

On the Work of Lucien Lafour & Rikkert Wijk

Quality for Ordinary People

In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell analyses the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche by imagining a conversation between the German philosopher and Buddha. Both have been invited by God the Creator to give their advice prior to the creation of the world. In the course of the discussion that unravels between these opposites, life is reduced to two fundamental principles: compassion, and the urge to destroy. Nietzsche practically blows his top every time he is obliged to hear Buddha's unctuous words. The latter talks of a world full of fellow-feeling and involvement, of tolerance and mercy. For Nietzsche, these are all inventions that give the weak an excuse for staying that way. His tale of Zarathustra descending the mountain demonstrated that Christian love of one's neighbour was not a timeless ethical principle but a device that served an evident interest – namely that of the highest common denominator, the man in the street interested solely in maintaining the status quo. Only the lazy, the inflexible and the superficial benefited from this clammy, comfortable universe. But the man who could face up to the naked truth of existence had no need of such a creation. So lay on the lash, the lash of struggle, of truth, of honesty; and, above all, of a language purged of all its metaphysical assumptions.

However great the distance between these two standpoints, a synthesis has become possible in our own time. In the work of Lucien Lafour and Rikkert Wijk, the vocabulary of Modernism, with its connotations of dehumanisation and its farewell to all that is 'definitive', proves capable of coexisting with a sincere involvement with the lot of ordinary people. Partly because of their individual backgrounds, the cooperation of these two architects is marked by a blend of tropical intimacy and metropolitan aloofness. Perhaps it is this combination of qualities that puts them in a position to rehabilitate the language of Modernism while retaining the critical, anthropological consciousness introduced into architecture by Team 10. The style that went along with the shock of the new thus turns out now to be applicable to the eternal constants of existence.

But when we look a little deeper, can we really still see a synthesis? The social housing of Lafour and Wijk is a product of a social democracy which, in the crisis of the welfare state, has become a victim of its own accomplishments. Revisionist socialism has defeated both revolutionary socialism and liberalism. Much has been achieved and consolidated in the form of a consumerist consensus, but new problems such as the environment, the increasing streams of refugees, the concentration of power in the hands of transnational enterprises etc. demand new solutions. Meanwhile, the present political configuration prefers to sweep these issues under the carpet.

It is seldom that architecture lends itself to an investigation of these questions as well as that of Lafour and Wijk.

The Architecture of the Post-Marxist Left

If there is a social democratic architecture that simultaneously reveals the enthusiasm and the dilemma of leftist housing ideology, then it must be that of Lafour and Wijk.

Their work is still strongly reminiscent of the idea of society being something that can be fabricated. But it also shows all the signs of the kind of disillusion that has produced the slogan 'think globally, act locally'. Lafour and Wijk clearly go along with a critical tradition which achieved prominence in the Netherlands from the late fifties onwards, in circles around Jaap Bakema and Aldo van Eyck. Their aim was to temper the univalent functionalism of CIAM. In the European context, Team 10 inevitably springs to mind here. Team 10 aimed to defy the sterile architecture of post-war reconstruction by paying more attention to the social and urban context; but they also attacked the guiding principles of architectural Modernism itself, in which life was reduced to a number of measurable functions (light, ventilation, space, habitation, work, recreation and transport), to which the design strategy merely had to conform in order to be considered a success. The consequence of this was a technocratic abstraction of real life which, when applied in practice, resulted in an architecture that totally failed to answer the human need for identification with the surroundings. Team 10 and its Dutch members opted for an architecture in which life was approached from a more complex, anti-hierarchical viewpoint.

'Our hierarchy of associations is woven into a modulated continuum representing the true complexity of human associations. (...) We must evolve an architecture from the fabric of life itself, an equivalent of the complexity of our way of thought, of our passion for the natural world and our belief in the ability of man.' ★

Although this riposte to Modernism undeniably implied a correction to the poverty of the functional idiom, the design philosophy remained metaphorical in character. No longer was the machine or the product of industry the perfect metaphor for the house, but 'nature' or 'life' as seen from an anthropological viewpoint. This aspect of architecture, which implied the opening of the field to the consideration of issues other than purely architectural ones, never formed an explicit part of the programme. Perhaps it was inevitable that the anthropological concern remained largely metaphorical, in the light of the utopian thinking that still pervaded Team 10.

'Team 10 is Utopian, but Utopian about the present. Thus their aim is not to theorise but to build, for only through construction can an Utopia of the present be realised. For them "to build" has a special meaning in that the architect's responsibility, towards the individual or groups he builds for and towards the cohesion and convenience of the collective structure to which they belong, is taken as being an absolute responsibility. No abstract Master Plan stands between him and what he has to do, only the "human facts" and the logistics of the situation.' ★

What Team 10 were saying was that the break with global legitimisation was definitive.

But – and in this they showed themselves to be pre-eminently social-democratic – this was not necessarily at the cost of their Utopia. Utopia, and thus the metaphor, remained. Utopia shook off its teleological accent, however, and

★ Alison Smithson, quoted in Agrest, Diana, *Architecture from Without*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, p. 47.

★ 'The Aim of Team 10', statement in Team 10 Primer, quoted in Smithson, Alison (ed.), *Team 10 Meetings*, Delft 1991, p. 8.

268

For years now architects have been providing outside instead of inside, but that is not their job at all; their job is to provide inside even if it happens to be outside.

Aldo van Eyck

When I say, make a welcome of each door and a countenance of each window: make of each a place, because man's home-realm is the in-between realm – the realm architecture sets out to articulate, – the intention is again to unmask false meaning of size with what right-size implies!

Aldo van Eyck

Space has no room, time not a moment for man. He is excluded.

In order to 'include' him – help is homecoming – he must be gathered into their meaning. (Man is the subject as well as the object of architecture.)

Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more.

For space in the image of man is place, and time in the image of man is occasion.

Today space and what it should coincide with in order to become 'space' – man at home with himself – are lost. Both search for the same place, but cannot find it. Provide that place.

Aldo van Eyck

Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man's homecoming.

Aldo van Eyck

What is happening here therefore cannot be called revolutionary, but a superior simplicity is achieved that is a delight for both the resident and the casual passer-by, easier to experience than to write about. The dwellings have been placed on either side of a central traffic axis: rows of medium-rise buildings across the axis and low-rise buildings along it. It could hardly be simpler, and a closer look shows that it does not need to be more complicated. Taken together, the variety in building heights and roof forms, the spacious entrances and the round balconies, the lay out, which ensures no two blocks are completely identical, the transparent stairways, the galleries, the roof terraces and the use of colour, all ensure the blocks, which in



Marica house, Paramaribo, 1974



Burmanstraat social housing, 11 dwellings, Amsterdam, 1983

became a 'motivation' or an 'energy' that operated here and now. It is this inflation of Utopia that is also recognisable, and to an even greater extent, in the work of Lafour and Wijk. Particularly when Lafour says, 'We have no vision of the future. It is all happening so quickly. A vision of the future is outdated as soon as it is expressed. All we can keep thinking and keep saying is that we can all build much more beautiful buildings.' ★

More beautiful buildings bring more happiness: 'I think it is very important we believe we are building for people. That the buildings, therefore, and the surroundings are made in the first place for the people who are going to live there.'

But these architects also go a step further. The work of Lafour and Wijk is still open to Team 10's critique of Modernism. All the same, it shakes off the constraints of Team 10's biological and anthropological metaphors.

They are receptive to all kinds of cultural and formal references, from tropical typologies to the *Plan Zuid*

★ Lucien Lafour, 'Interview IV', in Kloos, Maarten (ed.), *Lafour & Wijk Architects*, Arcam pocket 2, Amsterdam 1991, p. 86.

of Berlage. These are particularly noticeable in their social housing. They reevaluate the urban element, at the larger scale of street and public square, without losing sight of the individual experience. No longer is the 'structuralist articulation' of the separate units the guiding principle, as is visibly the case in much of the work of the Forum group. Now people are more concerned about the visual coherence of the urban image. Architecturally, they have taken an immense step forward. What a pity that the word 'forward' has become ideologically meaningless!

the first instance are experienced as merely simple, become upon closer inspection complex forms with a great expressive quality. And between these blocks there are the streets, the green strips, the bicycle racks and the parking places. All everyday things, things another designer might not devote much attention to. That is not the case here, however, and something has been created that is not meaningless emptiness, but space, a place where people like to be.

Jury Report Wibaut Prize 1990

From the beginning, Lafour and Wijk's Functionalism has focused on the needs of the people for whom they build and on the surroundings in which they build. By working together, a common architectural style has appeared in which practical and emotional considerations are combined to form a humane and versatile coherence. In doing so, they have proved to be genuine functionalists.

Izak Salomons

Holland Inc., Country of Feasibility Studies

Since the eighties, the no-nonsense politics of the Netherlands have effectively converted the country into a corporation. Holland Inc. has manufactured its social Utopia, at least wherever it has proved 'feasible'. Feasibility is the country's highest good. Everything else that was once an ingredient of the social Utopia – solidarity, equality and a belief in the inherent goodness of mankind – has dissolved into the mass consensus of the social middle ground: play streets and doggy toilets as palliatives for man's evil streak. And since practically everyone belongs to that middle ground, there are few objectors.

A physical consequence of this median society is a deadly uniformity of the urban landscape. Apart from the exceptional museum pieces, all city centres have come to look alike in their pedestrianised consumerism. Around them lie the universally identical dormitory suburbs and overspill towns, themselves centreless, where the primary model of harmony is invariably the solidly nuclear family, and the only cohesive forces are the shared communal facilities. If Fukuyama's 'era of boredom' has set in anywhere, then it is here. Holland is a country where the urban landscape and the housing for all (middle) classes reached an admirable level of quality within the bounds of the bureaucratic possibilities. That nice little house in the suburbs is now within everyone's reach. All the same, projects of outstanding quality are few and far between. In the bulk of social housing construction projects, architectural meanings play a subsidiary role. The main aim is to be certain of finding tenants and to keep down maintenance costs; in other words, to build inexpensive and liveable houses to attract an eager market and give the landlord as few problems as possible. In the case of houses built for the private market, a quick and risk-free sale is primary.

The architect is in a weak position. His ideological and political role is ever more confined. Architects occupy politically influential positions seldom if at all. Everyone is concerned about his own patch. The city councillor wants prestige and another term of office, the client wants a return on his investment and minimum maintenance costs, and the architect wants future contracts and/or a further shove along the road to stardom. Clients demand seductive architectural images and are no longer interested in a conception of humanity. It is something of a miracle that Lafour and Wijk, together with the very occasional 'good' client, have succeeded in swimming against this maelstrom to realise a modest architectural oeuvre that tries to escape the widely perceived ideological vacuum and makes a stand for a less anonymous existence.

Architecture of Human Interest

The urban planning of Lafour & Wijk lacks a centripetal force. They give the district a transparent dynamic structure by using a system of multiple lines of sight along the built volumes and visual openings between them, without ignoring the individual characters of the buildings themselves. The district acquires a personality of its own through its frequent distinctive orientation points and its richness in public facilities. We find a real concentration of vision only in the identity of the volume and the dwelling. But that is not to say that the architects' have not considered the urban context here

Architecture in general has become an island, cultivated by a group of architectural specialists with their own rules and power within their own ministates. Such a situation can be seen in other Western countries too of course, but in the Netherlands the housing tradition is so strong that in the case of housing there is a natural link between architecture as an art and architecture at the service of the people.

Izak Salomons

It is their ability to bridge the chasm between the isolated elite of architectural mandarins and the man in the street and their ability to transform the ordinariness of daily life into a well-balanced and elegant humane environment that make the architecture of Lafour and Wijk a standard for the future.

Izak Salomons

I think it is very important we believe we are building for people. That the buildings, therefore, and the surroundings are made in the first place for the people who are going to live there.

Rikkert Wijk



Ellen Health Centre, Mariënberg, 1975

270

too. The façade is never conceived only from the dwelling outwards. It also has a character that derives from the urban structure. The smallness of scale and the articulation of the block/main volume work together and reinforce each other. The façade often undulates due to local constrictions, and these are directly related to the differentiation of dwellings, to external views and insulation, and to access and/or balconies. Access to the dwellings is via porches and short walkways, a feature which fosters social contacts between residents. They exclude the possibility of alienation, and this is also the intention of the deliberate difference between front and rear, the angles, the jumps, the use of gables and the classical proportions of the façade. All this is achieved by a highly intelligent use of seriality in the construction of the dwellings. There is diversity in spite of the use of prefabricated elements, and this is due in part to the cheerful use of pastel tints in stucco and/or brickwork, giving their work a distinctive mediterranean character. From the point of view of urbanism and the articulation of the ground plan and façade, the dwellings are reminiscent of the work of Hans Scharoun (for example, the residential block in Zabel-Krügerdamm, Berlin, 1966-70, and the housing scheme Charlottenburg-Nord, Berlin, 1956-61). As with Scharoun, the symmetry is frequently deformed in accordance with the organic principle of destabilising the viewer's *Standort*, his confidence in his own perception. Unexpected openings and lines of sight abound. Naturally, we can also pick up reminiscences of their teacher Aldo van Eyck. The work of Lafour and Wijk is characterised by an admirable alertness to the urban structure and the horizon of the inhabitant. This architecture is meant for people and their everyday wons. In no case does the visual order reflect a social hierarchy. There is a mediocrity in the non-pejorative sense of the word, an architecture without extremes, acceptable to everyone. There is only one thing that matters in this architecture: the satisfaction of what people need. 'We like to work on the very simple things that closely affect people' say the architects. 'The programme of course is the most

important, but that goes without saying.' Or, as Izak Salomons puts it, 'It is their ability to bridge the chasm between the isolated élite of architectural mandarins and the man in the street and their ability to transform the ordinariness of daily life into a well-balanced and elegant humane environment that make the architecture of Lafour and Wijk a standard for the future.'★

What makes this work into something more than an illustration of social pacification as purveyed by Holland Inc., is that the initial impulse of Utopia remains recognisable. Lafour and Wijk confront us with the dilemma of the achieved Utopia in which someone like Francis Fukuyama, with his 'endist' theory, can celebrate worldwide triumph. The design-stage of the Netherlands is finished; and in spite of the resulting digestible but unexceptional sliced-bread architecture, at least it is still about people. Humanity – whatever Foucault may think – is still unfinished; and this architecture, whatever its socially affirmative character, also helps us see the technocratic post-history ideology in perspective.

★ Salomons, Izak, 'Elegant Ordinariness', in *Lafour & Wijk Architects*, Arcam pocket 2, Amsterdam

Social Democracy as Fatality

Lafour and Wijk understand people because they recognise themselves in them. They do not gather their knowledge of the needs of the man in the street by abstract cross-cultural surveys, but by a sort of feeling for the daily joys and woes of their public.

'We do not design north-facing living rooms if it can be avoided, because on the few days of the year the sun shines people want to enjoy it.'★

Their modesty emerges not only in their perception of their role, but also in their forms.

There are no efforts to force some or other 'meaning' onto the public. *Their* manifesto is not to have a

★ Rikkert Wijk, 'Interview II', in Kloos, Maarten (ed.), op. cit. p. 29.

manifesto, not to aim too high, not to unveil yet another architectural theory screaming

Buildings have to fit in, have to conform to existing buildings. Nowadays autonomy is seen as a quality, but I think that is because architects are too eager to leave their mark on the situation where they are building. Often it is the case that the more autonomous the building, the worse the situation is.

Rikkert Wijk

Not only have Lafour and Wijk developed their own personal architecture, they have also made a valuable contribution to modern Functionalism by enriching it with the art of complex compositions that combine highly different aspects of building problems under one architectural roof.

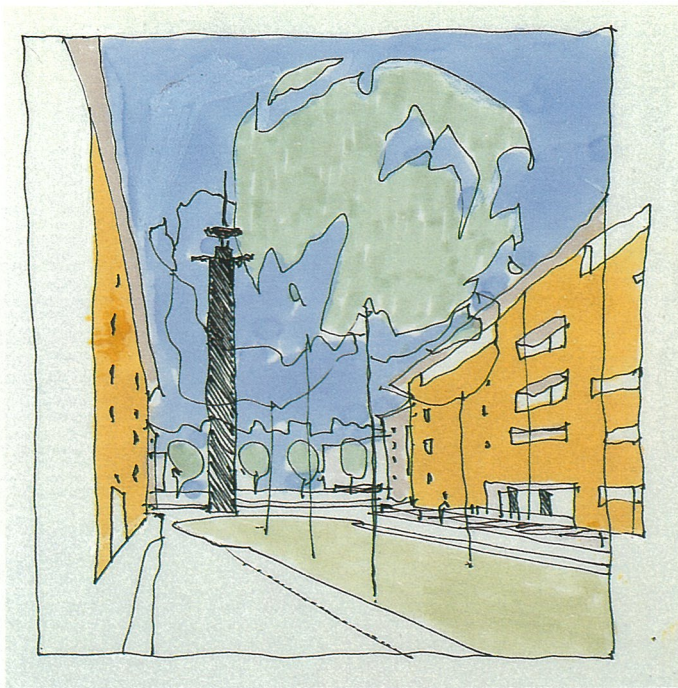
Izak Salomons

Lafour and Wijk have managed to produce a work of architecture that, despite its size, succeeds in being fluid and is precisely attuned to the different scales and characteristics of the site. Notwithstanding all the attention paid to the details of the urban design plan, the lay-out of the dwellings and the appearance of the buildings of which the project consists, and the interplay of many different architectural themes, the overall composition is well balanced. It is full of movement, yet quite consistent.

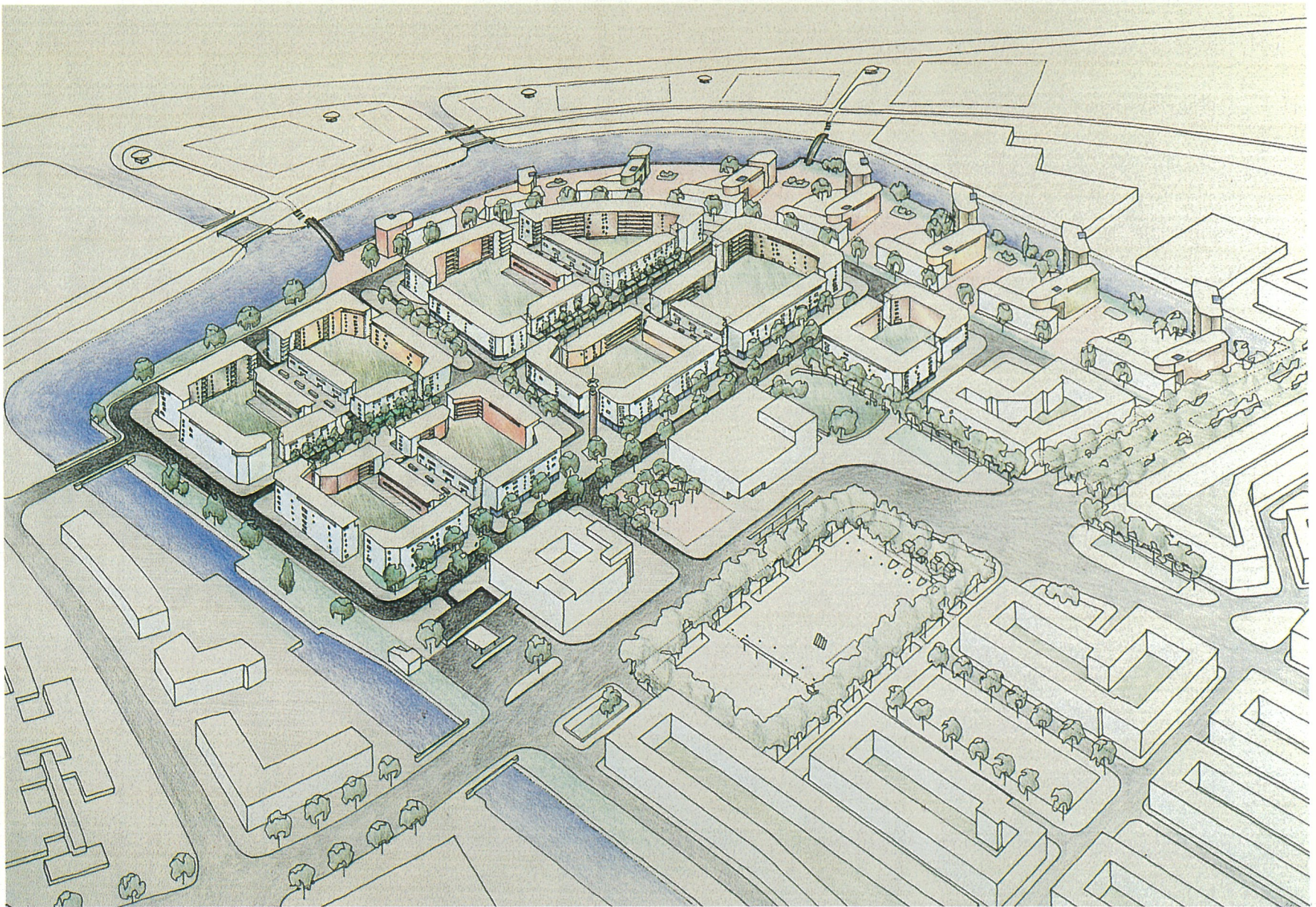
Izak Salomons

Lafour and Wijk are among architects those architects who, instead of looking for simplicity, strive for complexity, for a maximum of different spatial organisational solutions, a maximum of nuance. (...) Their buildings are colourful, but in a gentle and quiet way, adapted to the physical surroundings and to the social environment. If they make blocks, they are never closed and never completely open, but instead almost closed and thus profiting from the advantages of both. Disliking the traditional gallery, they prefer to combine the gallery with the portico in a friendly game of perception: when does the short gallery become a large portico, and vice versa?

Maarten Kloos



Urban Plan, Olympisch Stadion area, Amsterdam, 1992





School, extension, Galibi, 1978

for attention. People still have to make their own Utopia, just as in the high days of the Modern Movement. But the events of recent history have given the self-made Utopia a rather more subtle form. Heroes and pioneers no longer exist. Utopia is here now, and we have to learn to like it. The key principles are now adaptation to, and acceptance of, the human condition. After all, it is now clear enough that mankind is fundamentally bad, but since everybody accepts the fact it no longer leads to blood and mayhem.

This diverse, cheerful and comfortable architecture, in as far as it represents a view on the state of the world and how it ought to look, is an ambiguous statement. It is not an illustration to accompany the pedagogical and philanthropic visions of a social democracy. On the contrary, its Modernist connotations are instrumental in making us acutely conscious of that ideology. It is the ever self-confirming social democracy that aims to mitigate social tensions by the satisfaction of daily needs. Everything is provided for – sleeping, eating, living, relaxation. By dint of the media, the satisfied consumer is 'involved' in everything that goes on, but in the passivity of his easy chair he is galactically remote from any real social intervention. Buddha's timeless plea for a society of give and take, of live and let live, has been implemented just a bit too literally.

Both culturally and architecturally, the ambivalent politics of communal discipline *plus* individual emancipation can be recognised in the social democracy of old. The time-honoured striving of the Left, the condition of *communitas*, remains unattainable so all the effort goes into achieving the precondition of *communitas*: the emancipation of the individual. We are all prepared to stand together for a cause, be it the nation, the *Gemeinschaft*, the language or now perhaps 'Europe'. On the other hand, the individual has to develop his own capacities and, above all, distinguish himself from the herd. To get by in this paradoxical situation, the only system possible is what Hans Magnus Enzensberger termed 'mediocrity and delusion'. In this culture, the difference between one person and another – which is minimal from the point of view of social distinction, political choice and economic importance – is stage-managed. Everyone is just sufficiently different from his neighbour to allow him to retain a sense of individuality, but at the same time sufficiently similar for the idea of a community to persist. It is the kind of culture that we would expect under the hegemony of the middle class, one in which all conflicts are resolved by means of 'reasoned dialogue'. As is known, the integrative

capacity of this structure has exceeded all expectations. Ideological fanaticism, utopias and plans that smack of totalitarianism are thrown out. There is no *Verelendung*, no large-scale impoverishment. In the guise of uniformity, almost everything is levelled out.

Between Acceptance and Resistance

The architecture of Lafour and Wijk also falls into line with this cultural 'ideal'. Against the background of a comfortably neutral urban environment, the good citizen can continue to feel unique in his or her own home with its own ground plan and distinctive detailing. Unity in modest diversity. And everyone who wants to can work on shaping his private needs or can enjoy his well-earned rest. It speaks for itself that criticism has little foothold in this situation. Although this architecture can be read as a reproach to the tasteless and impoverished mass-production prevalent in the trade as a whole, it is really a conciliatory one. It is more inclined to legitimise the limitations within which architecture has allowed itself to be forced than to pillory them as over-restrictive. The world may change a little, but, as Nietzsche observed long ago, this attitude simply fails to get us anywhere and merely serves as an excuse for the status quo. In fact it is an attempt to enhance life by means of a fixation on the *preconditions* for that life.

On the other hand, Lafour and Wijk take their duty to build 'for the people' seriously. So much so, that their subtle handling of the 'quotidian programme' raises questions about the cultural substance of that programme. Where social democracy has allowed its concern for the community and for emancipation to decay into sterile categories, these architects remind us what it was all about in the first place. Thus they reinstate the utopian motive while criticising the all too passive enjoyment of the achieved Utopia; and they do this by the roundabout method of modestly manipulating the programme.

Perhaps this work achieves as much as architecture ever can achieve towards unmasking the hidden defects of a consensus society, without thereby attacking the profession, the occupants or social democracy's predominant achievements. These, according to the architects, must always be protected from the material consequences of social criticism. They show a great aversion to every intellectual endeavour that contradicts the pragmatic aspects. The work raises questions only within the available solution space; and even these questions are difficult to recognise because they are blotted out by the equation of the horizon of experience with the horizon of expectation, and by the soothing of every social discontent with commonplace comforts. Thus this architecture does not seem to make much of a contribution to the revival of the Left so long sought by its architects and their kindred spirits in the social democratic quarter.

P.S. More and more reports are reaching us from the political front about the demolition of the welfare state. If and when social housing also falls prey to the non-interventionist state of tomorrow, please regard the above *Neue Unübersichtlichkeit* as not having been written. Old-style polarisation will then be in fashion again. Let Lafour and Wijk build the barricades!

The tendency to deny limits, never using the one solution or the other but, if possible, both, explains their fascination with situations of transition: for the interior and the exterior as two complementary notions in both architecture and urbanism, for entrances and stairways, for the stone step not only as a connection between inside and outside, but also as a world between sun and shadow. And for the juxtaposition of cultural differences: the use of colours from tropical world in the sober context of the Netherlands, and, in the beginning of their careers, plain Dutch Modernism adapted to the climate of a country still deeply rooted in its traditionalism.

We have no vision of the future. It is all happening so quickly. A vision of the future is outdated as soon as it is expressed. We can only keep thinking and keep saying it can all be much more beautiful buildings.

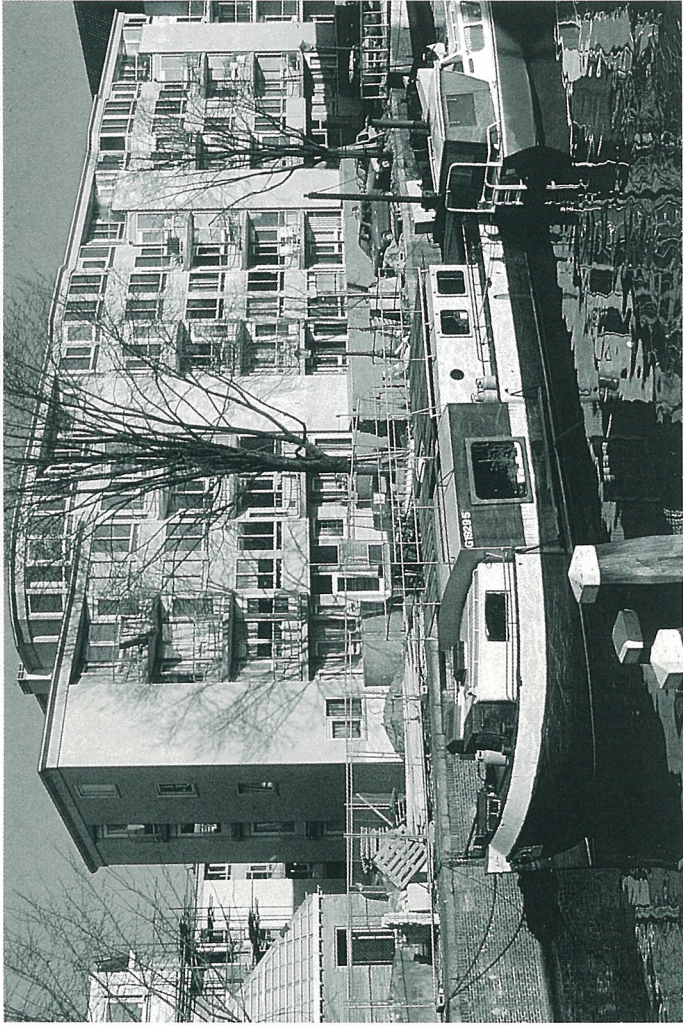
Lucien Lafour

In lifestyle and architecture Lafour has developed characteristics that are uncommon in the normally severe, well-ordered culture of the Netherlands. He might be described as an ebullient gentleman-architect with a cheerful yet elegant style, who combines proud self-confidence with a gentle interest in people. (...) And since good architecture can be seen as a self-portrait of its creator, one can hardly be amazed that Lafour's architecture shows the same traits as his personality: sensitive to essentials in life, colourful and careful with details.

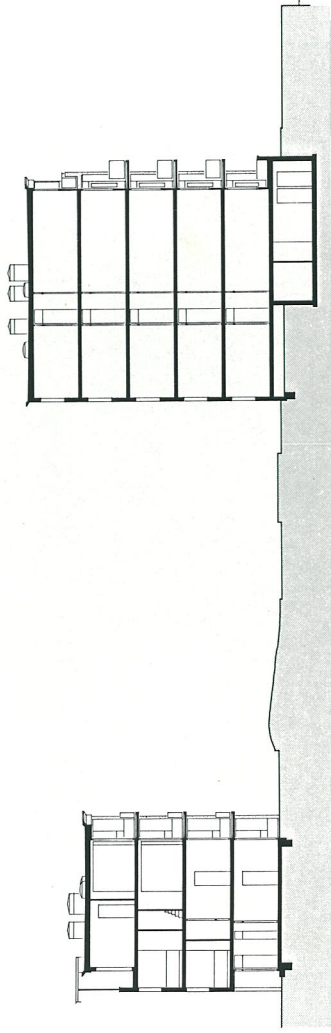
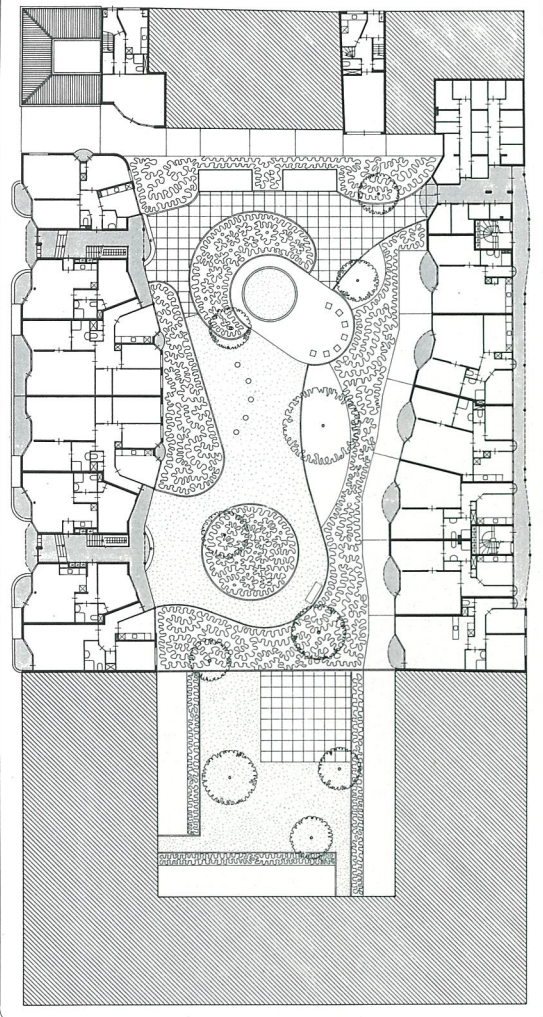
Izak Salomons

Lucien Lafour has given an impulse that can be carried further: test empirically, observe, improve – do! again and again, until it becomes possible to say, 'Look, that's how we do it here – how we function well in what we build'.

Aldo van Eyck



The project on the Realeiland consists of two blocks (in which 65 dwellings of various sizes have been realised) built between existing warehouses and dwellings. This situation was the starting point of the design. In order to create a gradual transition from the broad warehouses of 12.5 metres to the narrower dwellings of eight metres on the other side, undulating façades for the inner court have been employed. The unity of the whole is retained by using prefabricated components like balconies, bays and stairs in the outer walls. An important principle in the design is that the dwellings should receive as much sun as possible. All the dwellings are oriented towards the south, which results in the walls of the inner court having various functions. On the north side there are living rooms and balconies, on the south side kitchens and galleries. South elevations are relatively open with tall windows and animated by cheerful colours and the curves of projecting balconies. On the north elevations, stairs and access galleries are designed so that comings and goings on them provide some enlivening theatre to these sunless façades. For the benefit of the view from the other side, this façade was made special by designing it very



bright and transparent. Lafour: 'The façade is designed as a diamond with cut facets. Because of this the façade has light and shadow.' Colour also plays an important role in the design. And again, the situation was the starting point. The salmon pink on the Realeingracht façade fits in the reddish brown bricks of the warehouses. The stucco at the inner court is yellow so it fits with the grey-white of the warehouses at the inner court. By tilting the ground floor somewhat above street level, the residents have an unrestricted view over the cars. In order to retain a view of the water from the inner court, the block on the Realeiland is shorter. This open corner gives the inhabitants the feeling not to live in a hermetically sealed area. The inner court, which is laid out as a communal garden, can be reached through two other gateways. All the dwellings are reached by an intermediate form of portico and short gallery. Based on: *Lafour & Wijk Architects, Arcam pocket 2, Amsterdam 1991, pp. 56-57; and: Liesbeth Mellis, 'Situatie als uitgangspunt voor de architectuur', De Architect, April 1989, pp. 47-51.*



Pink, l'Art du Bonheur, 1983



Hans van der Meer, from 'Quirk of Fate', Keszthely, Hungary, 1982

