

1-1-1996

Police Station, Vaals

Bart Lootsma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/oz>



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Lootsma, Bart (1996) "Police Station, Vaals," *Oz*: Vol. 18. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1282>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Oz* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

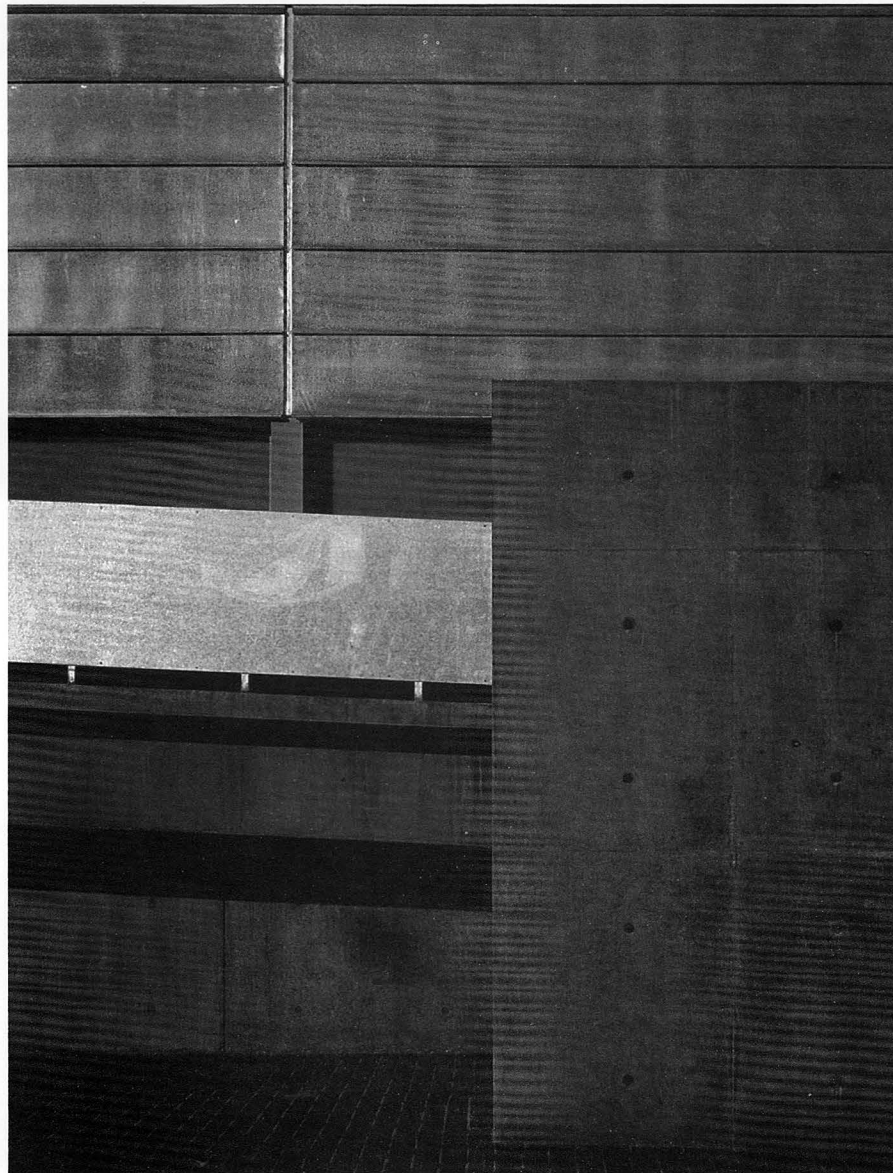
Police Station, Vaals

Project by Wiel Arets
Text by Bart Lootsma

Vaals is a small town at the southern tip of Holland, where the country meets Belgium and Germany. With its gently sloping hills, the fine landscape around here is very un-Dutch. At first sight, Wiel Arets' building seems to blend into this idyllic setting. It stands on a slope at the edge of the town and looks out over a magnificent valley. The buildings in the area are simple detached houses and farms, and their predominantly small scale is reflected in the division of the building into three different-sized areas, each quite different in character. Seen from the road from Heerlen, this could be an office building or a fashionable restaurant. In fact it is the local headquarters of the regional police force. From the other side, the function of the building is more obvious. To the town, it exhibits a severe, closed zinc-clad facade, constructed over a parking area which is enclosed by a steel fence.

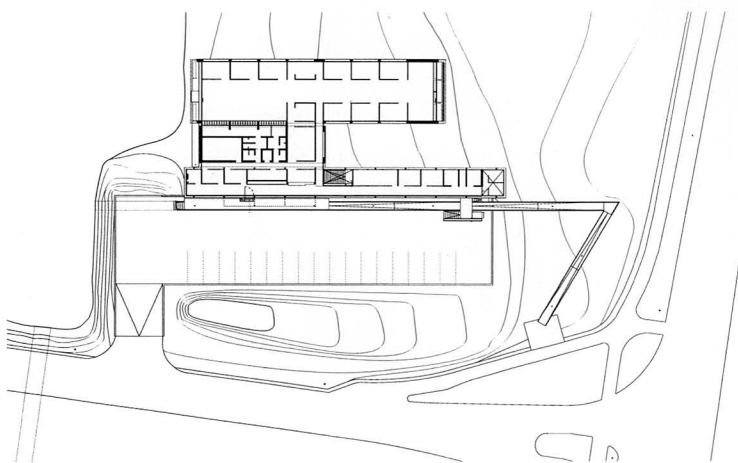
Arets' design involves the subtle yet impactful interplay of familiarity and strangeness, idyll and nightmare. Like in a David Lynch movie, one can turn into the other at any time. Arets is fond of referring to Jean-Luc Godard, especially his film *Pierrot Le Fou*, where the conflict between real and surreal, between violence and paradise, is personified by Ferdinand/Pierrot, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo. In Arets' opinion, the architect should not get out of this conflict: We architects have to be confronted with violence and innocence, with anxiety and composure, he once



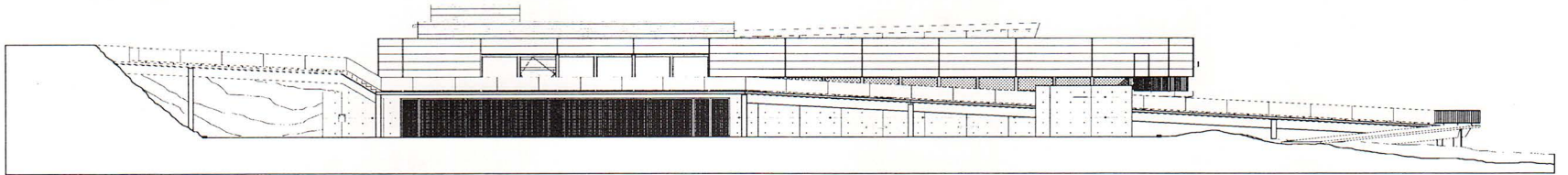


said in a lecture in Vienna. However, the architect identifies more with Godard himself than with the main character in his film. Like Godard, Arets' work is fraught with conflict. Just as a director cuts shots and scenes into a film, Arets structures combinations of programs, events, materials, prospects and insights into meaningful architectural experiences.

Here, part of the conflict resides in the nature of the brief. The regional police force has embarked on a program of reorganization, which involves another way of working, with great importance being attached to openness. At the same time, a lot of the police's work cannot be public knowledge. The design creates a form that reflects the different degrees and kinds of openness between the public and the police, but also between police officers themselves. The entrance to the police station is situated on a pedestrian route, which runs from the upper end of the town downward towards the provincial highway. At the entrance, the visitor finds a large display case containing police caps and helmets from all over the world. These items in some way show how the police externally appear to the public. At the height of the reception desk, it is possible to look through the entire building. From here the visitor passes the cell block. Although we can't look into the cells, a narrow window at the bottom of the cell doors allows the prisoner's legs to be seen. Finally, we



Entrance Level Plan

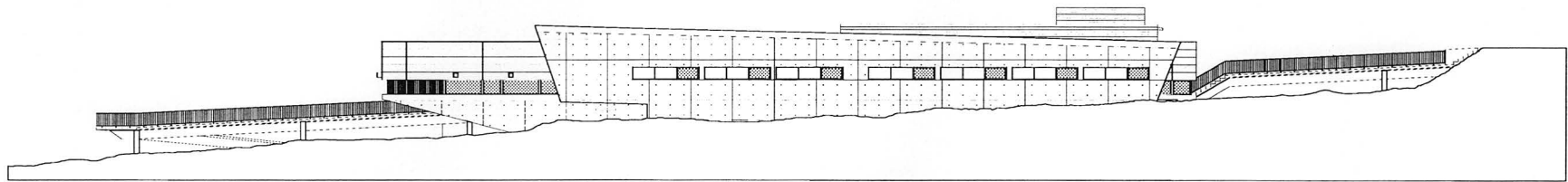


Southeast Elevation

reach a caged area at the far end of the building where the dogs are kept. This route gives us some idea of the friendly and not so friendly experiences we might have with the police. The interesting thing is that these experiences have been expressed in the building as realities, rather than symbolically as they might be in architecture *parlante*.

The building itself is divided into three areas running parallel to the pedestrian route, which are separated from each other by extended sky vaults. These areas are also clearly identifiable from the outside from the three volumes which make up the building. Just as Godard uses colors in *Pierrot Le Fou* to underscore the different states of mind of his characters, Arets has built each of the volumes from a different material: zinc, wood and concrete. The area nearest the pedestrian route is obviously where the public arrives, either through the front door as a crime victim or as prisoner up the stairs leading from the garage. Interview rooms are on the left side, cells and charge-rooms on the right side of the building. The central area is a transition space, which houses the administrative offices and police officers' locker-rooms, showers and toilets. Finally, we have the area where most of the police work is done. This contains the communications room, squad room and the operations room, which is the core working area. Individual work rooms are located along the edge of the building.





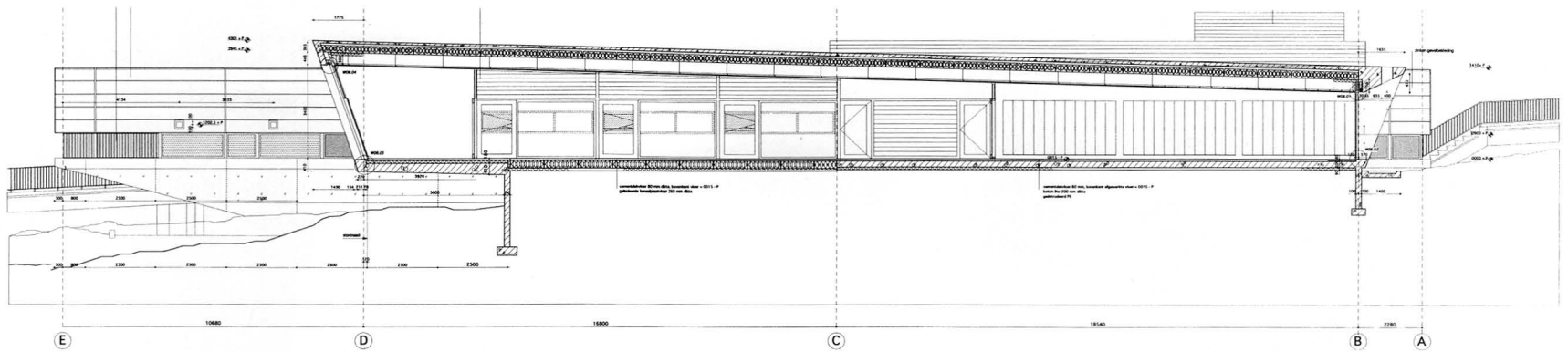
Northwest Elevation



Different degrees of transparency are used in the walls between these areas. Almost all the walls are glass. But depending on the degree of privacy required in a room, Arets uses opal glass, for example in the interview rooms and charge-rooms, or glass which is only transparent at standing height, as is the case with the work rooms. This area is the most transparent, since good communication is essential in police work. In fact, it is a large space which can easily be adapted for large-scale investigations, since it accommodates a large number of people. The operations room is separated from the locker-rooms by a wall of lockers which have transparent doors providing a blurred view of the contents—clothing, shoes, helmets, and personal belongings.



Just as Arets gives the public numerous—sometimes masked—views into the police station, he also makes strategic use of the views from the building. In the work area, where people are sometimes working under considerable pressure, he has placed a number of large windows which provide a relaxing view of the splendid landscape, like the glass lower section of wall in the squad room. The only view from the small windows in the cells is the cloister of Saint Benedictusberg, where Dom van der Laan built the church and some of the extensions, so one cell occupant looks out at another. The analogy between cloister and prison recalls Michel Foucault's typological analyses in which he points out that the imposition of dis-

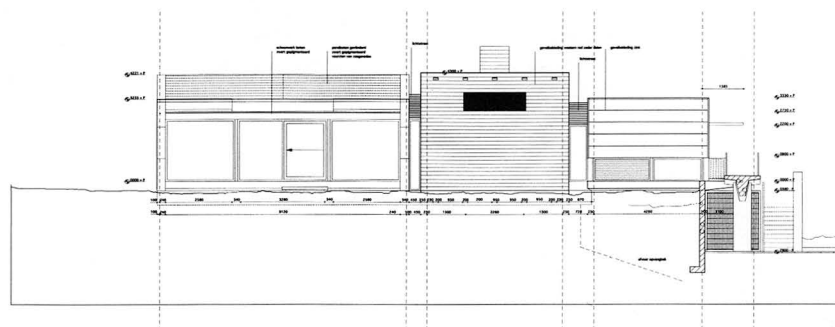


Longitudinal Section

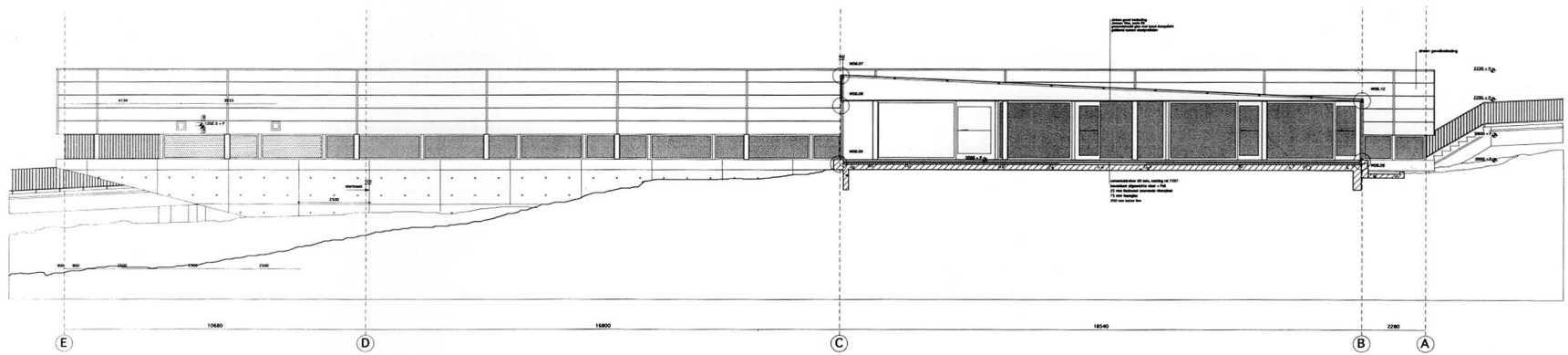
cipline is a phenomenon that works in the same way in many parts of society.

The question of who is actually looking at whom in this building is crucial, as in other Arets projects. In the proposed design for a theatre in Delft in 1991, using the motto *Videre*, Arets pushed the tension arising from the meeting of audience and actors to the extreme by the use of radically separate routing. Actors and audience follow an almost symmetrical route, in which the audiences removal of their overcoats and the actors dressing and being made up are crucial phases. Walls act as cuts, which allow the spatial organization to be edited like film. In his proposed scheme for the Court Building in Groningen in 1992, walls, sky vault corridors and blocks function as cuts which ensure that the different flows of accused and remand prisoners, lawyers, prosecutors, judges and members of the public are kept separate. At the same time, Arets uses transparent walls to allow visual contact, on the assumption that transparency in the judicial system has a positive effect on society at large. Here the agreements which we make with one another in a society are embodied in the law. It is a form of transparency which corresponds to the overall transparency of human behavior, as Michel Foucault has described.

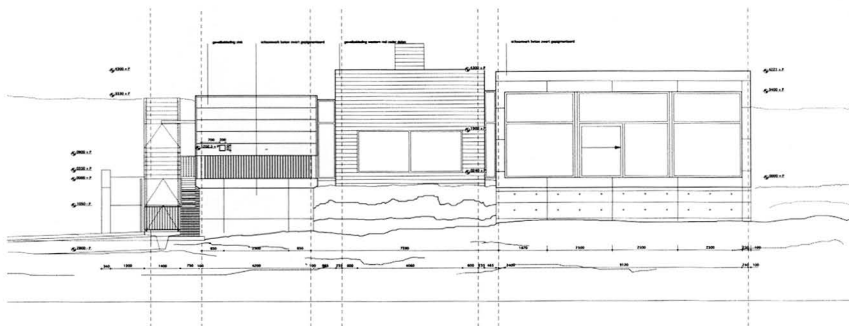
The demand for a similar greater degree of openness also underpinned the design for the police station from the start. However, transparency was much more problematic than it was with the court



Southwest Elevation



Longitudinal Section



Northeast Elevation

building in view of the essential role of the police. In *Surveiller et punir*, Michel Foucault describes the police as an apparatus that must reflect society as a whole, not only because it deals with social extremes, but also because of the need to go into every single detail of peoples lives. The police have to keep their eye on everything. The police are like an invisible eye which has made the whole of society its field of observation: thousands of eyes which are stationed everywhere, mobile and continuously attentive, leading to the central headquarters through a hierarchic network. A series of continuous observations which are recorded and kept in an endless flow of reports and records—all withheld from the general public. The quality of Wiel Arets' police station lies in the fact that transparency is not just symbolically expressed as something which is simply open, beautiful and democratic. The insight which the building offers the public into the way the police operate does not just relate to the easy-going approach of the community police officer and the customer-friendly approach of the people on reception; it also concerns the less pleasant aspects such as arrests and the maintenance of public order with a certain level of force. As a whole, the building has been designed as a building that looks at itself rather than being looked at. In particular, the part of the building where the most important aspects of police work take place, including the squad room with its large window, leaves us in no doubt as to who is looking at who.

Photographs courtesy Kim Zwarts.