a language. So now we must devote attention to the communality of that design. The typologies, the patterns, you name it. It's a very open field, which has remained fallow and unexplored for a very long time, a terrain where the past was always a great force. If you look at historical cities a very clear-cut typology prevails, but at the same time each house boasted its own identity. We must re-find that balance, and it will undoubtedly lie somewhere else than it did in the past.

### 3. ON THEORY AND PRACTICE

KH/HT:

When you elaborated and published your ideas, you were working in an academic environment. You deliberately maintained a distance from practice and did not actively put your ideas into practice, as was the case with Lucien Kroll in Belgium. Why did you do that?

JH:

I quite consciously maintained a distance. I did that because I wanted people to think about how they ought to go about things for themselves. If I had built things myself then it would have been too easy for others to react primarily to the visual result: 'That's the way Habraken does it, but we don't do it like that.' Realising that this therefore calls for a totally new process, I was primarily interested in finding the methodology that you need as an architect. How do you design something that is 'open-ended'? We felt that it was our task to figure that out, so that architects could play a positive role in this new situation. With hindsight, that was also the first time that design methodology was formulated as research. In England there were some people who were also talking about methodology at the time, but that fizzled out fairly quickly, because they were searching for a method that would guarantee the production of good designs. But you have to distinguish value judgements from methodology. Within every method you can do dumb things and good things. Methodology is a prerequisite for quality, but not a guarantee; it's not a recipe.

Lucien Kroll was the first architect to employ this. He burst in and said, 'This is just what we need.' He immediately

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adopted the dimensioning system and his project in Louvain-la-Neuve is based entirely on this body of thought. The contact with him was highly stimulating. He was himself concerned with similar themes and he recognised us as a support, because we could underpin that methodologically. So there were always colleagues, even young ones, who were enthusiastic about it. What I did learn back then was that you must always issue a warning: letting go of things does not make the work of the architect any easier—quite the reverse.

KH/HT:

You already mentioned urban design, where the distinction between urban structure and architectural infill is widely accepted. You brought this idea to architecture. Do you see a big difference between the two?

JH:

The principle is the same: there is a succession of interventions on different scales, and in general the larger scale provides the context for the lower level and so on, all the way down to the inhabitant who furnishes his home. But the novelty of the support and the infill was that it creates a new level: the buildings become larger and larger. And if something grows—just like in nature—then it will start to divide itself into several levels. That is why 'open building' projects for office blocks or shopping malls evolved very naturally, in response to the requirements of the clients. After all, with such large surface areas, for them it was commercially interesting to rent out space to people who can arrange it themselves.

5 INVITE AND PARTICIPATE: Reprinted texts

KH/HT:

Architecture is about the building's manifestation in the city and in the landscape. That certainly applies for the major projects you are referring to. With the project in Louvain-la-Neuve, Lucien Kroll lets go of the control over that manifestation. In that case the façade is determined by a process involving the residents. What is your view on this? After all, in your vision the façade is also a support: that of the collective identity of the building.

JH:

In some cultures that façade is fairly uniform. British Georgian architecture, for example, with uniform squares and façades, only the entrances are different, and the houses behind them might all be different. In the Netherlands everyone had his own facade, so where you set that boundary of the support is more culturally determined. But it is certainly true that when you produce a building as an architect, you are making an addition to the city's public domain. And that is also the task of the architect, in my opinion.

### 4. ON THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC

KH/HT:

In preparation for this conversation you wrote to us: 'There are forces that demand a response from architecture to the user's need for personal identity. And there are others who desire a more stable collective identity in an environment that is increasingly difficult to understand. These impulses from everyday life are what necessitate thinking in terms of time. Are they incompatible or reconcilable? If it were down to the profession and the architect's primary urge to identify himself,



then the dimension of time is not needed.' By extension you are suggesting that the urgency of 'open building' is different to 50 years ago. Could you elaborate on this 'identity crisis' that you have noted? How do you perceive the contemporary context of the architectural project?

JH:

Because we no longer bear a clear-cut individual responsibility, the communal has also been lost.

KH/HT:

Are you alluding to the blurring between the private and the public?

JH:

Yes, the two go together. If you refuse to see that distinction then it produces something that is neither of the two. The architect sees a residential building as an object, a piece of architecture, not as a component of three-dimensional urban planning or something that is an incentive for the individual resident to intervene there. I think that people who bear personal responsibility for their own home want to look after the communal—they put their minds to it. If I have no personal responsibility and I am not allowed to do anything then what will I care whether those staircases are well-maintained? That difference is clearly evident, in the difference between mass housing in China and South Korea, for example. In China they introduced a strict regime of mass housing construction in order to uplift the proletariat. But the proletariat was given absolutely no responsibility. I have never seen stairwells that were such a rubbish tip as there. There were similar mass house-building projects in South Korea: huge, uniform blocks of flats. But generous sub-

dies meant that residents could buy a home cheaply, and this meant they were directly responsible for their own living environment. Those people did some intriguing things with the collective spaces around the staircase. They collected money to build a porter's lodge and hire a porter, who ensured that the communal space was kept clean and knew who was allowed in or not. So the habitat was immediately looked after. And the next thing was that many people shifted the glazed façade on their standard balconies with a depth of 1.20 m, to make their homes bigger. That produced a really intriguing architecture, because all those glazed façades were realised by small contractors, so they were all slightly different. It resulted in a wonderful edifice with a huge variation. When people bear responsibility themselves and dedicate themselves and invest, then this also establishes the communal. It is taken care of, from the bottom up.

A year ago a law was passed in Japan to stimulate all kinds of residential buildings being allowed to 'survive' for a long time, for up to 200 years. It is a statutory form of sustainability that is based on the theme of the distinction between support and infill. There they call it skeleton and infill, which is in my opinion a poor term, though well-intended. That law refers to a technical report which sets out the conditions that the proprietor of such a building must meet in order to be recognised, so that he can then receive a tax reduction. So it is not the builder or the developer but the owner who reaps the benefits, but the builder and the developer are fully aware that they can ask for more money when they deliver work that satisfies these conditions. These technical requirements amount to a building being seen as a combination, an orchestration, of all sorts

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of subsystems. And each subsystem can be of its own specific age. Some subsystems are determined by technical capacity: they simply wear out. But other subsystems are determined by their usage: kitchens and bathrooms, for example, are also subject to changing domestic preferences. To give a detailed example, the shared waste pipe of a residential building must be renewed every 50 years. So you have to design in such a way that there is space alongside that drain for a second drain, so that you can connect the second waste pipe and take away the first. So this is a ground-breaking law, which first introduces the factor of time into the thinking of the building professions.

## 5. ON THE TOPICALITY OF THE BODY OF THOUGHT

KH/HT:

Can you name any recent projects in which the seminal ideas of the Foundation for Architectural Research (Stichting Architecten Research, or SAR) have been employed in a contemporary manner?

JH:

At a given moment the SAR evolved into what is now called the Open Building network. Officially that is a kind of working group within the CIB,<sup>3</sup> a fairly informal association that maintains contact and meets once a year in a different country. That network has already existed for 17 years and has therefore gradually developed further. Now it is run by three people: Stephen Kendall from Ball State University in the USA, Kazunobo Minami from Shibaura University in Tokyo, and Beisi Jia from Hong Kong University. The first two are former students of mine. This network propagated a great interest

in so-called Open Building on an international level, and not only in residential construction but more generally. There were of course other interesting initiatives in this sphere that emerged in parallel with this. In the USA, for example, office buildings and shopping malls are being produced as empty shells, so that tenants can decide what they want for themselves. The Americans have a whole system for how you must do that financially and in terms of legislation, simply because of market pressure.

Hospital construction is another intriguing field. There is a recent project in Bern that goes a long way in its application of the open building methodology. In Switzerland it is common for a canton to have its own building department, which serves as the commissioner for public buildings. The director of this department in Bern is the architect Giorgio Macchi. When an intensive care unit had to be added to the university hospital—a major project—Macchi ascertained that these hospitals changed so much, even during construction, that the standard approach was no longer efficient. In this project he applied a very strict separation between what he called the primary and secondary structures. He therefore launched a design competition for the primary structure without even mentioning the secondary one, so they had to produce a design without floor plans. In addition he stipulated that for the primary structure the participating architects had no experience with hospital construction. That ran up against the requisite opposition, of course. He argued that architects who have too much experience are not sufficiently open to new ideas. Once construction of this primary structure was under way, he held a design competition for the secondary

<sup>3</sup> The acronym for the International Council for Research and Innovation in Building and Construction's working commission Open Building Implementation. See [www.open-building.org](http://www.open-building.org).



system, and for that you did need to have experience with hospital construction.

In the Netherlands, the 'Solids' project by Frank Bijdendijk, who I mentioned earlier, is an interesting case at the moment. Here too the idea is that if a building has to last for a long time then it must be a building that is open and flexible, but at the same time a building that people cherish. By this he doesn't mean that architects must find it attractive, though the two can of course go hand in hand. [smiles]

KH/HT:

So your trail-blazing ideas from back then, about the role of the architect and allowing the factor of time into the process, have indeed taken root in design practice over the years?

JH:

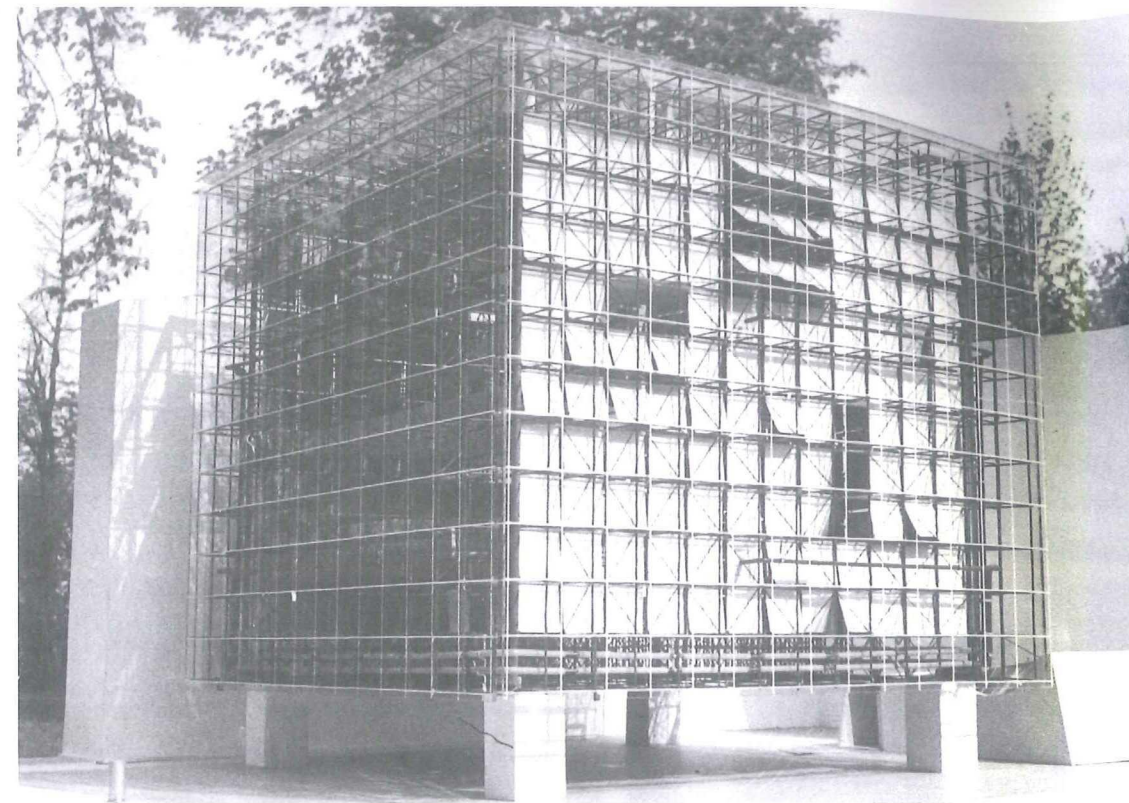
I've noticed that you can now begin at a different point. The focus of attention among architects is shifting. I've now been back from the USA for a decade, and even there the field is shifting. There is certainly evidence of a crisis in the profession: people are not so sure which direction they should take. This has the advantage that they are very pragmatic, open to all kinds of approaches; they want something more mutable and flexible than that macho thing with that huge emphasis on self-expression. Something else you see is that people are starting to reinvent the wheel again, that there is renewed interest in methodology: precisely what I was already looking for at the time. The idea that you have to be concerned with methodology is still barely accepted, or known, I should say—method was always seen as a hindrance, once again because of the misconception that it is not a recipe

but a way of handling things. As an architect you need method to be able to work together—certainly when there are so many different actors involved in a process. That is why we have a system of measurement, for example. That explains the renewed interest in methodological notions such as themes, typologies and patterns. After all, these are the things that are communal, the supports, as it were. Within the 'open building' network and the SAR we of course had an extremely long track record in these things. Hopefully that will now become more widely accepted again.

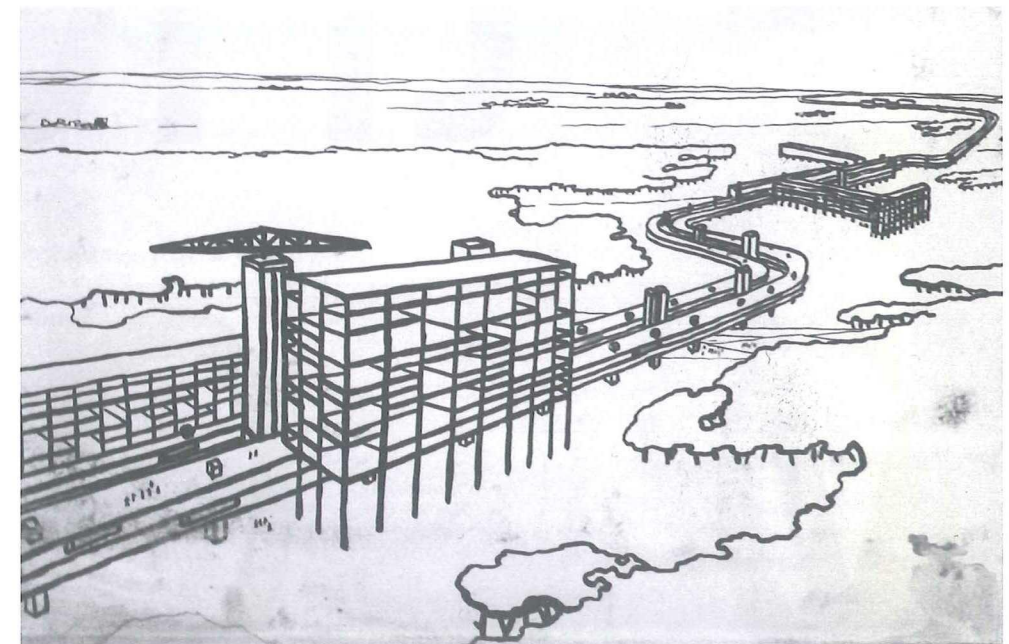
Translation Dutch-English: Andrew May  
OASE 85 (February 2005), pp. 8-16

John Habraken (1928) is a Dutch architect, educator, and theorist who has researched mass housing and strategies for the participation of users and residents in the building process. He is best-known for his concept of dividing the physical infrastructure of buildings into 'support' (provided by the state) and 'infill' (filled in by the users). He is interviewed by architect/professor and writer Klaske Havik and architect/urban planner Hans Teerds for the magazine OASE.

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Oskar Hansen, Stanislaw Zamecznik and Lech Tomaszewski, expansion design of Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw, 1958-1962



Oskar Hansen, *Linear Continuous System*, 1960s

5 INVITE AND PARTICIPATE



## Colophon

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### Proofreading

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### Index

Elke Stevens

### Graphic design

Elisabeth Klement  
Laura Pappa

### Paper

Soporset Premium Offset 90g,  
Cyclus Print 100g (inside)  
Cyclus Print 200g (cover)

### Lithography and printing

Mariska Bijl / Wilco Art Books  
Ten Brink, Meppel

### Publisher

Astrid Vorstermans,  
Valiz, Amsterdam  
with Stroom Den Haag

Amsterdam, 2017

Valiz, Amsterdam (NL)

[www.valiz.nl](http://www.valiz.nl)

Stroom Den Haag (NL)

[www.stroom.nl](http://www.stroom.nl)

This publication was made possible  
through the generous support of  
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ISBN 978 94 92095 00 8

NUR 646

Printed and bound in the EU

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