

Het Starthuisje, Harkstede
By: John Körmeling



Autonomy and Literalism

How John Körmeling's Starthuisje became a Monument

Thijs van den Berg



Site plan 1:5000 0 50m 100m 150m 200m



Table of Contents

Course

AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis

Tutor

Jurjen Zeinstra

Acknowledgements

John Körmeling (Personal Communication)

Marjan Lageweg (Providing Photography)

TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment

Julianalaan 134

2628BZ

© Thijs van den Berg, 2026

Introduction	8
Infrastructural Speculation, Regional Rivalry, and the Groningen Landscape Theoretical framework	13
TU Eindhoven and the Rejection of Dogma	15
Institutional Validation: From De Appel to MHKA	19
Tectonic Articulation, Material Contradiction, and Postmodern Semiotics	21
Mathematical Autonomy, Constructivist Heritage, and Proportional Systems	25
Survival via Geometrical Indifference	29
Discussion & Conclusion	32

Autonomy and Literalism

How John Körmeling's Starhuisje became a Monument



The discourse surrounding contemporary architectural preservation frequently centers on structures of grand civic, religious, or political significance. Rarely does the discipline focus its theoretical lens on the utilitarian, the temporary, or the banal. Yet, the architectural and conceptual strategies of the Dutch architect and artist John Körmeling demand precisely such an inquiry. This research explores the theoretical implications of Körmeling's Starhuisje, built in 1992 as a functional accessory to a two-kilometer sporting track in Groningen. Designed to theatrically frame the starting official against the sprawling polder landscape, the structure lost its original function in 2015 following the closure of the rowing track and the subsequent development of the Meerstad housing project. However, instead of facing demolition, the concrete monolith survived the erasure of its context. It transitioned from an abandoned sports facility into an autonomous ruin, ultimately becoming a permanent, heritage-protected urban anchor for a new suburban landscape. The survival of the Starhuisje cannot be attributed to functional adaptability; rather, it survived through an absolute indifference to its changing environment.

This thesis asks: How did John Körmeling, in his design of the Starhuisje, transform a simplistic structure used for a rowing track into a permanent monument in the suburban landscape of Groningen?

To answer this, the project contextualizes Körmeling's work within the defining spatial and economic shifts of the 1990s Netherlands. As the state initiated the market-driven expansion of the VINEX policy,¹ the engineered Dutch polder became a blank slate for developer-led construction.² The dominant SuperDutch generation, exemplified by MVRDV, capitalized on this environment by instrumentalizing programmatic data.³ By framing radical architecture as the objective, computable outcome of a client's own metrics,⁴ this data-driven approach functioned as a rhetorical device to neutralize aesthetic resistance and sell designs as inevitable solutions.⁵

Körmeling operated entirely outside this consensus. Rooted in the anti-dogmatic pedagogical environment of his formative years, he developed a syntax of Unorthodox Pragmatism. He rejected the statistical rhetoric of the market and the irony of Postmodern semiotics—specifically subverting Robert Venturi's "Decorated Shed"⁶—in favor of absolute literalism. By juxtaposing cheap industrial components against a massive concrete frame governed by strict Constructivist proportions, Körmeling decoupled the building's physical mass from its programmatic destiny.⁷

Consequently, the methodology of this thesis relies on a dual approach: a tectonic deconstruction paired with an institutional critique. First, relying on the architect's explicit prioritization of structural logic over theoretical narrative,⁸ the physical reality of the building is analyzed through comparative elevations, structural

axonometries, and exploded views.⁹ Second, the thesis traces the structure's conceptual trajectory beyond standard architectural practice, examining how Körmeling's refusal to conform to disciplinary boundaries led to vital early validation from the contemporary art world. By mapping the intersections of infrastructural speculation, pedagogical rebellion, and tectonic contradiction, this research demonstrates how the Starhuisje achieved permanence not by accommodating the shifting complexities of the Dutch landscape, but by relentlessly ignoring them.

F.2



F.2 Starhuisje Silhouette, Harkstede by Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author.

¹ Justin Kadi, "Market-Oriented Regulatory Restructuring in Amsterdam" (paper presentation, RC21 Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2011).

² T. Husby, "The Effects of Spatial Planning Policy: The Case of VINEX" (ODISSEI, 2021).

³ Bart Lootsma, *Superdutch: New Architecture in the Netherlands* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

⁴ Emma Vinella-Brusher, "MVRDV: Innovative and Sustainable Problem-Solvers," *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies* 3 (2016): 1–12.

⁵ MVRDV, *FARMAX: Excursions on Density* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998).

⁶ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).



F.3 Starhuisje Silhouette, Harkstede by Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author.

Infrastructural Speculation, Regional Rivalry, and the Groningen Landscape

The conceptualization, physical realization, and eventual obsolescence of the Starhuisje were inextricably linked to an era of unprecedented, albeit short-lived, infrastructural ambition in the northern Netherlands. In the late 1980s, the traditional Martini Regatta, a staple of the northern sporting calendar, had to be relocated from Groningen's Eemskanaal due to the planned expansion of the city's ring road.¹⁰ Instead of seeking a modest local alternative, the northern rowing community and provincial decision-makers saw an opportunity to capitalize on a crisis unfolding in the Randstad. At the time, Amsterdam's Bosbaan (the country's premier rowing venue) was embroiled in a bitter debate over whether to widen its historic track to meet new international Olympic and FISA standards, a move that required demolishing beloved parkland and a 1937 grandstand.¹¹

Seizing this hesitation, Groningen initiated a massive intervention in the rural polders of Harkstede. Aided by cheap land acquired through agricultural consolidation and heavily bankrolled by the state telecom monopoly PTT (later KPN), the engineering firm Grontmij rapidly excavated a state-of-the-art, Olympic-grade rowing course.¹² This intervention operated as a hyper-rationalized reshaping of the landscape, imposing corporate-sponsored infrastructural ambition directly onto the agricultural expanse.

It was within this climate of high-stakes infrastructural one-upmanship that John

Körmeling was commissioned to design the starting tower in 1991. Recognizing the absurdity of imposing the track—being such a heavily engineered blank slate—onto a quiet rural setting, Körmeling inaugurated the completed Starhuisje—his first ever realized building—with a characteristically dry address: “Ladies and gentlemen, hello grass, hello sheep, good day cows. What stands here is exactly what I want, and for the first time in my life, also what others want.”¹³ Rather than attempting to contextualize the building within its rural surroundings, Körmeling's design mirrored the artificiality and sheer scale of the province's Olympic ambition. By endowing a simple utilitarian brief with an oversized, massive concrete geometry, he produced a structure scaled for international spectacle rather than local, temporary utility.

For a brief period in the 1990s, the KPN Watersportbaan fulfilled its grand promises. It successfully lured the prestigious Holland Beker regatta away from Amsterdam for the first time in a century, hosted international events like the Coupe de la Jeunesse, and set its sights on hosting the 1997 World Rowing Championships. However, the track was situated in a wide-open, flat agricultural expanse entirely devoid of natural windbreaks. National rowing authorities frequently cited the resulting harsh winds as a fatal flaw, claiming it compromised the viability of professional regattas. Yet, Körmeling himself dismisses this logic. He points out that wind along the track

⁷ Wouter Davidts, Susan Holden, and Ashley Paine, *Trading Between Architecture and Art: Strategies and Practices of Exchange* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2019).

⁸ John Körmeling, *Architectonische constructies* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 1986).

⁹ John Körmeling, personal communication, March 12, 2026.

¹⁰ TopRow, “Drieluik: KPN Watersportbaan - Deel 1 t/m 3,” *Blog TopRow*, April 28, 2015.

¹¹ TopRow, “Drieluik.”

¹² TopRow, “Drieluik.”

¹³ Kunstpunt Groningen, “Starhuis,” accessed April 4, 2026.

affects all competitors equally;¹⁴ a headwind or tailwind acts as a collective disadvantage or advantage, not an issue of lane fairness. Consequently, the wind conditions appear less as an objective functional barrier and more as a convenient institutional rationale to justify abandoning the northern project.

The fatal shift for the Watersportbaan occurred in 1996, when Amsterdam's city council finally broke its political deadlock, sacrificing the historic Bosbaan grandstand to expand the track to international dimensions, with construction finalizing in 2001.¹⁵ With the Randstad regaining its infrastructural supremacy, the national rowing associations swiftly withdrew their support for the northern facility, cementing the wind as their primary justification. Stripped of its international FISA status, the KPN Watersportbaan entered a prolonged period of decline. Relegated to a regional facility, the massive track ultimately proved too expensive to maintain for purely local use. It was officially decommissioned in 2015.¹⁶

Because the Starhuisje was initially scaled to the failed, outsized ambitions of the province rather than the practical requirements of a local sports club, its massive concrete geometry felt entirely alien to the declining rowing track. Yet, as the research question explores, it is exactly this disconnect—the survival of a monumental object after its infrastructural context was erased—that allowed the structure to transition from an abandoned sports facility into a permanent urban artifact in the new suburban landscape.



F. 4 Site map of the Starhuisje and KPN Watersportbaan at the time of construction, Harkstede, 1992. Map by author.

F. 5 Current site conditions of the Starhuisje within the Meerstad development, Harkstede, 2026. Map by author.

F. 6 Projected site map integrating the Starhuisje into the planned Meerstad expansion. Map by author.

¹⁴ Körmeling, personal communication.

¹⁵ TopRow, "Drieluik."

¹⁶ TopRow, "Drieluik."

TU Eindhoven and the Rejection of Dogma

The trajectory of Körmeling's architectural philosophy is closely tied to the pedagogical and political shifts at the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e).¹⁷ Prior to 1969, TU/e's discourse was dominated by founding dean N. John Habraken and his SAR (Stichting Architecten Research) methodology, which proposed a systemic reorganization of mass housing by decoupling the built environment into permanent infrastructural "supports" and customizable "infill."¹⁸ While inherently democratic in ambition, students increasingly viewed the SAR framework's mathematical strictures and bureaucratic nature as a dogma that failed to account for architecture's broader spectrum. Consequently, the global student protests of 1969 demanding democratization led to an institutional break. Habraken departed, and rather than adopting a new doctrine to fill the resulting pedagogical vacuum, TU/e embraced an experimental pluralism.¹⁹

When Körmeling enrolled that same year, education at TU/e had become anti-dogmatic and eclectic. Tutors fostered ideological friction, turning design studios into a place for debate rather than a singular vision. This contrasted with TU Delft, which often produced stylistic replicas of its educators.²⁰ At TU/e, student projects drew from disparate historical epochs and contemporary magazines. For Körmeling, witnessing this institutionalized conflict was formative; it solidified his core belief that there is no single, universal solution in architecture and liberated him from adhering

to any cohesive theoretical camp. Navigating this pluralistic environment required a synthesis

of influences, and Körmeling's eventual architectural syntax was shaped by two pedagogical encounters that steered him toward an authentic pragmatism.

The first was the Vormleer (Theory of Form) curriculum directed by Professor Jan Slothouber.²¹ Focusing on abstract geometric autonomy and "cubic constructions," Slothouber blurred the boundaries between industrial design, mathematics, and fine art. Finding this open-ended exploration of pure form compelling, Körmeling became involved, serving as a teaching assistant and curating exhibitions. This experience equipped him with an infrastructural mindset, teaching him to view spatial problems through pure geometry and civil proportion.

The second defining encounter occurred under his first-year tutor, Tom Dubbelman.²² Initially, Körmeling produced derivative work, starting with "half-medieval" structures inspired by Dom Hans van der Laan's *plastische getal* and ending with designs closer to those of Peter Eisenman. Dubbelman halted this stylistic mimicry, informing Körmeling that these polished designs were "not like him." Instead, Dubbelman pointed out that Körmeling's physical, pragmatic models—his "own hammered-together stuff"—were more compelling than his academic emulation. This critique was a revelation, validating Körmeling's fascination with the unpolished,

¹⁷ S. M. Figueiredo, "Thinking Through Building: The Eindhoven School," in *2019 ACSA/EAAE Teachers Conference Proceedings* (2019).

¹⁸ Dirk van den Heuvel, M. Steigenga, and J. van Triest, *Lessen: Tupker/Risselada, dubbelportret van het Nederlandse architectuuronderwijs 1953-2003* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij SUN, 2003).

¹⁹ Figueiredo, "Thinking Through Building."

²⁰ Figueiredo, "Thinking Through Building."

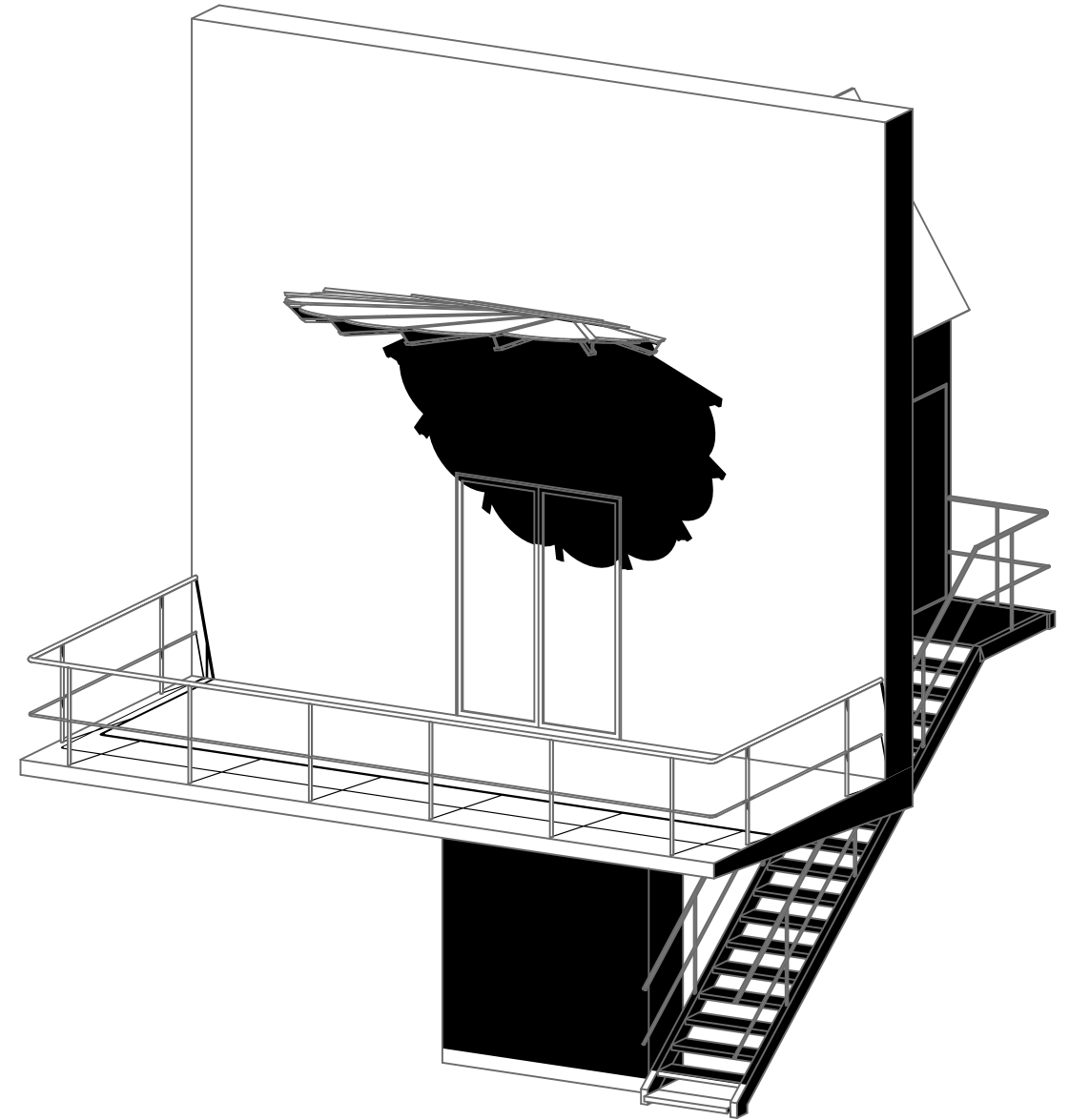
²¹ Van den Heuvel, Steigenga, and Van Triest, *Lessen*.

²² Van den Heuvel, Steigenga, and Van Triest, *Lessen*.

the utilitarian, and the direct. Consequently, his inspirations shifted away from academic treatises toward the honesty of industrial buildings. He drew inspiration from the infrastructural aesthetics of the Centre Pompidou, Lucien Kroll's participatory La Mémé building, and everyday utilitarian structures like sheds, factories, and construction trailers, viewing them as clear manifestations of spatial truth.²³

Decades later, in an attempt to historicize TU/e's open educational environment, theoretician Gerard van Zeijl curated the 1988 exhibition "The Eindhoven School: The Modern Past."²⁴ He deliberately included Körmeling alongside figures like Jo Coenen and Wiel Arets as a fundamental pillar of this newly minted school. However, this inclusion occurred entirely against Körmeling's explicit wishes.²⁵ He disavowed the label and the exhibition, arguing that a pedagogical environment defined by diversity, internal conflict, and anti-dogmatism cannot produce a unified "school of thought."²⁶ To brand such a disparate group of architects under a single umbrella was to impose an artificial, retrospective dogma onto a movement defined precisely by resisting dogma. Ironically, and much to Körmeling's annoyance, Van Zeijl utilized this public rejection as philosophical validation, he argued that a school defined by anti-authoritarianism would naturally produce architects who reject the school itself.

F.7



²³ Körmeling, *Architectonische constructies*.

²⁴ Figueiredo, "Thinking Through Building."

²⁵ Körmeling, *personal communication*.

²⁶ Körmeling, *personal communication*.

F.7 Axonometry Showing Building's Geometry. Illustration by author.



F.8 Eindhoven School Exhibition, DeSingel, Antwerp, 2020. Photograph by Dario Sposini. Converted to greyscale by author.

Institutional Validation: From De Appel to MHKA

Körmeling's refusal to conform to standard architectural practices meant that his earliest and most profound validations came from the art world. His capacity to merge civil engineering logic with conceptual spatial design positioned him outside traditional disciplinary boundaries. His institutional recognition began in Amsterdam at the contemporary art center De Appel. In 1983, De Appel hosted his interactive installation *Ontwerpmachine*.²⁷ By using phosphorescent filaments and artificial light to create ephemeral, shifting spaces, this early exhibition showcased his focus on liberating space and circumventing the systemic limitations of traditional Dutch architecture.

This trajectory of artistic validation was formally solidified in late 1995 during his solo exhibition *De platte auto 1400 CVT Race* at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MHKA).²⁸ Coinciding with this period, MHKA acquired a series of his key conceptual models and sculptures. Crucially, this included the original 1991 steel and plaster maquette for the *Starhuisje*.²⁹ Within the museum, this object is archived and displayed as an autonomous standalone sculpture. This acquisition effectively decoupled the form of the *Starhuisje* from its functional destiny in Groningen, demonstrating that its geometric mass carries intrinsic value independent of the rowing track.

Alongside the *Starhuisje* maquette, MHKA's collection grew to include several other seminal works.³⁰ By housing these architectural provocations within a contemporary art museum, MHKA positioned Körmeling's utilitarian pragmatism directly within the discourse of contemporary art. Ultimately, Körmeling's refusal to choose between art and civil engineering led to formal recognition across both disciplines. He was awarded the Witteveen+Bos Prize for Art+Technology for his ability to use engineering as an inspiration for art.³¹ He later received the Wilhelminaring, a national oeuvre prize for sculpture.³² In 2010, his cross-disciplinary approach reached a peak when he won the Golden Eye at the Dutch Design Awards for his *Happy Street* pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo,³³ proving that his unorthodox methods had achieved definitive institutional validation.

²⁷ De Appel, John Körmeling: *Ontwerpmachine* (exhibition), Amsterdam, 1983.

²⁸ Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, *De platte auto 1400 CVT Race* (exhibition and acquisitions), Antwerp, 1995.

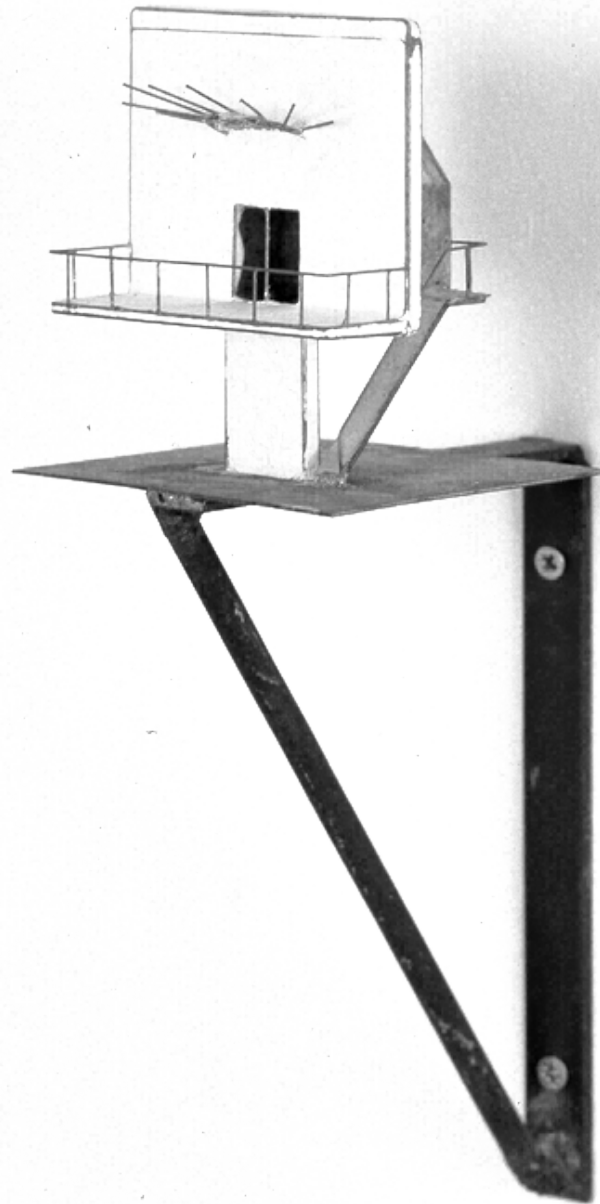
²⁹ Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, *Starhuisje 1991* (sculpture, steel, plaster), Antwerp, 1991.

³⁰ Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, *De platte auto 1400 CVT Race*.

³¹ Witteveen+Bos, "Witteveen+Bos-prijs voor Kunst+Techniek 2006: John Körmeling," 2006.

³² Stichting Wilhelminaring, "Winnaar Wilhelminaring editie 2009: John Körmeling," 2009.

³³ Dutch Design Awards, "Happy Street: John Körmeling" (Winner Golden Eye, Dutch Design Foundation), 2010.



F.9 John Körmeling, *Starhuisje* maquette (steel and plaster), 1991. Collection Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MHKA). Background removed and converted to greyscale by author.

Tectonic Articulation, Material Contradiction, and Postmodern Semiotics

A critical, highly calculated mechanism by which the *Starhuisje* achieves its monumental status and philosophical depth is through deliberate tectonic contradiction. The architectural tension in the project emanates directly from a structural clash of materials, elevating the banal requirements of a sporting event into the realm of the permanent and the monumental.³⁴ Körmeling engineered this specific monumentality by directly juxtaposing cheap, standardized, off-the-shelf industrial parts against massive, durable, poured-in-place concrete. Commissioned as a starting tower for a newly excavated, state-of-the-art Olympic-grade rowing course, the *Starhuisje* immediately rejected standard architectural typologies. Rather than designing a transient, lightweight shed typical of temporary sports facilities, Körmeling approached the brief with the brutal logic of civil engineering.

The physical orientation and massing of the *Starhuisje* were driven by a hyper-literal interpretation of its function, resulting in a design that prioritized the spectacle of the race over the comfort of the user. The building was positioned to face directly south. This orientation was a highly calculated decision regarding visibility and light. As the sun traversed the southern sky, it served as a natural, unyielding spotlight, intensely illuminating the starting official standing on the balcony. For the rowers situated on the water, whose vision of the

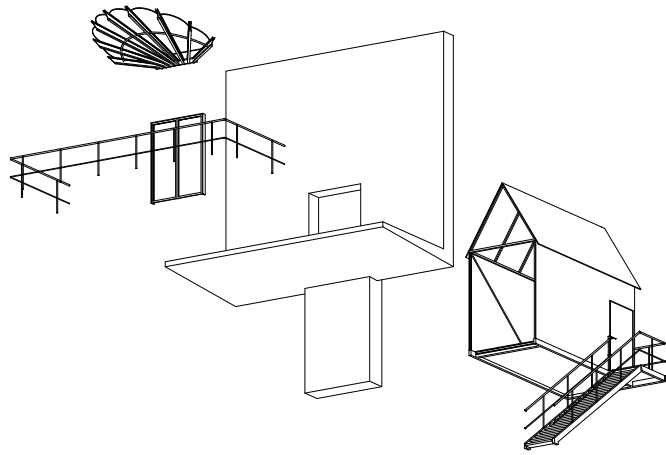
starting signal was absolutely crucial to the race, this orientation ensured maximum visibility of the starter's physical presence. Conversely, this meant

the starting official was staring directly into the blinding southern sun. A conventional architect might view this as a fatal functional flaw. Körmeling, however, deployed a ruthless, theatrical logic: it simply did not matter if the starter was blinded by the sun. The starter's ability to see the horizon was entirely irrelevant to the mechanical act of initiating the race; he did not have to see. It was only crucial that the rowers could see him.

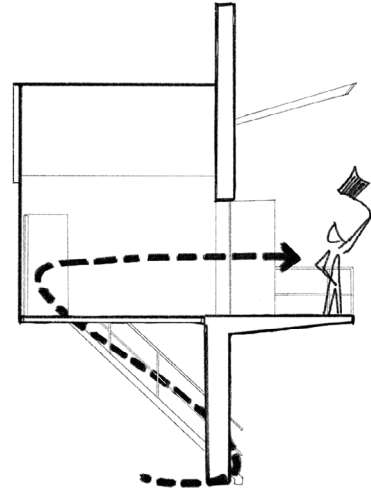
To further enhance this visibility, Körmeling designed the primary facade as a massive, poured-in-place concrete billboard. In the vast, flat expanse of the Groningen landscape, a human figure would easily be lost against the background. The heavy concrete slab provided an absolute, neutralizing backdrop, framing the official and isolating his silhouette against the sprawling agricultural polder. The materials for the structure were chosen explicitly for their capacity to withstand the harsh northern wind. Because the billboard was the most important element for ensuring visibility, it was constructed out of massive concrete; all other materials—the steel of the stairs, the corrugated metal of the shed—were distinctly secondary to this primary monolithic face.

³⁴ Körmeling, *Architectonische constructies*.

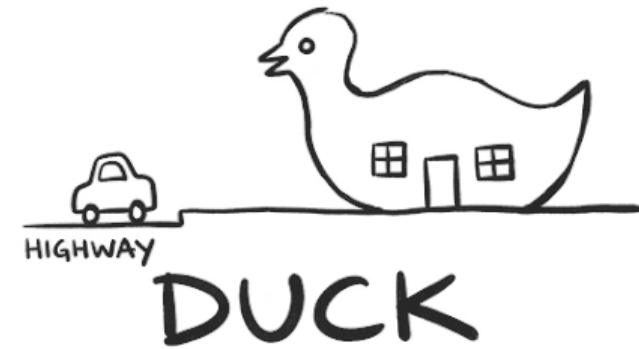
F.10



F.11



F.12



While Körmeling acknowledged the relevance of Venturi's "Decorated Shed" within the contemporary discourse, the Starhuisje actively subverts the concept.³⁵ In Venturi's framework, the sign is a flat, applied surface serving to advertise the hidden program behind it.³⁶ Körmeling fractured this relationship, applying his own logic that bypassed Postmodernism, which he viewed as too volatile for such a direct structural problem. He relegated the actual "shed"—the enclosed space where the official prepares, constructed from cheap, catalog-ordered corrugated aluminum—to the rear of the structure, hidden completely out of sight. It is accessed via a narrow, utilitarian steel staircase. The "sign," meanwhile, is the massive concrete balcony facing the track. By physically separating the functional prep-room from the display facade, the human being becomes the iconography. Körmeling inverted Venturi: the sign (the concrete slab) became the primary functional space where

the critical action occurs, and the shed became mere functional support hidden in the back.

Perhaps the most profound insight generated by the Starhuisje is its inherent, acknowledged obsolescence. Körmeling freely admits that the building is an exercise in pure theater.³⁷ The human starting official standing on the balcony is, technically speaking, entirely unnecessary. The exact same mechanical function could easily be achieved with automated machinery and digital cameras. Yet, the human starter remains, and Körmeling built a monumental concrete stage to house them. By taking what the building was supposed to be and taking it to the absolute extreme, Körmeling highlighted the absurdity and the romance of the sporting ritual.

F.10 Exploded Axonometry of the Starhuisje, Harkstede, 2026. Illustration by author.

F.11 Theatrical Routing of the Starter, Harkstede, 2026. Illustration by author.

³⁵ Silvio Carta, "Iconic Buildings and the 'Decorated Shed,'" Scipedia (2013).

³⁶ Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

³⁷ John Körmeling, "Bijdragen tot actuele artistieke theorievorming," in *De Appel Reader Nø 1: Modernity Today* (Amsterdam: De Appel, 2004).

F.12 Diagrammatic comparison of architectural semiotics. Top and middle rows adapted from Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's "Duck" and "Decorated Shed" (1972). Bottom row illustrating the Starhuisje drawn by author.



F.13 Starhuisje Side View, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author.

Mathematical Autonomy, Constructivist Heritage, and Proportional Systems

To fully grasp the anomaly of the Starhuisje, it must be contextualized within the dominant spatial, economic, and political shifts of the 1990s Netherlands. The formation of the First Kok cabinet in 1994, colloquially known as the “Purple Cabinet,” marked a definitive shift toward neoliberal policies, market principles, and privatization across all sectors of Dutch society.³⁸ The state retreated from its traditional post-war role of decommodifying housing through redistributive measures, opting instead to actively promote and support market forces to maximize economic growth.³⁹ This political climate birthed the VINEX policy.⁴⁰ The VINEX directive, intended to promote “compact cities,” often paradoxically resulted in large-scale suburban sprawl and greenfield developments on the outskirts of major urban centers.⁴¹

The Dutch landscape, largely reclaimed from the sea through a centuries-old system of polders, functions as a unique tabula rasa; an empty, flat expanse devoid of historical or topographical constraints.⁴² This highly engineered environment, often referred to as “Second Nature,” meant that Dutch architects felt no romantic obligation to integrate their designs into a traditional historical context. Within this landscape, the architecture of the SuperDutch generation embraced a radical pragmatism. They engaged with the immense pressure of density requirements, infrastructure networks, and complex zoning laws. However, rather than simply managing this data, they weaponized it.

This methodology, codified in publications like MVRDV’s FARMAX, utilized statistics and programmatic constraints as rhetorical devices.⁴³

Körmeling operated within this same landscape but deviated from this statistical approach. Rather than generating form from shifting local data, he employed a rigid mathematical framework. Crucially, his application of mathematics is not a pursuit of universal truth or divine proportion. Projects such as the Patatje (calculating the maximum geometric volume of a potato fry) or the Platte weg (proposing a perfectly straight road that actively ignores the Earth’s curvature) demonstrate a literalist application of geometry. In these works, mathematics functions as a blunt, a priori constraint applied to banal subjects, removing programmatic flexibility from the design process.

He applied this same methodology to the Starhuisje. This approach contrasts with the proportional systems he learned about during his education at TU/e. While he engaged with Dom Hans van der Laan’s “Plastic Number,” Körmeling did not adopt it as an exclusive standard. Instead, the Starhuisje is governed by a self-contained 6/7 width-to-height ratio. This ratio was not selected for an inherent aesthetic harmony, but is the direct result of a specific geometric construction. By establishing a horizontal baseline and projecting lines upward from the left and right at an exact 66.5-degree

³⁸ Kadi, “Market-Oriented Regulatory Restructuring.”

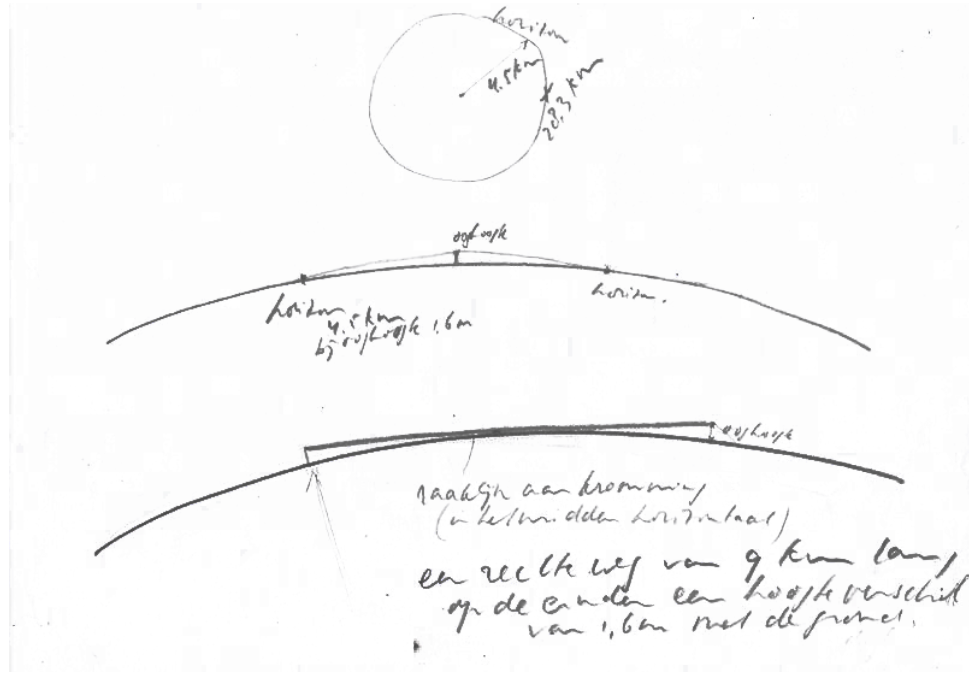
³⁹ Kadi, “Market-Oriented Regulatory Restructuring.”

⁴⁰ Husby, “The Effects of Spatial Planning Policy.”

⁴¹ Husby, “The Effects of Spatial Planning Policy.”

⁴² Lootsma, *Superdutch*.

⁴³ MVRDV, *FARMAX*.

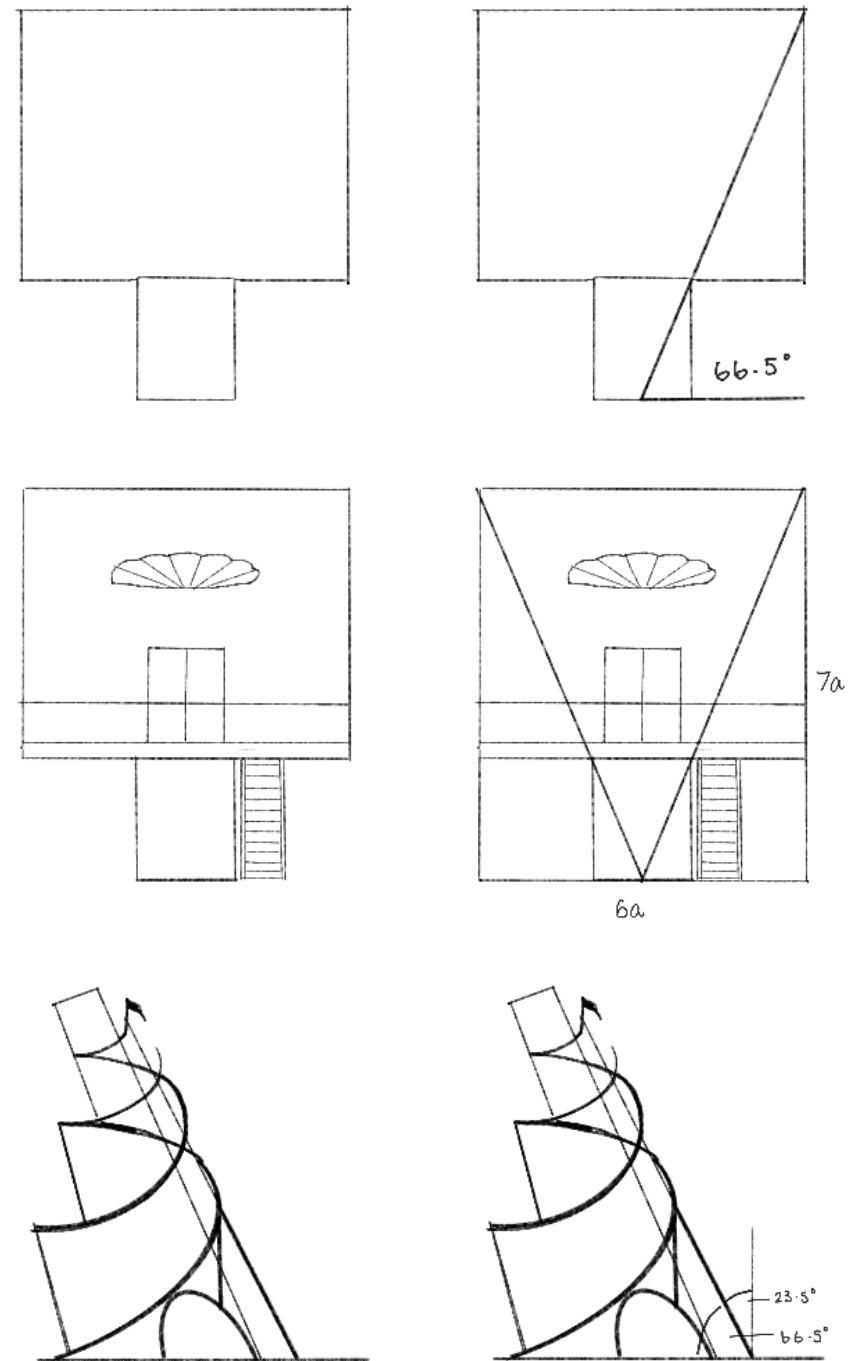


angle, the resulting intersection structurally defines the 6/7 framing of the concrete facade.

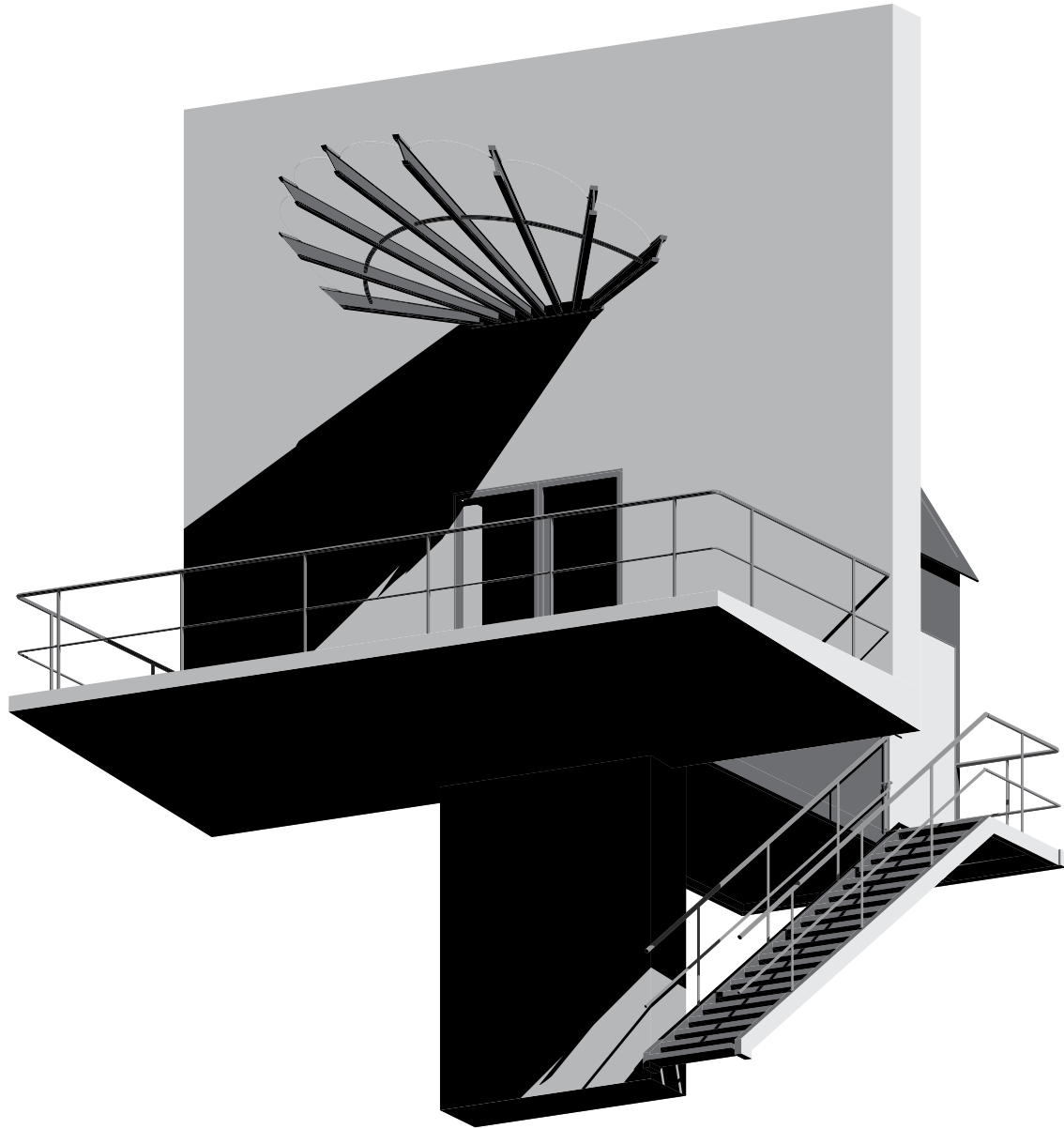
The 66.5-degree angle is the primary determinant of the building's form. This angle does not respond to local wind trajectories, site conditions, or practical sightlines; it corresponds exactly to the Earth's axial tilt relative to its orbital plane. This reference, also utilized in Vladimir Tatlin's unbuilt Constructivist tower, the Monument to the Third International, anchors the building to a planetary datum rather than a local context. By inextricably linking the structure's overall proportion to this mathematical constant, Körmeling established an autonomous geometry.

This is the mechanical basis of the building's geometrical indifference. The structure survived the erasure of the rowing track because its form was never calibrated to the transient requirements of a sports facility. By anchoring the building to an absolute mathematical rule, it retained the structural and formal authority required to exist as an autonomous monument once its functional program was removed.

F.14 John Körmeling, sketch for the 'Hollandweg' (referred to as 'Platte weg'). Published in Eindhoven's Dagblad. Edited by author.



F.15 Analytical sequence illustrating the geometric derivation of the Starhuisje's proportions. Top and middle: derivation of the 6/7 facade ratio using the 66.5° planetary constant. Bottom: reference to the 66.5° structural tilt of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International. Diagram by author.



Survival via Geometrical Indifference

The ultimate test of the Starhuisje's monumental autonomy occurred when its original programmatic function was entirely erased. In 2015, the Harkstede rowing track was forced to close.⁴⁴ The site suffered from persistent wind issues that rendered the water conditions unsuitable for fair, Olympic-grade rowing competitions. This functional failure was compounded by the advancing development of the Meerstad housing project, which sought to reclaim the landscape for suburban residential expansion. Bereft of its purpose, the rowing infrastructure was abandoned, and the Starhuisje fell into a state of ruin. Left unprotected in the landscape, the structure was subjected to time and vandalism; locals stripped the site, looting all the bolted-on catalog elements, including the standard steel stairs and the corrugated metal shed.

Typically, within the efficiency-driven Dutch spatial economy, when a sports facility loses its function and its primary components are stripped away, the remaining structure is viewed as an eyesore destined for demolition. However, the Starhuisje survived this phase of dereliction precisely because it was never designed solely as a building bound to the specific comfort requirements of a sports facility. Its shape was not determined by the transient needs of rowing officials, changing sports regulations, or programmatic efficiency. Instead, it was driven by the starter's required line of sight, the necessity of absolute authority, and the spectacle of the race, and finalized with rigid Constructivist proportions. Consequently, when the cheap,

functional parts were removed, the remaining concrete frame did not devolve into a mere pile of rubble. Because it was governed by an oversized civil scale and strict internal geometry, the stripped ruin maintained a stark, autonomous architectural presence in the landscape. It stood as a modern ruin, a pure geometric absolute that refused to be visually compromised by the loss of its secondary metal attributes.

This enduring geometrical indifference forced the urban planners of the Meerstad expansion to acknowledge the structure's inherent authority. Recognizing its aesthetic and historical value beyond its lost function, the developers contacted Körmeling to consult on renovating the concrete ruin.⁴⁵ Körmeling proposed reusing the monumental frame as a landscape center. The planners ultimately rejected this specific programmatic proposal, citing practical concerns; they feared a landscape center would attract too many external visitors to what was intended to be a quiet residential neighborhood, noting a lack of adequate parking infrastructure to support such an attraction.

Despite rejecting the new program, the developers never intended to demolish the structure. The concrete monolith had successfully transitioned from an isolated sports utility into a permanent urban anchor. The planners integrated the surviving geometry into the new urban fabric, utilizing it as a focal point and naming the newly

⁴⁴ TopRow, "Drieluik."

⁴⁵ Körmeling, personal communication.



constructed adjacent street “Startlaan” (Start Lane) in its honor. Recently, recognizing its unique contribution to late-twentieth-century Dutch design, the structure was officially granted *erfgoed* (heritage) status.⁴⁶ This legal protection ensures its preservation and mandates its eventual restoration during the ongoing development of Meerstad. The survival of the Starhuisje establishes a vital precedent for the “monumental banal” that Körmeling would continue to explore in his later career. By designing an object that was entirely indifferent to the shifting, statistical complexities of its environment—by prioritizing absolute geometry and civil mass over programmatic flexibility—Körmeling ensured that when the

environment inevitably changed, the object would remain firmly anchored. Through geometrical indifference, a temporary starting house was undeniably transformed into a permanent monument.

F.17 Starhuisje's Degradation on Site, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2024. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author.

⁴⁶ Gemeente Groningen, “Lijst met beeldondersteunende en karakteristieke gebouwen en bouwwerken met waardering t.b.v. ontwerp bestemmingsplan Gebouwd Erfgoed Groningen,” 2021.



F.18 Starhuisje's Degradation in Front View, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2024. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author.

Discussion & Conclusion

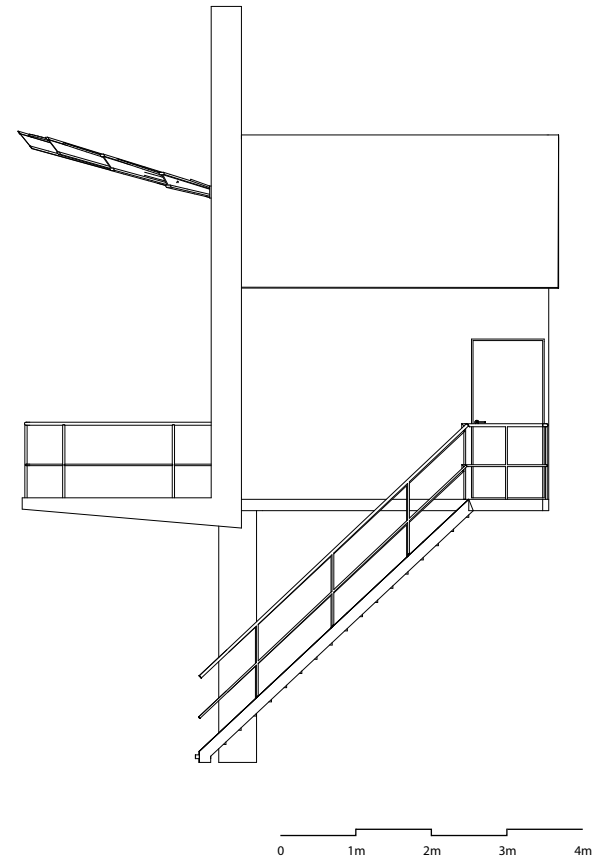
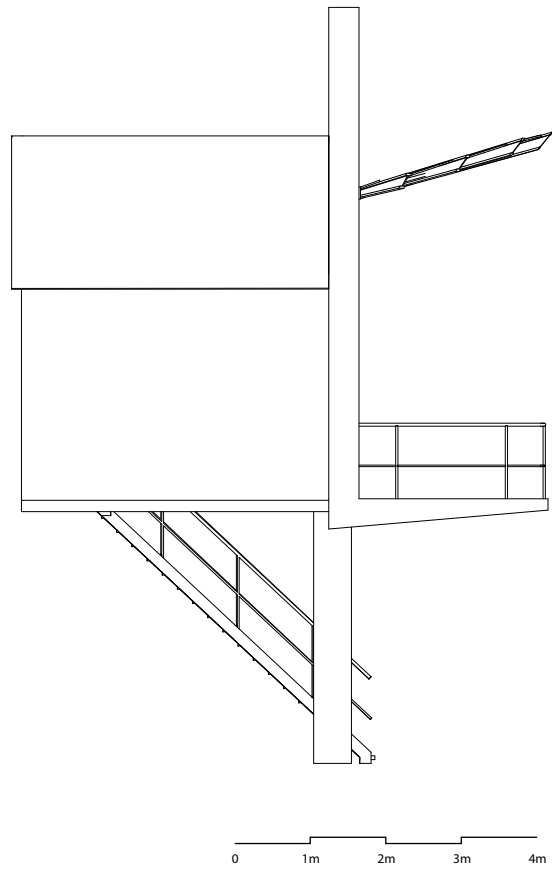
The survival of John Körmeling's Starhuisje provides a critical counterpoint to the dominant architectural methodologies of the 1990s Netherlands. During a period when the SuperDutch generation utilized programmatic data and market metrics to generate highly adaptable forms, the Starhuisje achieved permanence through deliberate structural inflexibility. Körmeling separated the building's tectonic mass from its initial utility, demonstrating an alternative approach where a structure does not need to continuously adapt to its environment to survive.

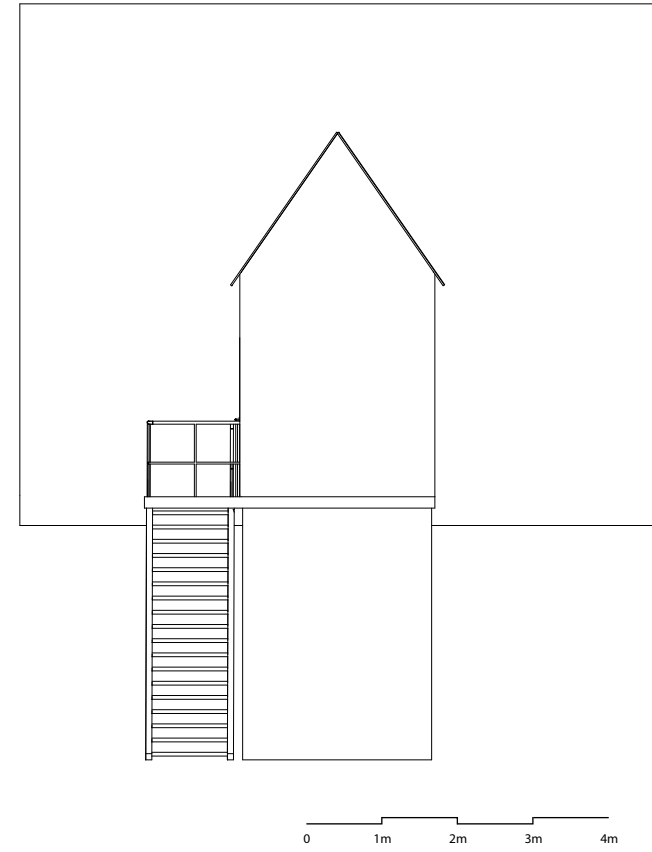
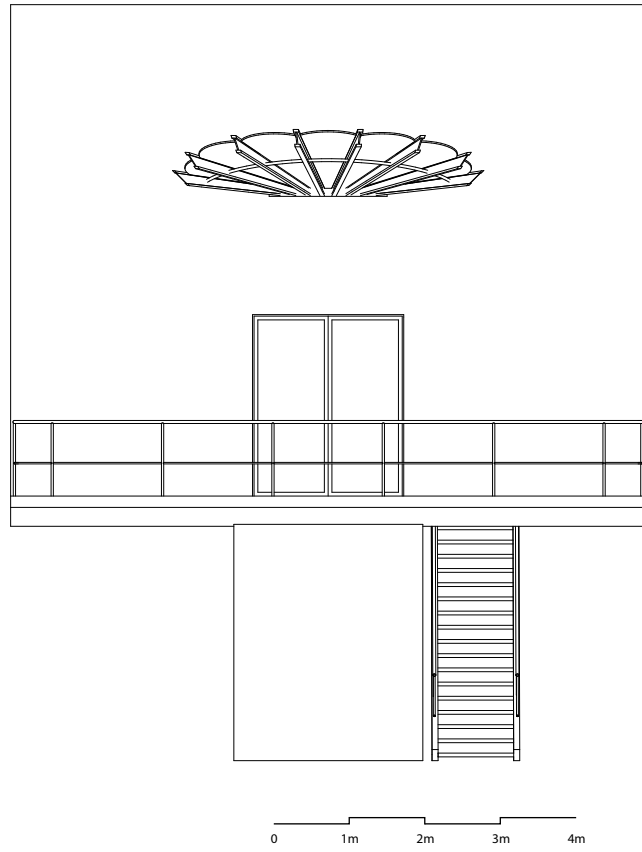
Instead of designing a lightweight, transient shed typical of temporary sports facilities, Körmeling applied a heavy civil engineering scale to a standard sporting brief. He anchored the overall form to a strict mathematical constant—the 66.5-degree angle corresponding to the Earth's axial tilt—producing a design that did not react to local wind conditions, site boundaries, or shifting rowing regulations. Furthermore, he explicitly subverted Postmodern semiotics, specifically Robert Venturi's concept of the "Decorated Shed". By constructing a massive concrete billboard to frame the starting official and relegating the actual corrugated aluminum preparation shed to the rear, Körmeling inverted standard functional hierarchy. The "sign" became the primary active space, while the "shed" was reduced to hidden, secondary support.

This prioritization of pure geometry and theatrical visibility over conventional user

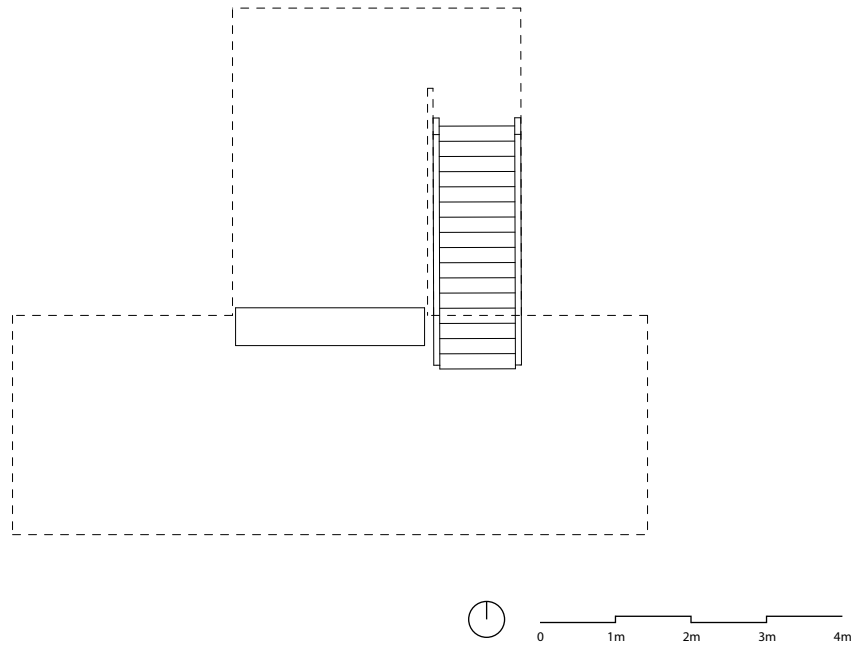
comfort meant the building possessed an inherent architectural autonomy. Because the core proportioning was independent of the rowing track's specific mechanical requirements, the eventual closure of the track in 2015 did not invalidate the building's form. When the site was abandoned and its secondary, off-the-shelf metal components were looted or stripped away, the primary poured-in-place concrete frame did not devolve into the recognizable ruins of a sports facility. Instead, governed by an oversized civil scale, it retained its structural and visual coherence as a self-contained geometric absolute.

This enduring geometrical indifference ultimately forced a reevaluation of the structure's value beyond its lost function. It led urban developers to acknowledge the structure's distinct architectural authority, resulting in its integration into the Meerstad suburban expansion as a focal point and its official designation as protected heritage. The Starhuisje's transition from a strictly utilitarian object to a permanent urban landmark demonstrates the practical outcome of Körmeling's literalist methodology. By refusing the disciplinary expectation of continuous programmatic adaptation, he established that a building can secure its physical permanence simply by maintaining a rigorous material integrity, remaining entirely indifferent to the erasure of its surrounding context.

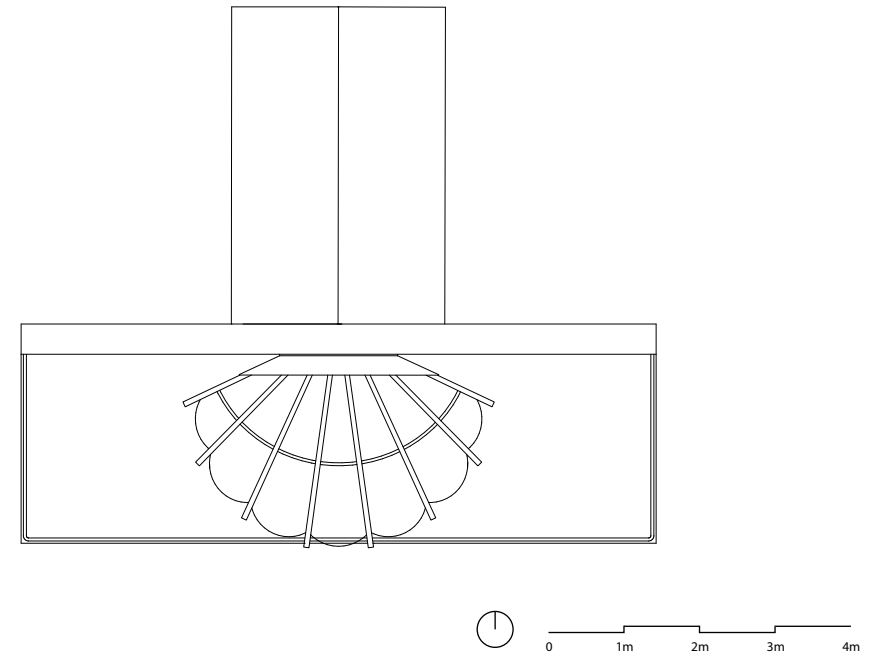




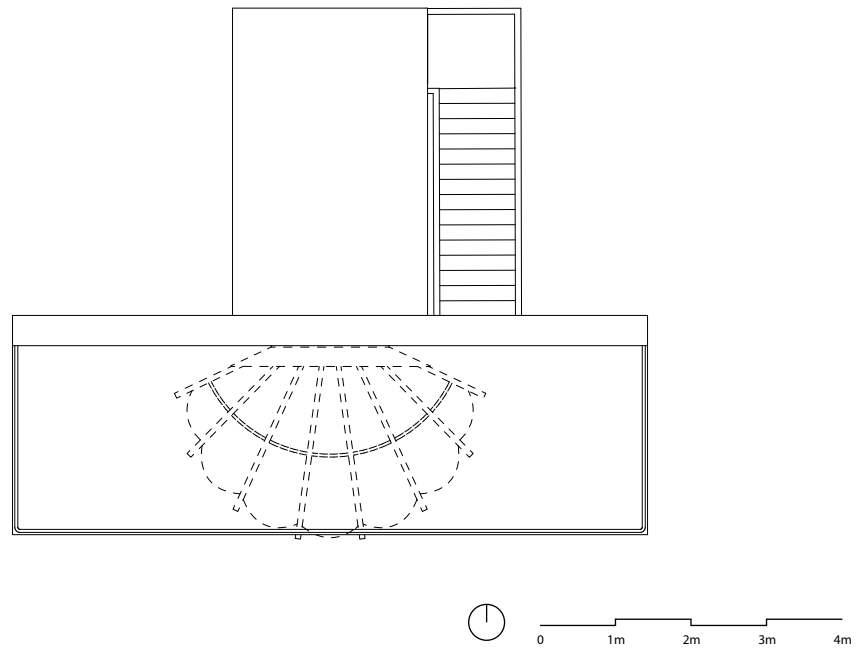
F.23



F.25



F.24



F.23 Ground floor plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author.
 F.24 First floor plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author.

F.25 Roof plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author.

Bibliography

Carta, S. (2013). Iconic buildings and the "decorated shed". Scipedia. https://www.scipedia.com/public/Carta_2013a

Davidts, W., Holden, S., & Paine, A. (2019). Trading between architecture and art: Strategies and practices of exchange. Valiz.

De Appel. (1983). John Körmeling: Ontwerpmachine [Exhibition]. De Appel Amsterdam. <https://www.deappel.nl/en/archive/entities/681-john-kormeling>

Dutch Design Awards. (2010). Happy Street: John Körmeling [Winner Golden Eye]. Dutch Design Foundation. <https://www.dutchdesignawards.nl/gallery/happy-street/>

Figueiredo, S. M. (2019). Thinking through building: The Eindhoven school. 2019 ACSA/EAAE Teachers Conference Proceedings. <https://doi.org/10.35483/ACSA.Teach.2019.4>

Gemeente Groningen. (2021). Lijst met beeldondersteunende en karakteristieke gebouwen en bouwwerken met waardering t.b.v. ontwerp bestemmingsplan Gebouwd Erfgoed Groningen. <https://gemeenteraad.groningen.nl/Documenten/Bijlage/Bijlage-9-Lijst-met-Beeldondersteunende-en-Karakteristieke-gebouwen-en-bouwwerken-met-waardering-t-b-v-gebouwd-erfgoed.pdf>

Husby, T. (2021). The effects of spatial planning policy: The case of VINEX. ODISSEI. <https://odissei-data.nl/2021/05/06/the-effects-of-spatial-planning-policy-the-case-of-vinex/>

Kadi, J. (2011). Market-oriented regulatory restructuring in Amsterdam [Paper presentation]. RC21 Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Körmeling, J. (1986). Architectonische constructies. Uitgeverij 010.

Körmeling, J. (2002). A good book. Van Abbemuseum.

Körmeling, J. (2004). Bijdragen tot actuele artistieke theorievorming. In De Appel Reader Nø 1: Modernity today. De Appel.

Kunstpunt Groningen. (n.d.). Starhuis. Retrieved from <https://www.kunstpuntgroningen.nl/en/kunst-op-sstraat/starhuis/>

Lageweg, Marjan. Photographs of the Starhuisje's ruination. Received via personal communication, March 23, 2026. Original color photographs published on Instagram: @De_Waker.

Lootsma, B. (2000). Superdutch: New architecture in the Netherlands. Thames & Hudson.

Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen. (1991). Starhuisje 1991 [Sculpture, steel, plaster]. MHKA Collection, Antwerp.

Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen. (1995). De platte auto 1400 CVT Race [Exhibition and acquisitions]. MHKA, Antwerp.

MVRDV. (1998). FARMAX: Excursions on density. 010 Publishers.

NRC. (1996, March 1). Klaar voor gebruik; De gebruikskunst van Joep van Lieshout en John Körmeling. NRC Handelsblad. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/1996/03/01/klaar-voor-gebruik-de-gebruikskunst-van-joep-van-7311749-a1106950>

Sculpture International Rotterdam. (1999). Pioneer house [Public artwork].

Sculpture International Rotterdam. (n.d.). John Körmeling. Retrieved March 13, 2026, from <https://www.sculptureinternationalrotterdam.nl/en/artist/john-kormeling-2/>

Stichting Wilhelminaring. (2009). Winnaar Wilhelminaring editie 2009: John Körmeling. <https://wilhelminaring.nl/winnaar-editie-2009-john-kormeling/>

Van den Heuvel, D., Steigenga, M., & Van Triest, J. (2003). Lessen: Tupker/Risselada, dubbelportret van het Nederlandse architectuuronderwijs 1953-2003. Uitgeverij SUN.

Venturi, R. (1966). Complexity and contradiction in architecture. The Museum of Modern Art.

Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., & Izenour, S. (1972). Learning from Las Vegas. MIT Press.

Vinella-Brusher, E. (2016). MVRDV: Innovative and sustainable problem-solvers. Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies, 3, 1-12.

Volkskrant. (2017, October 7). John Körmeling: 'Ik ben allesbehalve een ontregelaar.' De Volkskrant. <https://www.volkskrant.nl>

Van Canneyt, H. (2018, August 14). Interview met John Körmeling. Interviews met hedendaagse kunstenaars. <https://hildevanconneyt.blogspot.com/2018/08/interview-met-john-kormeling.html>

Witteveen+Bos. (2006). Witteveen+Bos-prijs voor Kunst+Techniek 2006: John Körmeling. Witteveen+Bos.

Figures

Front Page John Körmeling, Starhuisje, 1992. Photograph by Arthur Blonk, 2006. (p. 2)

F. 1 John Körmeling, Starhuisje at Opening Day, 1992, Harkstede by Groningen. Photograph by Martien van Mens. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 8)

F. 2 Starhuisje Silhouette, Harkstede by Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 11)

F. 3 Starhuisje Silhouette, Harkstede by Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 12)

F. 4 Site map of the Starhuisje and KPN Watersportbaan at the time of construction, Harkstede, 1992. Map by author, not to scale. (p. 14)

F. 5 Current site conditions of the Starhuisje within the Meerstad development, Harkstede, 2026. Map by author. (p. 14)

F. 6 Projected site map integrating the Starhuisje into the planned Meerstad expansion. Map by author. (p. 14)

F. 7 Axonometry Showing Building's Geometry. Illustration by author. (p. 17)

F. 8 Eindhovense School Exhibition, DeSingel, Antwerp, 2024. Photograph by Dario Sposini. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 18)

F. 9 John Körmeling, Starhuisje maquette (steel and plaster), 1991. Collection Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MHKA). Background removed and converted to greyscale by author. (p. 20)

F. 10 Exploded Axonometry of the Starhuisje, Harkstede, 2026. Illustration by author. (p. 22)

F. 11 Theatrical Routing of the Starter, Harkstede, 2026. Illustration by author. (p. 22)

F. 12 Diagrammatic comparison of architectural semiotics. Top and middle rows adapted from Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's "Duck" and "Decorated Shed" (1972). Bottom row illustrating the Starhuisje drawn by author. (p. 23)

F. 13 Starhuisje Side View, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2023. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 24)

F. 14 John Körmeling, sketch for the 'Hollandweg' (referred to as 'Platte weg'). Published in Eindhovens Dagblad. Edited by author. (p. 26)

F. 15 Analytical sequence illustrating the geometric derivation of the Starhuisje's proportions. Top and middle: derivation of the 6/7 facade ratio using the 66.5° planetary constant. Bottom: reference to the 66.5° structural tilt of Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International. Diagram by author. (p. 27)

F. 16 Axonometry Showing Building's Geometric Indifference. Illustration by author. (p. 28)

F. 17 Starhuisje's Degradation on Site, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2024. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 30)

F. 18 Starhuisje's Degradation in Front View, Harkstede bij Groningen, 2024. Photograph by Marjan Lageweg. Converted to greyscale by author. (p. 31)

F. 19 West elevation of the Starhuisje. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 33)

F. 20 East elevation of the Starhuisje. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 34)

F. 21 South (primary) elevation of the Starhuisje. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 35)

F. 22 North elevation of the Starhuisje. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 36)

F. 23 Ground floor plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 37)

F. 24 First floor plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 37)

F. 25 Roof plan. Scale 1:100. Drawing by author. (p. 38)

This thesis examines John Körmeling's Starhuisje (1992), a utilitarian starting tower constructed for a Groningen rowing track. Contrasting with the data-driven adaptability typical of 1990s Dutch architecture, Körmeling grounded his design in strict mathematical proportion and tectonic contradiction. Following the track's closure in 2015, the structure avoided demolition, ultimately transitioning into a protected heritage site within a new suburban development. This research demonstrates that the Starhuisje survived precisely due to its absolute geometrical indifference. By prioritizing civil scale and autonomous concrete mass over programmatic flexibility, the building retained its architectural authority long after its functional context was entirely erased.