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Jaap Bakema and the open society

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In many ways the work and ideas of Jaap Bakema epitomize the best of the architecture of the post-war Dutch welfare state: it is utterly unapologetic about its modernity as well as its drive to be universal and egalitarian. Bakema firmly positioned his office and its production at the heart of the Dutch welfare state. Not only did he, together with his office partner Jo van den Broek, succeed in developing a systemized approach towards housing and planning, integrated design, construction, and advanced typological research, he also presented the construction of the Dutch welfare state as the opportunity par excellence to recast Dutch society as a forward-looking, humane, modern and rationalist welfare state society within the new global reality of the Cold War.

The monumental schemes for complete new towns and for regional planning are demonstrations of an unrelenting determination to overcome the economic misery of the pre-war era and the utter chaos of the Second World War by way of a combination of positivist rationalism and the logic of efficient production employed for the benefit of all. The gigantic city extension and regional planning projects in particular testify to an ambition that entailed nothing less than a reconceptualization of the Dutch landscape and the national identity: Architecture and planning should and would help bring about a socially just redistribution of wealth and access to power, knowledge and culture. At the same time, Bakema’s work could not escape the paradoxes and the reification of mass-produced housing and construction, which are part and parcel of his idea of a democracy. Government, industry and citizens all had to fulﬁl their particular responsibilities in terms of contributing to the democratic process. He believed that, as an expert in spatial design and material construction, the architect had a special obligation within the whole process of planning and building. It was up to the architect to make visible and to communicate through his architecture the social relationships of a modern society. In his view it was up to the architect to enable citizens, users and inhabitants to shape their ways of life as they themselves preferred, as well as to stimulate cultural values and what Bakema called “spiritual growth”. This paradoxical, sometimes contradictory assignment for architects— to be at the service of a client while also being their mentor—is at the heart of Bakema’s beliefs and runs like a continuous thread through his career from his early years as a young architect participating in CIAM to becoming an established architect and teacher, and thereafter when contested by new generations of students and by vocal citizens who new about Bakema’s attempt to ﬂee to Great Britain.

We know more about Bakema’s attempt to ﬂee to Great Britain. In March 1943 he tried to travel from Rotterdam to Great Britain via Spain in order to avoid being sent to Germany as a labourer. This was the Engelandvaarders escape route. Together with Jan Rietveld, also an architect and son of De Stijl architect Gerrit, he managed to escape fairly far as the French-Spanish border in the Pyrenees where the pair was captured and subsequently imprisoned in
During his flight and subsequent imprisonment Bakema kept a diary. In it we find some of the 29-year-old architect’s innermost feelings, including lyrical descriptions of nature and a yearning to be back with his wife and baby daughter in Rotterdam. There are also a few reflections on society in general and visions for the future post-war political structure, ranging from outright socialism, in which everyone would be obliged to spend a few hours per day on collective labour duties, to more humanist, liberal notions of culture and politics. Descriptions of daily life in the camp and its barracks paint a picture of a micro-society, in which the prisoners had to negotiate their internal affairs. For instance, it was sometimes possible to send food packages to individual prisoners, which – when it happened – led to debates about whether or not to redistribute the food among fellow prisoners. From these personal notes an image emerges of a young Bakema who could not sit still and wait until war was over, someone who remained positive against all odds, always looking for an opportunity to improve a miserable situation no matter how gloomy the outlook.

In the first issue of the Groningen edition of De Vrije Kunstenaar, published a few weeks after the liberation, Bakema continued to explore how to collectively organize and plan for immediate amelioration in the post-war situation. In his contribution, ‘Architectuur – Gemeenschap’ (Architecture – Community), Bakema argued for an open and transparent procedure for the planning and rebuilding of the central square in Groningen, the Grote Markt, which had been heavily damaged during the street battles of April 1945, which he had witnessed himself. Bakema called on architects to work together in a study circle, and on the local government to organize an information campaign, including an exhibition, to raise public awareness. In arguing the case for the much-needed new city extensions in Groningen, Bakema stated that successful planning depended on the involvement of the future inhabitants from the beginning. Two other key factors mentioned by Bakema were control of landownership and the need to accommodate a variety of household types in neighbour-hoods to achieve a city full of diversity. In a nutshell, these were elements and issues that recurred throughout Bakema’s practice and way of working. Early on in the way Dutch CIAM set up its collective studies for new city districts, and much later in the public debates on major urban projects, such as Pampus in Amsterdam (1964–65) and the Cityplan for Eindhoven (1966–69).

In a follow-up article in De Vrije Kunstenaar on the politics of reconstruction – ‘De Wederopbouw, de Jongere Architecten en Nieuwe Architectuur’ (The Reconstruction, the Younger Architects and New Architecture) – Bakema reiterated his plea to open the decision-making process to include modern architects like himself. He complained that ‘the word Democracy (was) not yet understood’ within the building and planning disciplines. His disappointment had its roots in the early war years, when architects from different backgrounds and institutional positions had held collective meetings, the so-called Doorn seminars, in which Bakema had actively participated. These seminars were intended to overcome the pre-war dissent between official factions of modernists and traditionalists in particular, and to discuss the future of reconstruction once the war was over.15 This attempt at a new collective project was colloquially labelled ‘shake-hands architecture’, or the ‘marriage between concrete and brick’. Leading figures in these debates were Van Tijen, for whom Bakema briefly worked, on behalf of the modern architects and Marinus Granpré Molière as the leading voice of the Catholic-inspired, traditionalist architects and planners of the so-called Delft School, named after their dominant presence at the Delft University. Yet despite that early collaborative intention, now war was over it appeared to Bakema and other modern architects that the traditionalists, who also held most of the senior planning and government positions, were unwilling to share work with their Nieuwe Zakelijkheid (Dutch functionalist) counterparts. Significantly, Granpré Molière was also the supervisor for the reconstruction project in Bakema’s own city of Groningen.

With modernists like Cor van Eesteren as director of the town planning department in Amsterdam, and Cornelis van Traa in charge of the Rotterdam department of reconstruction, it could be argued that the actual state of affairs was more nuanced; however, the polemics quickly developed into a new polarization of the Dutch architectural debate, between traditionalists and modern architects, which already seemed to be a lost cause by then. It was also the subject one of the first reproaches Bakema put to Granpré Molière: why had he resorted to the Katholiek Bouwblad instead of the new, collaborative platform of Forum? Of greater note beyond the personal disagreement, however, is the fact that Bakema was advancing a very specific definition of democracy. Democracy was not about expressing a new universal and organic harmony, even though Bakema occasionally used the term organic at that time, nor was democracy about the will of the people or the ‘common man’; at this particular moment in the polemical exchanges, Granpré Molière defined democracy as the overall political framework or ‘maatschappijvorm’ (social arrangement) within which diversity and difference should be accepted and accommodated. According to Bakema, in a proper democratic society both ‘Catholic dogmatists’ and ‘humanitarian life artists’ should be allowed to define their own way of life and give expression to this.20 After this statement, Bakema went on to explain his position as a humanist and as an architect and why it was necessary to move beyond the boundaries of national identities and religious beliefs and to allow a new freedom. In his view architecture and city planning, as extensions of human existence, were first and foremost relational. It was the architect’s duty to help to make people aware of this in order to enable them to make their own life choices.

Post-war CIAM 1947–1959

The idea of an inclusive and socially fair democracy was also what Bakema subsequently brought to the post-war CIAM meetings, all of which he attended. For the reunion conference in Bridgewater in 1947 he prepared a statement on behalf of a ‘group of young Dutch architects’ affiliated with Dutch CIAM, which put the ‘democratic attitude of life’ front and centre. This attitude was defined firstly by social justice, in terms of individual opportunity for a ‘full’ life, secondly by freedom, as an awareness communicated through spatial configuration, and thirdly by collaboration, altruism and democracy through form.21 To bring democracy as a central concern for architecture and planning in such an explicit way to CIAM was wholly new, even though CIAM’s
affinities were arguably with the left or at least with a political project of the emancipation of the masses, albeit mostly through the provision of housing and slum clearance, and the planning of hygienic and healthy labour conditions as part of the doctrine of the Functional City.

Explicitly political statements were not appreciated in CIAM. Eric Mumford has pointed out how CIAM transformed itself in 1934 into an organization of specialists in response to tensions within CIAM itself, among others between André Lurçat and Le Corbusier. Lurçat favoured a communist revolutionary approach to advance the cause of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” while simultaneously Le Corbusier’s humanist idea of the rule of the few, and support for a governing “Authority” to implement his planning ideals as reactionary and (too) close to fascism. To avoid an internal split over such ideological matters, it was decided that “no political declarations should be made in the name of CIAM.”

And indeed, in principal texts of CIAM and its key members, democracy and other forms of modern polity were not mentioned as such, let alone propagated. From the famous Athens Charter, “Can Our Cities Survive? and the Nine Points of Monumentality,” one reads about civic culture, community life and humanization, about social, economic and even biological concerns, but the specifics of any political structure and power distribution in relation to spatial planning was studiously avoided.

In the post-war period, however, such ideological matters immediately resurfaced, not only because of the necessity to come to terms with the fascist past, but also due to the new geopolitical situation characterized by two opposing blocks representing very different ideologies. Such ideological incompatibility not only hampered relations among CIAM members, especially those from the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, but also existed at the highest level of the CIAM council, the governing body of the architects’ organization. This came to the fore most poignantly at the second post-war CIAM congress in Berne in 1949, when the Polish architect and urban planner Helena Syrko, one of CIAM’s vice-presidents, stated that it was false to believe that politics were not involved in the issues at stake, and that the pre-war statements on the Functional City doctrine in the Athens Charter should indeed be considered in a political way. She tried to make a case against the CIAM group, but it was also possible to be convinced of social realism as the future for architecture and planning in general, and for the reconstruction of Warsaw in particular, even though back home she and her husband Szymon were treated with distrust due to their international connections and pre-war avant-gardist practice.

After Bridgwater, Bakema too, refrained from overly political statements about an explicitly democratic programme, even though he had initially stated there that he was interested to hear what “other young architects from other countries” had to say about “the extent to which in their country the democratic ideals can find expression in new architecture and town planning.” Instead, at the Bergamo conference and the conference in Hoddesdon in 1951, the presented the designs for the Pendrecht district in Rotterdam as illustrations of his view on the issues at stake. These plans were also an attempt to oppose combining the housing units of the CIAM group, and the department of urban planning headed by Lotte Stam-Beeke. Pendrecht served as a first case study for the realization of visual and social relationships within the actual context of city building and planning regulations.

At Hoddesdon, witness the official proceedings of the conference, The Heart of the City, the topic of democracy was raised only very occasionally. The then president of CIAM, Josep Lluís Sert preferred to talk about public spaces in the rather apolitical terms of community life and civic values. It was his view that the architect could only help to realize the “frame or container within which this community life could take place,” but in the end was entirely dependent on the specific “political, social and economic structure of every community”. Only once did Sert refer to democracy, stating that “a free and democratic exchange of ideas led towards the government of the majority” was preferable to “the rule of the few”, and that civic centres might help in “consolidating” such majority governments. Sigfried Giedion addressed the topic of democracy more explicitly, albeit in terms of the historical examples of the Greek agora and Roman forum as public spaces for the “formation of public opinion.” Apparently, he was expressing a consensus opinion when he stated that “a city is the expression of a diversity of social relationships which have become fused into a single organism.”

Yet in the final summary of the conference there is no mention of political or specific democratic concerns in relation to architecture and city planning.

As has been well documented in the case of Bakema’s work in the Dutch post-war architecture and planning ideal, the socio-political ideals of universal inclusion and diversity were translated almost literally into specific spatial and typological configurations that were a reflection of the population, or at least a planner’s categorization of the various household and income types. At the lower level of the CIAM group, this was reflected in the designs for the Pendrecht housing project in Rotterdam as a housing unit consisting of multiple blocks, that was the expression of a social mix of housing and open spaces. Low-rise terraces and walk-up flats accommodated a variety of household types. At the higher, urban scale, the repeatable housing unit was combined with the neighbourhood idea, which was based on a horizontal, man-made “polderscape, interspersed with a syncopation of elementary verticals that denote the rhythm of the series of ‘visual horizontals’”.

At the BMC conference in 1956, Bakema expanded the idea of the repeatable housing unit into the much larger ‘visual group’ to overcome problems of too much repetition and the limitations in “variety in plastic-visual relationships”, in order to increase the possibilities for “greater identification” for the inhabitants. These studies were made in the context of the Alexanderpolder urban development east of Rotterdam. In expanding the basic unit of urbanization, he succeeded in combining the housing units with the vast scale of the polder landscape and with that of the new infrastructure of motorways. At the final CIAM conference in Otterlo in 1959, organized by Bakema himself, he presented a full-blown regional planning scheme for the urbanization of Kennemerland, a coastal region centred on the city of Alkmaar, 30 kilometres north of Amsterdam. This time, the project was not developed within the Opbouw group, but by his own office, and in particular by Jan Stokla, who was responsible for many of the groundbreaking housing projects of the Van den Broek and Bakema firm. Collages of the landscape behind the dunes illustrate how he visually and physically envisaged the reconceptualization of the Dutch landscape and identity: a vast expansion of the flat, horizontal, man-made polderscape, interspersed with a syncopation of elementary verticals that denote the rhythm of the series of visual groups, which comprised a microcosm of typologies to accommodate households from all walks of life.

In Otterlo, Bakema also felt free to once again connect his ideas of democracy with architecture and planning. Perhaps this was now possible due to the absence of the older, Dutch post-war architecture and planning ideal, and CIAM had abandoned the concept of national representation as a basis for its organization, and all national groups had been dismantled by the time CIAM convened for the last time in Otterlo. CIAM members sought to act as individuals, not as national representatives. This reconnection between politics and architecture was also evidenced by the presence of the Dutch State Secretary for the Arts, Wim d’Anthony (1937–2008), who spoke at the opening of the conference about the various responsibilities of the architect as a technician.
Bakema’s explanation of the Kennemerland project touched several times on the topic of democracy, firstly in terms of the common man’s entitlement to the fulfillment of basic needs such as decent housing, and secondly to “live more freely” as a “right to a personal way of life.”34 He viewed the new mass-production and mass-scale planning as a risk, since they were geared to the production of monotonous environments, whereas in his view a multitude of types was needed for a democratic society. He criticized the construction industry for following the production logic of a “push-button” system in automated factories with, as an undesirable by-product, new class divisions. The division of labour and how this might relate to the production of the built environment and its spatial and aesthetic development were also democratic concerns in Bakema’s view. Underneath it all lay a strong collectivist belief. While the assumption was that the land was publicly owned or at least made available through government intervention, the spatial organization of the capital and technology was balanced by a “publicly directed economy,” which was to be “subservient to the development of an open society.”35

Cold War and global exchanges

Ottelro 1959 also marked the introduction of the topic of the open society in Team 10’s discourse, and very likely in Bakema’s thinking as well, where it formed one of the constitutive elements of his theory of the interrelations between society and architecture. It was Bakema’s Team 10 friends Alison and Peter Smithson who deployed the term open society most explicitly.37 They used it specifically in relation to the city of Berlin in the context of the international Hauptstadt Berlin competition of 1957–58, organized by the then mayor of Berlin, Willy Brandt, against the backdrop of polarizing debates on the looming division of the occupied German capital.38 All to no avail as it turned out, since the Soviets started constructing the Berlin Wall on 27 August 1961. Within this Cold War context, the Smithsons connected Berlin in its “open war excellence, characterized by a new kind of mobility that was also a new freedom. This new mobility was both a physical phenomenon in terms of car mobility, which had a fundamental impact on the principles of post-war city planning, and social in terms of a new post-war egalitarian society.”39

For Bakema, Berlin and its precarious political situation was a familiar context. Like the Smithsons, Bakema and his office participated in the Hauptbau Berlin competition. He was also involved in the Interbau international building exhibition of 1957 that showcased projects of national and international modern architects in the Hansaviertel district and was conceived as the counterpart of the socialist realist project for the Stalinallee in East Berlin.40 Another contribution by Bakema to the Berlin debates on planning and architecture was his lecture “Our Neighbours’ City” (From Doorstep to City) as part of the larger “Unsere Nachbarn Bauen” (Our Neighbours are Building) show at the Akademie der Künste. Bakema curated the exhibition to which he brought a selection of the latest developments in Dutch modern architecture, including work by his own office, Aldo van Eyck, J.J.P. Oud and Hein Salomonson.41 In the accompanying essay, Bakema once again stressed the need for “architecture by planning” and “planning by architecture” to arrive at cities in which each citizen had “a right to his own approach to life”, and to “shape his own corner of the larger” “structure of society.”42

According to the report on the Otterlo meeting, it was Ernesto Rogers’ presentation of his Torre Velascas project that elicited a discussion of the idea of the open society in relation to “closed versus open aesthetics.” Peter Smithson led the opposition, stating his view that an open aesthetic— unlike the closed one of Rogers’ project— embraced changes of the form and technology of inhabit, instead of being “subservient to the development of an open society.”43

Societal issues and the idea of an open society also formed the natural context of Bakema’s teaching, especially abroad. He often referred to Karl Popper’s idea that the world, Jaap Bakema was like a travelling salesman in ideas. Given the fact that he was also the director of one of the bigger architecture firms in Western Europe and a full professor in Delft, the list of teaching posts and guest professorships, predominantly in the United States and Europe, is simply bewildering.44 His preferred format was the workshop, the design seminar or as he called it, a “Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki and that went on to become one of the central ideas in the Team 10 discourse of the 1960s.”45

The Hansens refrained from speaking explicitly of the open society, perhaps because it was not possible for anyone coming from ‘behind the iron curtain’, or perhaps because they did not want to use the term. In any case, Bakema’s concept in move beyond overly strict ideological hair-splitting in relation to the specific local political regimes. The notion of the open society in Bakema’s writing and thinking thus became a versatile container term capable of absorbing a multitude of divergent positions and allowing for a continuation of the international exchanges within his professional network that by the end of the 1950s, and all the way from the United States to Western Europe, the Eastern Bloc, the Middle East and Japan.

After the Otterlo conference, Bakema maintained his post-CIAM network through the Team 10 meetings and further developed it through his ‘Post Box for the Development of Architecture’ which aimed to ‘systematically develop an open world architecture’.46
One of his last international teaching posts was at the Van den Broek and Bakema office held in the Boymans-Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam, which opened on 27 October 1962. It was entitled ‘Building for an open society’. This was seemingly felt to be self-evident, since it was left unexplained in the catalogue. The exhibition was organized in honour of the Prix de la Critique, which had been awarded to Van den Broek and Bakema.

The jury report singled out Jasp Bakema’s contribution as a representative of the ‘Otterlo group or Team Ten’. It praised Bakema and the office for their achievements in modern architecture, for the way they had managed to strike a balance between the ‘emphasis on human relations’ on the one hand and the ‘possibility for personal freedom and intimacy’ on the other. Touching on the issue of authorship, the jury apparently felt compelled to explain why the Prix de la Critique had been awarded to the office rather than to Bakema as an individual. The report commented that Bakema’s activities could not be uncoupled from the office, while also stating that by awarding the prize to the office the jury aimed to honour the “complete development of modern architecture: the pre-war activities of Prof.Van den Broek, the participation in Oplombertse, hence in De 8, the participation in the planning of Nagele, etc. a line from the beginnings of Dutch functionalism to the latest tendencies.” The jury report concluded by stating that the work was a major contribution to and a reflection of a “functional, human and democratic art of building.”

The third occasion on which Bakema deployed the term open society in the Dutch context was at Expo ’70 in Osaka, for which Bakema designed the Dutch pavilion together with Caren Poole. However, the years around 1970 were a period of rapid change, different from the years 1959-1964. If connections between the open society, democracy and modern architecture were a matter of course in the 1950s and early ’60s, the years around 1970 represent a shift that was in many ways profound and important.

The term open society, in Bakema’s case, was primarily used in relation to the ‘declaration of life’ (levensverklaring) in the original Dutch text; it might seem odd, but it needs to be understood in the context of a Dutch society that was still largely religious and divided according to conviction or creed into ‘pillars’ representing the various Protestant and Catholic denominations as well as non-religious socialist and humanist groups. For Bakema the aim was to go beyond this ‘pillarization’ of society, to move indeed towards an open society of diversity and inclusiveness. The aforementioned 1951 idea of the ‘core’ is crucial here, for in the core of a city or society the diverse pillars were brought together in a new relationship. This idea of a diverse core was best demonstrated in the village of Nagele, dedicated to the locally loaded terms used by the jury to characterize the work of Van den Broek and Bakema were considered as self-evident as the term open society. No further explanation seemed necessary, and perhaps indeed it wasn’t. When looking at the context from which the Prix de la Critique stemmed, we find once again the informal networks that grew out of the experience of the Second World War and the concomitant, deeply felt, urge to secure a democratic society and its institutions.

Contestations

When Bakema worked on the Dutch pavilion for Expo ’70 he made extensive notes to order his thoughts regarding the conceptual programme behind the project. The most concise set is a mere three pages of key words jotted down, initially in English, finally in Dutch, in an attempt at a compact summary. The idea of an open society was accompanied by the key notion and it was the first characterization of the Netherlands: ‘a country is planning [its] change – an open society’. Bakema architecture and democracy
In his Osaka statement Bakema also listed the ‘results’ of the Dutch open society and its integrated knowledge economy. They basically boiled down to the conditions of global, international communication and trade, such as the expansion of Rotterdam’s port (into Europort); and of Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, alongside large-scale infrastructural works like the Deltaworks. Also included here was the proposition that NL, KLM, Philips and Unilever, as well as Bakema’s position and his idea of an open society seemed to converge with that of modern national interest and establishment, or at least he did not draw any clear distinction between them.

Bakema touched on the issue of democracy by describing a general attitude rather than a concrete political programme. Notes on page three combine pragmatism with a ‘philosophical’ tone – ‘touch, sight, smell – to be activated by way of special, machinic “information units” augmenting the overall experience in which music and film accompanied movement through the pavilion on escalators. The water feature in front of the pavilion completed the Dutch experience of living on the edge of the water below sea level. In terms of Dutch visual culture, Bakema also pictured a tradition of Dutch identity summed up by the quartet of Rembrandt, Mondrian, Van Gogh and Provo.

That the anarchism of Provo was included by Bakema as representative of Dutch culture is certainly key here. In the mid-1960s the Provo movement made waves in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, staging all sorts of ludic ‘happenings’ in protest against environmental pollution by cars in particular and against consumer culture in general, in support of women’s liberation and decriminalization of drugs, free sex and even the dismantling of the police force. Bakema absorbed Provo’s experimentalism and recast it in a new story about a Dutch identity of tolerance, inclusivity, pragmatism and rationalism. At the same time, this was characteristic of the way the new left-leaning Dutch cultural elite, to which Bakema clearly belonged, embraced both modernity and the counterculture. Yet the fact that Bakema felt it necessary to co-opt the anti-authoritarian Provo movement in his 1970 definition of the open society was also an indication that the earlier notions of openness, democracy and tolerance were highly contested. The ‘second’ development would take a very different turn from that envisaged by Bakema. At this point, Bakema and his Team 10 and Dutch Forum allies were more or less caught between the limitations of the post-war welfare state system and the social unrest of the late 1960s, including the new youth and protest culture. On the one hand they had become representatives of the establishment, or at least they had to deal critically with its shortcomings and institutions. In the Team 10 debates one can observe an awkward appreciation of the bureaucratic and paternalistic state apparatus that made decisions on behalf of the individual all in order to secure an efficient redistribution system. For instance, in the new preface to the reissued Team 10 Primer from 1968, all the Team 10 members loudly bemoaned the state of affairs, while nevertheless acknowledging the necessity to build under the conditions of the welfare state.

Bakema always had an eye for dissatisfaction among younger people and underprivileged, marginalized groups. At the Otterlo conferen he referred to the phenomenon of Teddy Boys in England and noezis in Holland, which he interpreted as a signal that different solutions in town planning were needed. And in the Team 10 Primer he talked about his many visits to schools of architecture where the “noise of the [stencil machine] is everywhere”. In Delft he supported the 1969 student revolt aimed at achieving greater openness, and involvement of students and staff members in the decision-making process. Still, there was also an ambivalence. Though he attended the plenary meetings, where the whole community of the Faculty of Architecture gathered, he denounced the idea of reaching decisions by way of a one-man-one-vote system. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the neo-Marxist factions that set the tone for Delft’s development of research and education in the 1970s became highly critical of Bakema’s work, just as the radical critics of the positions of the professors in Delft, Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, and the lesser-known but very influential, cultural theorist Joop Hardy.

Bakema’s shifting ideas on what an open society could be were also challenged within his own circle of architect friends, however. Famously so in the case of his promotion of the concept of the visual group in CIAM and Team 10. The Smithsons in particular contested the literal translation of social groupings into three-dimensional schemes as proposed by Bakema. Instead, they proposed something they called the ‘appreciated unit’, which remained rather abstract since they refused to give it a well-defined architectural programme. Notes on page three combine pragmatism with a ‘philosophical’ tone – ‘touch, sight, smell – to be activated by way of special, machinic “information units” augmenting the overall experience in which music and film accompanied movement through the pavilion on escalators. The water feature in front of the pavilion completed the Dutch experience of living on the edge of the water below sea level. In terms of Dutch visual culture, Bakema also pictured a tradition of Dutch identity summed up by the quartet of Rembrandt, Mondrian, Van Gogh and Provo.

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in 1964. Speaking about the post-1945 avant-garde, Hardy claimed it was the opposite of an open society. It consisted of ‘almost closed communities juxtaposed to an ‘open society’ which absorbs everything that submits, adapts, socializes.‘ Speaking of the arts, Hardy also posited that the ‘open museum that admits every manifestation, attracts every event and, in doing so, neutralizes, invalidates [the avant-garde].‘ 82

It just goes to show that consensus-building and pragmatism as hinted at by Bakema were not a matter of course, not even among his own peers of Dutch Forum and Team 10. How to (re)organize the planning system in the Netherlands and to situate deconstruction was a subject of fierce debate, which led to highly radical and innovative propositions that touched on the very definition of the architectural discipline. In the Netherlands one of the first proponents of the empowerment of inhabitants as the starting point for a fundamental rethink of architecture and planning, and of the structure of the building industry was, of course, Jan Habraken, who published his groundbreaking book De dragers en de mensen in 1961. 83 Other radical positions in the Dutch debates that sought to translate new democratic ideals into architecture as a critique of functionalist planning were represented by Frank van Klinger and Constant Nieuwenhuys. Van Klinger developed a spatial theory of friction to overcome functional segregation for his various experimental projects for cultural centres, while the artist Constant famously worked on his fictional and utopian project of New Babylon from 1956 to 1974. 84

Bakema seemed to embrace the competition and the challenging of his propositions. To him, contestation and critique were part of the discursive game, completely in line with a Popperian understanding of what an open society stands for. A comparison of the design production of those years reveals quite a few parallels. Bakema’s diagram of future urbanization and the interweaving of public and private functions, for example, is reminiscent of Constant’s project. Both men assumed that land should be fully collectivized in order to maximize modernization and freedom, a socialist ideal that was shattered in 1977 when the centre-left coalition government led by the socialist-democrat Joop den Uyl foundered on a new law that would allow the government to acquire agricultural land cheaply for the construction of new housing projects. 85

Support and infill concept of John Habraken, who himself never came up with a design proposal to illustrate his groundbreaking 1961 idea. In one of the many newspaper articles devoted to the project, Bakema explained the idea of support and infill as an approach that allowed people to ‘tinker’ or ‘fiddle’ with their own apartment in order to adjust it to their own ideas and wishes. 86

Throughout 1969, Bakema and his office supported and co-developed a full-scale democratic process of citizen participation in Eindhoven, not unlike his vision for the reconstruction of post-war Groningen, with exhibitions and plenty of opportunity for public debate. A costly proposal that was supported at the Van Abbemuseum, where Jean Leering had been appointed director. A recent graduate from the Delft Faculty of Architecture, Leering was quite familiar with the field of planning and the work of Van den Broek and Bakema. From 19 September until 9 November 1969, half the museum space was made available for the many scale models, reproductions, slide shows and other visuals. 87 The first room was dedicated to the Osaka pavilion, in a 1:20 model that occupied the whole space. It showed the complex spatial elaboration of the heart of the plan. A second room gave insight into the principles of the plan with more models, photos and drawings of a multi-level city, a third room contained a classic overview model of a plan as proposed by the city, and a fourth room offered variations on the basic plan, with more explanations as to the overall planning principles, a slide show and a wall with newspaper clippings of the debates and various opinions. There was also a model that could be used in discussions to test different alternatives. The last room was devoted to a selection of work from the Van den Broek and Bakema office as an illustration of developments in modern architecture in the 1960s.

The accompanying catalogue included sheets for comments and even one page with an outline of the area in which citizens could draw their own alternative visions, a selection of which survive in the archive. As well as an extensive and plenty of opportunity for public debate. A costly proposal that was supported at the Van Abbemuseum, where Jean Leering had been appointed director. A recent graduate from the Delft Faculty of Architecture, Leering was quite familiar with the field of planning and the work of Van den Broek and Bakema. From 19 September until 9 November 1969, half the museum space was made available for the many scale models, reproductions, slide shows and other visuals. 87 The first room was dedicated to the Osaka pavilion, in a 1:20 model that occupied the whole space. It showed the complex spatial elaboration of the heart of the plan. A second room gave insight into the principles of the plan with more models, photos and drawings of a multi-level city, a third room contained a classic overview model of a plan as proposed by the city, and a fourth room offered variations on the basic plan, with more explanations as to the overall planning principles, a slide show and a wall with newspaper clippings of the debates and various opinions. There was also a model that could be used in discussions to test different alternatives. The last room was devoted to a selection of work from the Van den Broek and Bakema office as an illustration of developments in modern architecture in the 1960s.

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Ultimately, however, the scheme was cancelled, not due to the citizens’ protests, but because of all sorts of new uncertainties caused by, among others, the oil crisis and a newly elected city council in 1974. In the end, the minister for spatial planning decided that the proposal appeared to be unfeasible, precisely because it was too flexible, and hence its future development too unpredictable to receive his support, after which the whole scheme was abandoned.

Between Japan and the Netherlands

But why did Bakema feel that the megastructure concept would fit his ideal of an open society? Especially given that some very successful housing districts were realized in parallel in the debates about the various large-scale projects such as Cityplan in Eindhoven and Pampus in Amsterdam. In Eindhoven, too, Bakema and his office designed a very popular scheme for an area just north of the inner city. Crucially, it was at the initiative of a few Philips engineers that the ‘t Hool housing estate came into being.’ They wanted to build their own houses and established a foundation that succeeded in realizing the district together with the Van den Broek and Bakema office, housing associations and the city. The project started around 1961 and was eventually built between 1968 and 1972. It largely followed the concept of the visual group designed to accommodate a wide variety of housing types, including in terms of ownership.

The megalgestructure concept in Bakema’s work originated in the late CIAM debates and the exchanges between Team 10 members and the Japanese metabolists, especially Kenzo Tange and Fumihiko Maki. The earliest example dates from 1953 and Bakema’s work within the Rotterdam CIAM chapter Opbouw: a sketch proposal for ‘mammoths’ for Alexanderpolder shows how the various housing blocks of the familiar visual group concept are linked together and built up into a massive ‘mammoth’-like building that rises up from the flat polder landscape and merges with the new motorway infrastructure at the point of its highest vault. Eleven such monumental structures make up the whole district and create a highly futuristic environment of myth and identity that goes far beyond the classic opposition of country and city. A similar idea was developed for the Hapstaptuist Amsterdam competition in 1958, on which occasion the typology of ‘core-wall’ buildings were introduced functionally neutral, slab-like volumes, which demarcate the inner-city motorways and the entry to specific districts.

From 1959 onwards, Bakema started to elaborate the idea in a more radical way under the influence of his exchanges with Tange and Maki, both of whom attended the Otterlo conference. Bakema’s teaching activities in the USA were also crucial in this respect, since they allowed him to continue the conversations with Fumihiko Maki in particular, at Washington University in St. Louis where Bakema would teach as a visiting professor in 1959, and at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where Maki ran a ground breaking studio focused on urban design, which was also frequented by Bakema. Arguably, Tange’s Tokyo Bay project of 1960 influenced Bakema’s 1964-65 proposal for the Pampus city extension of Amsterdam. As well as publishing images of the project in Forum, in its sixth ‘Post Box for the development of the Habitat’ newsletter of 12 May 1961, Bakema described Tange’s plan for Tokyo as “the consequence of the idea of an open society”, in particular its “linear structure”. Other elements of the project he highlighted were the multi-level city, its circulation system, man-made platforms and land reclamation from the sea. In the context of the Eindhoven Cityplan two other remarks by Bakema stand out: the vertical cores as growing points for the new structure, and a “visual language about change and growth” that resulted in a “discipline in architectural terms for a step by step realisation of this plan”. The newsletter also refers to ‘Thoughts on Collective Form’, distributed in typescript by Fumihiko Maki and Masato Ohhtaka, in which they elaborated on the notion of group form. Bakema summarized it as “An attempt to create a total image through [the] grouping of elements that it is a reflection of growth and decay in our life processes...” or even more significantly, did the architectural discipline meet its nemesis when confronted with the more radical forms of democracy? Or was the subversion in process the inevitable result of the kind of integration between architecture and planning that Bakema sought and that he dubbed, not so poetically perhaps, ‘architecturbanism’?

New beginnings?
Can we conclude that the architectural project for an open society as envisaged by Bakema faltered at the very moment of maximum participation and democracy in the 1970s? Or even more significantly, did the architectural discipline meet its nemesis when confronted with the more radical forms of democracy? Or was the subversion in process the inevitable result of the kind of integration between architecture and planning that Bakema sought and that he dubbed, not so poetically perhaps, ‘architecturbanism’? A shift to the organization of processes similar to that for the megalgestructure projects of Cityplan and Tanthof, can be observed in many other projects of the same period, such as the planning for the Hamburg housing district of Mümmelmannsberg or the project for the Siemens research and computer centre in Munich. In these projects, the end result was not defined by any formal concept or language,

99 The foundation is still very active and pays particular attention to the quality of public spaces. For more information see their website www.woonwijkhetool.nl; for a project documentation archive of Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.
90 Tange’s contribution is well-known, Maki’s bears testimony to his presence, cf. note 49.
91 Ibid., p. 1.
92 Ibid., p. 69. Dutch text: “De realisatie van deze gedachte wordt in onze tijd steeds meer mogelijk.”
93 Ibid., p. 1.
95 Ibid., p. 46.
96 Until the 1990s, when the idea to build a new city was taken up again, and a whole new scheme, the so-called ‘t Hool district, was developed, about on a much less ambitious scale: instead of the 350,000 inhabitants of the Pampus scheme, there is intended to accommodate 45,000 people.
97 Members included Pieter de Jong and Joost Vahli, recent graduates of TU Delft who worked for the Delft municipal planning office; Frans Hooykaas and Peter Lootsli represented the Van den Broek and Bakema office and were supervised by Jaap Bakema and Jan Stolica, with Hove Groenewold and Annaloes van den Berg as citizen representatives.
but rather emerged from the rules and parameters as set out at the beginning based on an analysis of the programme and needs.

The formal language of Bakema’s designs of the 1940s and ’50s, which synthesized notions from the De Stijl movement (continuous space, ascending dimensions), the oblique rationalism of Dutch functionalism, and brutalist, ‘concrete’ realist architecture as exemplified by projects like his modest construction office in Rotterdam, the Hansaviertel tower block in Berlin, and the church in Nagele, made way for a range of ‘impromptu responses’ to the internal logic of the assignment in question, its context and concomitant realization process.109 That the office only expanded further with branch offices and project architects, even ‘democratized’ itself into a new organization as the ‘Architects’ Community Van den Broek and Bakema’, is also part of this history.110 Within the resulting diversity of projects one can detect families of projects, associated with the various project architects, local contexts and the types of assignments.

Yet perhaps this is the ‘open society’ par excellence, the collection of processes of a continuous critique and revision, which ultimately cannot be fully controlled from a singular centre as exemplified by the figure of an author-architect. Bakema himself might have referred here to his favourite Henri Bergson quote: “d’abord je constate que je passe d’état en état”.111 However, this quote should not be understood as a harmonious way of being in the world. That would imply a superficial glossing-over of the real socio-political differences and disruptions that are at stake, and which can only be resolved or overcome through contestation and critique. Even though one might criticize Bakema for not explicitly elaborating such a philosophical foundation and justly complain that all too often such references to a discourse outside architecture amounted to a bypassing of the actual political differences at stake, he himself was acutely aware of the political rifts that governed the Inner-City Koningswei project, and of the changing atmosphere in schools of architecture.

To be sure, Bakema himself never abandoned the project for an open society. It was in his vision by definition unfinished. The concept of the megastructure or core-wall building was a ‘core group’ of office partners: Bakema, Boot, Van den Broek, de Groot, Rijnsdorp and Stoks. In addition he mentioned Lopa, Van der Jagt, Van der Weij and Weber. The definitive history of the office and its project architecture remains to be written: of the office project architects, Jan Stoks received a special accolade when he was awarded the so-called Brinkhuis, the most prestigious architecture award in the Netherlands.

109 Project documentation can be found on pp. 144-149, 151-152 and pp. 174-179 respectively.

110 This ‘democratization’ of the office occurred in 1970, although the two partners always held a majority of the shares. When Van den Broek passed away in 1979, Bakema held the majority (as communicated by Frans Hooftvaart) in the preface to the Joedicke monograph of 1976.

111 See for instance the preface to the Joedicke monograph of 1976, pp. 6-7.


104 Jaap Bakema, sketch for a holiday resort in Verneuil, France, 1979

105 Project documentation can be found on pp. 144-149, 151-152 and pp. 174-179 respectively.

106 See for instance the preface to the Joedicke monograph of 1976.

107 ‘I find, first of all, that I pass from state to state.’


109 See for instance the preface to the second monograph of the office published by Jürgen Joedicke: Van stoel tot stad.

111 Jaap Bakema, sketch for a holiday resort in Verneuil, France, 1979

In the photos montages of Lard Buurman the architecture of Van den Broek and Bakema appears as the modern, urban backdrop for the intersections of history and theory of architectural culture and heritage. The photo montages of Lard Buurman the architecture of Van den Broek and Bakema appears as the modern, urban backdrop for the intersections of history and theory of architectural culture and heritage. The photo montages of Lard Buurman the architecture of Van den Broek and Bakema appears as the modern, urban backdrop for the intersections of history and theory of architectural culture and heritage.