

On the Work of Ton Alberts & Max van Huut
**Consolation or Exorcism; a Healthy
Mind in a Healthy Building**

In Amsterdam's Bijlmermeer, the functionalist high-rise district of the sixties whose subsequent deterioration and bad reputation caused it to be euphemistically renamed 'Amsterdam South-East', there stands one of the most intriguing products of contemporary architecture. It is the headquarters of the transnational ING Bank designed by Ton Alberts and Max van Huut. This building is a clear case of *architecture autre*. The bank, known locally by the irreverent name of the 'monkey rock', has none of the technocratic clarity of the honeycomb tower-block flats in its vicinity. Nor does it bear any relation to the later low-rise additions, which were intended as a counterweight and a means of 'revitalisation'. The bank is a relic from the tradition of organic building that we identify with the 1910s and 20s with movements such as the *Gläserne Kette* and names like Hugo Häring, Bruno Taut and Hans Scharoun. It calls to mind the architecture of forced optimism whose products sprouted here and there like defiant weeds from the ruins of a shattered Europe after the First World War. Sixty or more years later, with our knowledge of the totalitarian temptations of this kind of architecture, and in the context of Western Europe's economic prosperity, we may sense a dated quality about this building. Yet at the same time it is like a breath of fresh air. It is not enough to dismiss this miniature city of social and monetary traffic as yet another formal variant of proliferating Post-Modernism. This building is intendedly the product of a social programme, of a well thought-out standpoint on the moral content of contemporary architecture. Ton Alberts and Max van Huut are architects who do not eagerly bow to the overpowering restrictions of the market which force architecture to become a veneer for commerce and speculation. They aspire to create buildings that are salutary, a prescription of hallowed space and purified material to cure mankind of his soulless condition – a remarkable objective, seeing that the architectural discipline has long consigned the building principle of the perfectibility of society to the waste-paper bin.

Amoral Dealings in Moral Architecture

Architectural criticism directed at the buildings of Alberts and Van Huut cannot avoid the following dilemma. What are we to think of an organic, even moralistic, architecture that allows itself to be taken in by a programme like that of the ING Bank, the preeminent operator among speculators in third-world debt? But then, how can we fail to be impressed by the treatment of the many programmatic levels in a way that respects not only the interests of the client, but also those of the user (here personified by the employee)? This architecture invites scathing criticism because of the very idea of the client. But in spite of the client, we could argue that the architecture succeeds marvelously in creating a perfect environment for people. It seems that the key to understanding this dilemma is the fact that the client's interests have come to coincide with those of the personnel. Not only is the bank delivered from the pangs of the sick building syndrome that dogged the previous headquarters, causing productivity to tumble;



De Waal Residence, Utrecht, 1980

but now the highly lucrative idea of the bank as one big family has much more chance of catching on than in the bloodless atmosphere of a Modernist tower of glass. And, we all know, you can always turn to your family... The 'problem' seems to have solved itself. We are clearly faced with a revival of corporatism, and just as in the early days of the present century this goes hand in hand with the vocabulary of organic architecture. Moreover, the directorship of this bank has shown a long-standing affinity for anthroposophy, which places people at the centre. Not a bad idea when those people are earning lots of money for you.

A Built Manifesto

The ING Bank building sums up many, if not all, of Alberts' and Van Huut's sensitivities and preoccupations. With the ample budget that was at their disposal, they were able to give vent to their thinking at every imaginable level. An ideology has come to full expression in this building. It is a metaphor for the modern way of doing business, a metonym for anthroposophical thinking and a synecdoche for a vision of humanity and the world we live in. It sums up ideas that the architects have been working out over a long period, notably in a number of villas, and which they have recently taken further in a number of similar commercial projects. The programmatic complexity, budget and in-depth involvement of the client combine to form an impressive cultural manifesto.

Our culture understands the geometric centre as special and as the place of primary human occupation. We would not typically divide the rectangular room into two halves, but rather, more appropriately, would tend to place ourselves in the centre, thereby precluding any reading of the room as a diptych. In analysing room configurations, we sense a cultural bias to certain basic geometrics. We habitually see ourselves, if not at the centre of our 'universe', at least at the centre of the spaces we occupy. This assumption colours our understanding of the differences between centre and edge.

What is the ING building if not a morphological allusion to a castle or an artificial rock? The articulation of the building follows the structure of the bank's organisation. The project as a whole forms an expressionist ensemble of ten separate volumes, which are linked together by an elongated walkway. Arranged along this artery are the facilities of a more general, public character, such as catering services, large conference rooms, office gardens and entrance lobbies. Although the layout of the building is extrovert, the backward-leaning brick façades give it an air of introversion. As to its urban context, it is like an island adrift among the neighbouring commercial developments and standardised housing.

The building as a whole is segmented into ten tower-like structures. On each floor of each tower, there are separate offices for the management and meeting rooms, plus a flexibly-structured compartmentalised *Bürolandschaft* providing work units for eight people. The intention here is the same as that behind the division of the building as a whole into ten smaller masses, namely to reduce the scale to a more human level. The character of the interior is strongly determined by the organisation of space, the choice of materials, the design of details, the sculptures and 'natural' elements such as water and vegetation. These give the building an intimacy that is unprecedented among modern office buildings; and this, it appears, is also prized by the employees who work in the building.

Although there are countless plausible practical reasons (noise nuisance, outside views, problems of access, energy economy etcetera) for the peculiarities of this building, they can clearly mostly be put down to the architects' will to form. Alberts and Van Huut have repeatedly defended their design with such slogans as 'the person is central', 'small is beautiful', 'creation of identity' etcetera. However vague these sentiments may be, they are expressed in the bank building as practical solutions, such as the continuous semi-public space, the dimensions, the use of high-quality materials and the use of brick infill for the concrete skeleton. The design is geared to the experiential world of the user. The employee's identification with his or her work is largely conditioned by the surroundings in which it takes place, not by the content of the work itself. The idea that architectural devices thus serve as a means of functional representation will presumably not be a problem for the actual user.

Anthropos and Sophia

Because of the many potential misunderstandings, Alberts prefers not to term his work anthroposophic. All the same, it is clear that an anthroposophically inclined agenda operates in the building. The link to the earth is effectuated by the building's broad footing; environment and energy-conscious materials show respect for nature; the absence of right angles is a criticism of the functional rationality of the Modernist box; and the zigzag of the traffic zone points to a desire to make movement into an adventure instead of a predictable progress from A to B. Earth and nature, intuition and harmony, are the issues here. In this sense, the architecture aligns itself with the long tradition of criticism of modernity that has shadowed the bulk of opportunistic building since the end of the eighteenth century. 'The building', says Ton Alberts, 'is ordered

rationally both inside and outside, but there are also spiritual forces such as beauty present. Beauty is love in concrete form. All things considered, beauty is a rational entity. Without beauty, we can not live. (...) That is no "normal" rationality but a kind of super-rationality, and that is something we have introduced into the building. That is exactly what we mean by "organic".' ★

Anthroposophy has no style of its own, since it has no unique vision or thought which is to be expressed but aims only to create the conditions for the free formation of judgements. The architecture of Alberts and Van Huut is an expression of their ideas on the kind of atmosphere that will foster this process of judgement-formation. The bank building must first and foremost tell the user that he is 'somebody'. In contrast to the majority of Modernist boxes in which the international financial fraternity has tucked itself away, this building continually reassures the user that he is warmly welcome. Feel the touch of the banister that also serves as a stream; let your gaze drift around the magnificent hanging plants in the sacral open voids; throw open the window and enjoy the fresh air. Within the bounds of its competence, this architecture does everything possible to make you feel at home. This politics of identity has personal development, experience, quality and harmony as its watchwords. It is a kind of super-humanism that works as a remedy for the psychic chaos that has reigned since, say, Nietzsche and Freud.

★ Alberts, Ton, *Een Organisch Bouwwerk, Architectuur en Spiritualiteit*, Utrecht/Antwerp 1990, pp. 124-125.

Leistungsform, Organwerk, Sinngehalt... and Profit

Since the ideas of anthroposophism are greeted with widespread scepticism and often drift off into a cloying nebulousness, Alberts has termed his architecture *organic*. This immediately brings to mind the idiom of German Expressionism in the form that emerged shortly after the First World War. This movement was fond of resounding phrases on the mystic powers of craftsmanship, the healing effect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the redeeming potential that architecture can have for a leader or a society. The Great War had effectively sanctioned a universal godlessness, but in spite of this, architecture was still capable of marshalling the sacrality needed to invoke an ethical reawakening in mankind. Organic building, traditionally situated within the established history of architecture as a kind of aberration of the Modern Movement, was characterised by a search for the *innerste Wesen* of the programme. In the words of Hugo Häring,

'We would like to approach things gently and let them determine their own form. We do not wish to thrust a form on them, to determine their form from the outside, to impose some or other abstract regularity, to do them violence.'

Organic building was concerned not so much with the *Ausdrucksform* as the *Leistungsform*, not the *Gestaltwerk* but the *Organwerk*. That is to say, the architect must actually sacrifice expression of his personality and let the organism of a building speak for itself. This strategy was entirely a product of the great yearning for a new harmony in a violated world. Not surprisingly, the original proponents of organic architecture invoked nature as the main source of inspiration. So does Alberts: 'When there is a bond between a building and the primeval fabric from which it is made, the beauty

New Age Architecture

Characteristics

Before a brief exposition on architecture, one should reflect for a moment on the term New Age. What is the New Age? It could perhaps be said that the development of mankind consists of processes that carry certain universal laws within them. One of the universal laws in that development is that we may find a new consciousness growing in mankind. This consciousness will be the basis of an entirely new culture, which we will call the New Age. Before long, it will not surprise anybody anymore that great changes take place in the present world. Every aspect of our community will be gradually transformed by the uni-

versal laws. Where this progress takes place on the side of man, a new creativity will come into being; an abundance of ideas and developments will flow into us in harmony with cosmic law. Nature is revealing its secrets to us; the universe will make itself available to the investigating spirit of man and the knowledge gained thus will provide man with new insights in (for example) upbringing, lifestyle, the art of healing, education, energy consumption, art and forms of government. From our new creative insights these social fields will be brought to a different level to serve general welfare. Everyone can choose for himself the right way to go with his own consciousness and social responsibility. These will be the characteristics of the

New Age.

This is why the architect has the task to create, from basis of his responsibility, a built environment which has a positive effect on man. And this is what brings us to the words of Winston Churchill: 'We shape our buildings, afterwards they shape us'. To fully understand this we need to look back at the culture of the ancient Greeks. For a long time man lived within a mythological awareness. His ideas were never stagnant. All kinds of imaginative ideas constantly bubbled up in him at the merest stimulus from outside. The Greek master-builders knew what was happening when these people entered a temple. By means of strict static forms a kind of consciousness was initiated that involved a dis-

tillation of his rampant fantasies. One could say that man was confronted with a certain severity and brought back to the experience of thought.

of nature is reflected in architecture'. ★ It is striking that the concept of nature to which organic building appeals has only been possible since the Enlightenment. Nature was subjected, but the new civilisation in which people found themselves aroused such disquietude that they found it necessary to appeal to nature as their healer. Organic building shows the same paradoxical character as the patient who yearns for a return to the circumstances that originally caused his disease; or as the dialectician who, now that the synthesis displeases him, hankers after the thesis.

The essentialism that permeates the idealised picture of nature is, however, contradicted by the subjective experience of space. To quote Hans Scharoun:

'Through the perceptual experience that a space provides, a meaning determined by the architect is transmitted to the spectator and influences his behaviour and way of being in that space. The meaning of the space and the person's behaviour and way of being in that space are thus intimately connected. Therefore space does not have an autonomous, arbitrary meaning.' ★

Scharoun himself conceived completely asymmetrical ground-plans for his interior spaces, offering countless perspectives and viewpoints in order to stimulate the indi-

★ Kloos, Maarten (ed.), *Architecture Now*, Amsterdam 1991, p. 14.

★ Janofske, Eckehard, *Architektur-Räume, Idee und Gestalt bei Hans Scharoun*, Berlin 1985, p. 114.

At Last, Here it is: Capitalism with a Human Face

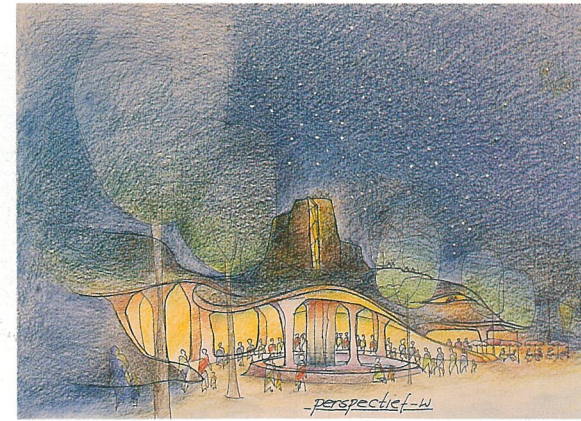
Alberts' identification of innovation as a desirable result of organic building brings us to the point of the functional programme, for which this architecture is stripped of its social utopianism and given a new task as the head office of a transnational enterprise. There is not much to be said against innovation as such. But the kind of innovation intended here is part of the holy trinity of capitalism, the other components of which are 'expansion' and 'surplus value'. As known, there are many possible objections to this threesome, just as capitalism in general contains several severe internal contradictions. Alberts is not himself afraid of these contradictions, seeing his remark that 'we are in favour of an economic synthesis (...) in which the free economy is allowed to stay in existence'. ★ Although there are several respects

★ Ton Alberts, op. cit. p. 14.

in which Alberts and Van Huut draw inspiration from brick-built Expressionism, the missionary zeal of the earlier organic building is foreign to them. They are fully prepared to accommodate to the material demands of the present: a Post-Modern bank does not keep vaults full of money, unlike the Doric monoliths of the past. Now that the National Banks are dumping even gold, the final bastion of eternal value, a bank has to preserve no more than hard-disk backups and documents. A bank need have no fear of living in a glass box in which everything is open to view. All the money is hidden away



Dutch Gaz Utilities Headquarters, Groningen, 1993



Dutch Pavilion, Sevilla Expo '92, competition entry, 1989

vidual observer's active involvement in the experience of the space. Alberts, on the other hand, avoids right angles for other reasons.

'Non-rectangular spaces foster the development of intuition. Evolution goes one step further as a result. That is why it is important for a company to work in differently shaped spaces, because people who work in such spaces will tend to think in a different way. At least, they advance a step further in their personal development, and this is what organic architecture encourages. Organic architecture stimulates people to see through things more quickly and to step over thresholds more readily. In fact organic architecture is a precondition for innovation.' ★

★ Ton Alberts, op. cit. p. 112.

management is gaining growing insight into the importance of the human resource. The staff may no longer be treated as obedient automatons, carrying out a dull, repetitive routine. Under conditions of flexible accumulation, the hardware is subject to capitalistic innovation – but the wetware in the heads of the employees needs continuous updating too. The people have to be offered something more than bare filing cabinets and uniform open-plan offices. They need a solid footing.

Organic architecture gives them that footing. In the ING bank the satisfaction of this need is expressed particularly well in the continuous pedestrian route through the building, designed to aid social contact, and in the high voids in every tower, designed

Shaping the Past and Present

The rectangle was, as it were, made a present to man. That is why we can see that approximately in the Greek era the intellectual powers are beginning to be developed. Great initiators like Pythagoras, for example, put energy into this. I am thinking in this respect of Pythagoras' theory, which made it possible to lay off a right angle. That is why we can see that approximately in the Greek era the intellectual powers are beginning to be developed. As the straight angle was developed in building, thinking powers were the powers of intellect, of logical thinking. Since it was rectangular forms that shaped our thinking powers, we may see these forms as a great gift. This is the very reason we have

now arrived at a material phase that increases our insight in the nature of the material world. Without this development we would not know the universal laws of the material world and we would not have any technical aids.

However, we have now arrived at a point where the 90 degree angle is used at all times and seasons as if there were not any other possibilities. It may seem feasible that by constantly applying rigid building forms built-up from right angles, we are over stimulating our capability to think and will undergo a process of crystallisation. We may indeed now find that we are growing more rational and material, because at present we ignorantly abuse the right angle we once

received as a reward for our development. We seem only to be able to make our built environment one that is ever growing more cold, hard, intensive, businesslike and poorer. The result is a lifeless world.

Roels Hifi, showroom, Wevelgem, 1993



Marina Abramovic, Shoes for Departure, 1992



Roels Hifi, showroom, Wevelgem, 1993



to elevate the spirit. People are inspired to become self-aware individuals who are nonetheless capable of responding maturely to collectivity. The only problem is that in the system within which this architectural space functions, the straightforward opposition between the individual and the crowd became irrelevant long ago. Individuality has become something of a lost cause, leaving the present day person to merge comfortably into the crowd. The crowd, in turn, lets itself be manipulated as one entity. This all-devouring herd longs for nothing but the global Big Mac. And the whole world is potential grazing for the beef.

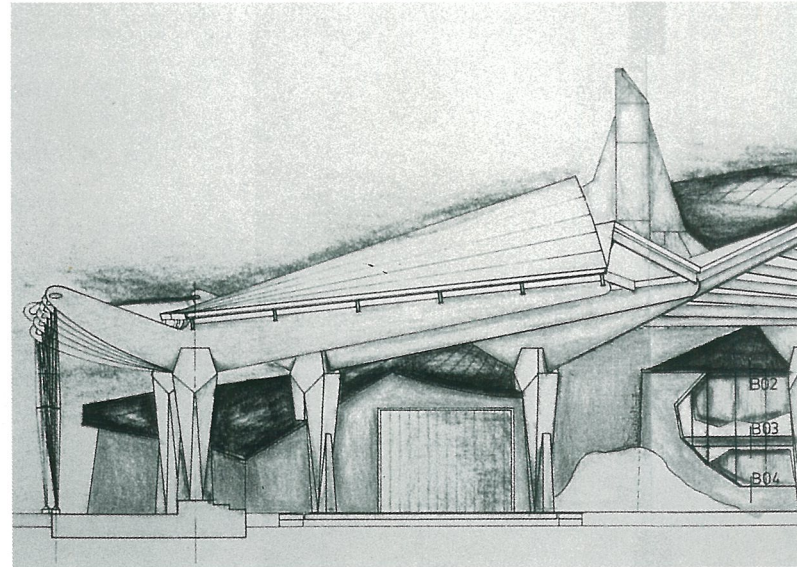
The ING Banking corporation, known for Third World debt conversion (by which countries can get out of debt by selling off their sovereignty) and for megamergers in the financial sector, takes a direct hand in the compression of time and space in the global village and the corresponding transformation of the mentality of space. From that point of view, both the sacral voids and the socialisation route through the building are outdated concepts. Only Mammon can inspire awe in those towering spaces, and casual meetings are good only for exchanging consumer tips about market segments. The conclusion: the instant architecture wins back something of its archaic opacity in the architecture of organic building, the heads of its occupants become completely transparent. The temptation of vitalism to enjoy the fullness of life boils down to a primitive hunger for more of the same.

Archaistic Appeasement

In their architecture, Ton Alberts and Max van Huut opt unwaveringly to express a spiritual programme. By this, they place themselves outside the order of contemporary pluralism, in which high and low culture, and values and conditions, have become interchangeable. Their architecture offers a remarkable confirmation of how far it is possible to convert ideas into matter. At the same time it offers enchanting spaces which are delightfully finished. Moreover, their experiment in energy economy is only to be warmly appreciated in this ecologically dislocated world. But the ING bank building is intended to be more than these things. It is also meant to be a monument to humanity; and, indeed, it forms a wonderful background for the perspex trophies that the managers award their staff for exceptional performance. In other words, the humanity referred to is of an unusually limited kind.

General human dealings are at the centre. The architecture does not revolve around the occupant's highly individual quest for personal fulfilment. It concerns, rather, the stimulation of a balanced interchange between the individual and the collective in an endless game of give and take. The only exception to this rule is the architect, who has promoted himself to umpire. In the spatial articulation, every reference to hierarchy, programmatic contrast, inequality and intellectual doubt is carefully smoothed away in a all-embracing, pacifying atmosphere. Horizontally, the routing and the sequence of pleasant work-zones are dominant. Vertically, the visitor can lose himself in a vague, mystical atmosphere, bathing in filtered light. This is an architecture that preaches peace and harmony in a world where these two commodities are hard to find (except in the ideology of the end of history, of course). Because everything is directed towards

creating a congenial atmosphere and fostering social intercourse, the architecture can make no appeal to a critical consciousness, let alone to a willingness to do something about the less desirable aspects of the status quo. The built environment is purely placatory and in the long run that is no real philanthropy. For even the client knows better than anyone that stagnation is tantamount to decline, and that there is no time for criticism in a capitalist order. The dilemma showcased here in a heightened form is that a mild, sensitive answer to the observed dehumanisation will ultimately only strengthen the forces that make for that dehumanisation. Through its sharp stress on haptic proximity, the architecture loses the capacity for critical distance that is required by the programme. The higher the institutional level of the commission – and a transnational bank such as the ING is an extreme example as far as that is concerned – the more strongly is architecture subject to this dilemma. Through their anthropological approach and their exaggerated emphasis on the physical body, the organic builders (and their fellow spirits from the camp of architectural Structuralism) create a distract-



De Scheg, ice track and swimming pool, Deventer, 1993

tion. Thus we can charge this archaism with the same error as it accuses Modernism of: a disregard for the machinations of production that aim to mask divide-and-rule strategies by means of neutralising interventions. In Modernism, this neutrality consists of the transparent box. In archaism, it consists of the massage of the depoliticised body. In the vitalist variant of this archaism, namely organic building, everything is reduced to an indifferent life-energy, the Schopenhauerian acceptance of the world as 'will' and 'representation', to which every politics of change finally succumbs.

Liberating Effect

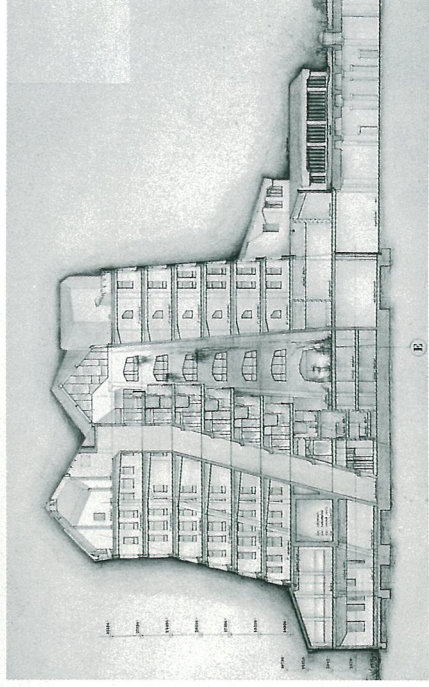
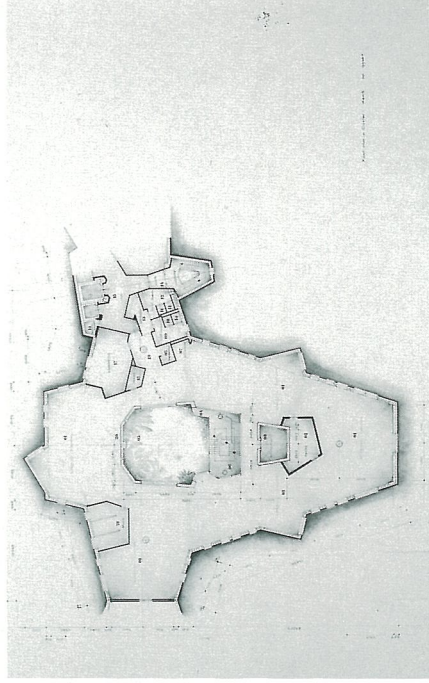
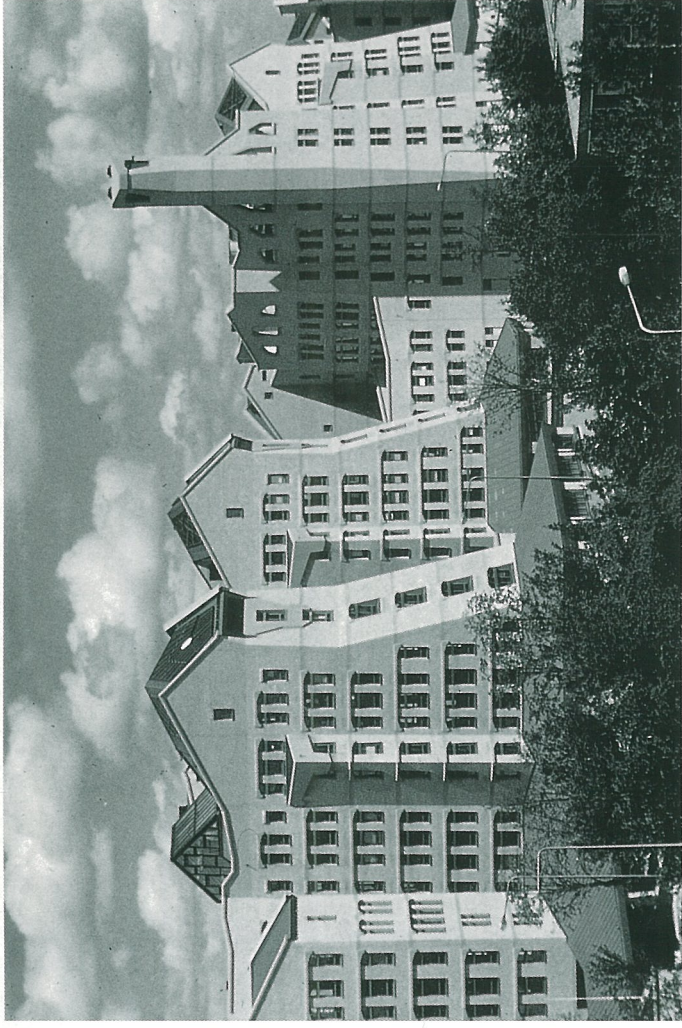
And exactly for that reason we may consider it to be a gift that nature reveals its secrets, so that we may gain new insights as in the beginning of this story. If we will discover organic forms arising from the world of movement, we will find that architecture can contribute to the re-establishment of the balance between our material and spiritual needs. Of course the rectangle will always be there, but only as one of the many other possibilities. In all directions free forms will arise that will make man go through the experience of the adventure of space again. By critically looking at these forms, the soul is touched and inner warmth will flow through his personality. With his body he

moves through these spaces and he feels free to experience new dimensions in his thinking. The life forms grown stagnant in matter begin to flow again and man will start to use his intelligence creatively again. Architecture, given form in this way, can have a liberating effect on mankind. It will develop and guide us in life. Society will have a soul again; a collective ideal, which of course requires new creative energy if it wants to be realised as an integral human perfection...

Ton Alberts

Since our society produces only standardised, normalised objects, these objects are unavoidably realisations of a model, the speech of a language, the substances of a significant form. To rediscover a nonsignifying object, one would have to imagine a utensil absolutely improvised and with no similarity to an existing model, (...) a hypothesis which is virtually impossible to verify in any society.

Roland Barthes



The building's appearance is determined by ten towers of varying heights. The walls of these towers are slightly sloping, reflecting noise upwards. The towers have pentagonal sun collectors on top: the building opens itself toward the sun, like the crown of a tree. The relatively large external wall surface is made up nearly entirely of prefabricated concrete units, clad with hand-laid bricks. Together, the towers form a capricious 'S' which winds its way through the shops, houses and flats of Amsterdam-Zuidoost. A quarter of the façade is formed by the windows, creating a favourable balance between heat loss and the admission of daylight. In each tower daylight also enters through a dome illuminating an internal void. Light art in the void provides additional light in the indoor walkway which connects the towers. Long hanging plants inside the void create curtains of green. The central facilities such as reception, four restaurants, library, film theatre and conference rooms are located on the indoor walkway. This walkway contains art that is not only beautiful, but sometimes functional as well. An example of the latter are the flow forms. They channel rainwater through the building in sinus-like movements, cleaning and oxygenating it. The channel is open so that the air gets humidified and the murmur of the water is audible. This enriched water is given to the plants that contribute to the natural atmospheric humidity. The walkway should give

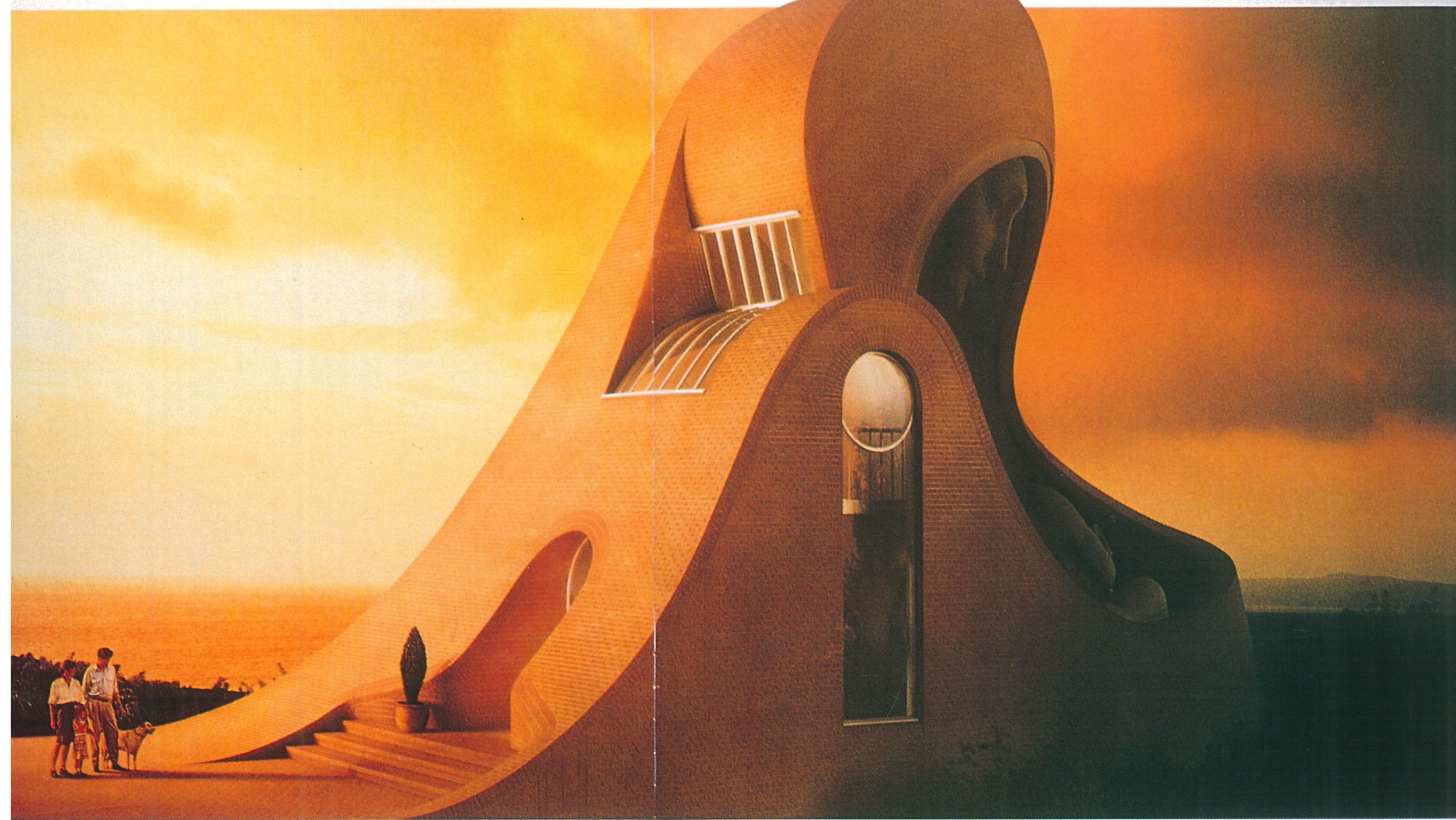
its user a feeling of walking in the woods, or rather walking through organic architecture. Alberts & Van Huut desired a building that positively influences the user, thus creating optimal efficiency in the workplace. Combining this demand with those of the programme, they concluded that no large areas of office space were to be created, but rather smaller units appropriate for eight people. Such units, or 'cells' should then be flexible to grow to a size able to accommodate about forty people. Following the example of a biological organism, or a 'cell structure', the offices were then grouped into 'clusters'. Because the workstations are located within six metres of the exterior walls, individuals are encouraged to manually control the amount of air, light and heat supplied. Great attention has been paid to the building's energy efficiency. Its construction and the materials used inhibit rapid cooling and heating. The sloping walls and the solar collectors in the top of the towers make the greatest possible use of the sun as an energy source. In addition, a ceramic energy retrieval wheel draws heat from the extracted air. This heat is used to raise fresh air to the right temperature. Based on: *Domus 714*, March 1990; and: ING Communications Department, *Building with a difference*, Amsterdam 1992.

Location Bijlmerplein 888, Amsterdam, The Netherlands Client ING Banking Corporation Design 1978 Completion 1986

Architectenbureau Alberts & Van Huut **ING Head Office Building**

C R E A T I O N

The Architectural Review September 1990



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