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(Article begins on next page)



Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld. Visions of a new Amsterdam

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representation | space | memory | vision

ABSTRACT

The early decades of the twentieth century represented a period of particular turmoil for the Netherlands as the country underwent a cultural transition that culminated in the search for a new social order to counteract the chaos generated by the Great War. The Dutch art world, which had always felt the need to play a role in society, now felt a pressing urge for renewal representative of the new community ideal. Wijdeveld contributed to this search through written pieces published in the magazine Wendingen. His support for a new social order first manifested itself in the idealistic design of the People's Theatre to be built in the Vondelpark in Amsterdam, then in the visionary design concerning the expansion of the city of Amsterdam. Wijdeveld's proposal for the People's Theatre was initially conceived in 1919. The monumental theatre is located inside the Vondelpark in Amsterdam up against the city's seventeenth-century perimeter walls. All around it lie the symbols of the country's artistic culture: the Rijksmuseum, the Concertgebouw and the Stedelijk Museum. The drawings published in Wendingen magazine on the 9th and 10th of September-October 1919 highlight the urban value of the project. A major road axis, a veritable urban boulevard dotted with tower buildings, crosses the historic Vondelpark. Starting from the ramparts, the boulevard constitutes a perspective axis at the end of which stands the monumental People's Theatre. The size of the public building reveals its representative value in accordance with a compositional tradition that harks back to the conception of the classical city. In the drawings, the Vondelpark appears to be overshadowed, with its presence negated. A modern route replaced the idea of the romantic park crossed by winding streets and symbolises trust in progress and the idea of urban and social order. This project prefaced the study of a contemporary and monumental expansion plan that involved the development of Amsterdam along radial roads that set out from the heart of the historical city towards rural land. These routes were dotted with a series of tower buildings that represented the idea of a city open to nature, following a development method that contrasted with the settlement rules of the historical city.

Introduction

The visionary expansion plan for the city of Amsterdam proposed by Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld in 1920 represents a break from the consolidated way of thinking about the construction of the city on Dutch territory. The Dutch idea of the architecture and planning methods of a city until the Wijdeveld plan were advanced by the Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage according to the principles of settlement found in the traditional historic city as expressed in the Amsterdam South expansion plan. The Amsterdam South plan preceded the Wijdeveld plan by only five years and in fact referred to a way of thinking of the millennial city as the historic city which includes the classical, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, and baroque city, continuing up to the nineteenth century, measuring the construction of urban spaces according to the well-known principles of the walled city (closed city).

Urban development viewed according to the principles of settlement of the historic city has never been doubted in Holland even when the late Nineteenth century urban planner Gerhardus van Niftrik presented the municipal city council with an audacious expansion plan to go beyond the seventeenth century walls. The plan announced *ante litteram* the idea of urban development according to the principles of the open city and provided for the development of a wide green belt with public parks, various connecting and cross-city axes, similar to the geometric plan of French parks of the time like the gardens at Versailles and the Parisian boulevards built by Baron Haussman.

Thought out as a scenic background to a rich middle-class neighbourhood, the very pretentious *Plan tot uitbreiding van Amsterdam* by the municipal city council recognised the improbability of its development not only because of the inevitable compulsory purchase orders, demolition of houses, and re-parcelling out of the land during the redevelopment, which would have been difficult to put into practice using the instruments available to the City Council, but also because this is an idea of the city to which the community in Amsterdam does not relate to or feel it belongs.

This model leads to the development of a new urban form very closely related to a city of nature. Urban blocks of houses are no longer recognisable as a fundamental part of the city, and the transport network is no longer the system generating the urban layout. In contrast, the urban layout is defined by the extremely close relationship with the surrounding nature established by the urban facts. Although this model is hardly rooted in the collective memory, it is very advanced compared to the expectations of Dutch society even though research for this model was already present in the contemporary planning culture (Physiocracies, garden city) that developed with the advent of the Industrial Revolution¹.

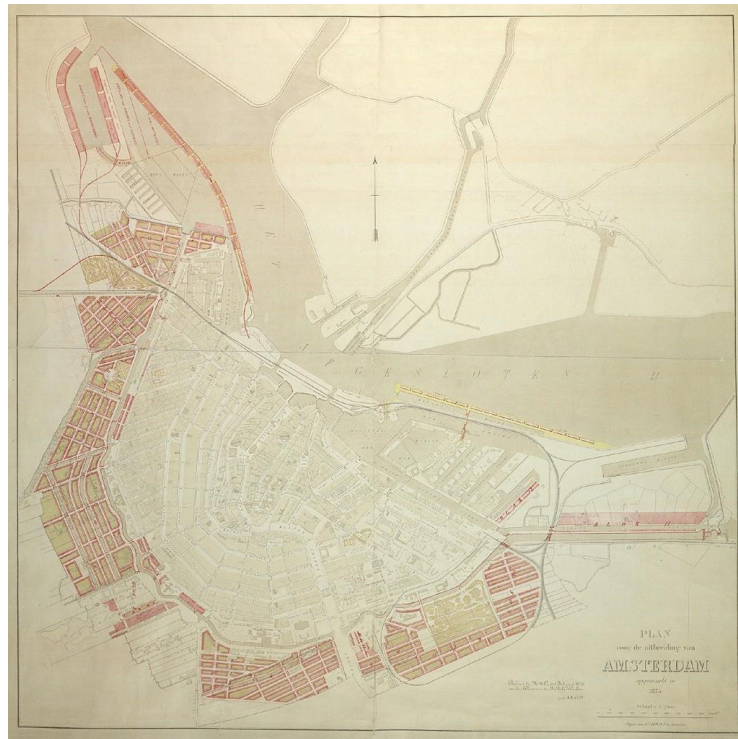
An alternative to the model of van Niftrik is the Jan Kalff model of the walled city of a decade later which met the expectations of the municipal city council as its formal validity was preferred and adopted in the planning of other parts of Amsterdam during the decades that followed, demonstrating a strong propensity to develop in harmony and continuity with the character and history of the country. It is significant that the model of the walled city is re-proposed once again by the father of Nineteenth century Dutch architecture Hendrik Petrus Berlage in the Amsterdam South expansion plan. The exemplary urban project proposed by Jan Kalff, which recognised the model of the walled city for the urban belt around the wall, was accepted by the municipal city council in 1876, and was perhaps still enduring in and preferred by Dutch urban planning culture in the early Twentieth century².

The Dutch seem to have kept to this model by Berlage until the new generation of the school of Amsterdam architects introduced the idea of identifying a new urban order representing the socio-political changes occurring at the time. The idea of a new social order as a result of the Russian Revolution inspired the renewal of the city in a new formal order.



Fig. 1

Gerhardus van Niftrik, Plan tot uitbreiding van Amsterdam, 1866. and expansion plan for the belt around the seventeenth century wall by Jan Kalff, 1876.



Post-war artistic ideals and community values

The hopes and aspirations promised by the Russian Revolution echoed through Holland and fed the enthusiasm of the new generations of intellectuals and artists, who were convinced that they were on the brink of a new world, a new universal brotherhood between peoples³, united in a new belief and a new art.

The new social and political climate of new social democracies in Europe such as those in Hungary and Germany, the emergence of new artistic movements such as Dadaism, constructivism, and expressionism were signs of the coming of a new society and with it new international art extending beyond national boundaries.

The main figures in Dutch political and artistic cultural life subscribed to this movement. The same Wijdeveld prophesied the advent of a new society and international art through *Wendingen*, a new magazine of which Wijdeveld was chief editor. The *Wendingen* group followed events in Russia with great interest and news from abroad fed their hopes for a new world in the sense of a total revolution including the field of art.

This point of view of the new art is set out from the first issues of the magazine by reviewing projects that emphasise the visions of School of Amsterdam. The enthusiasm of Wijdeveld for these projects is manifested in the introduction to the first issue of the magazine, “Here, together with architecture, in its new conception of pure construction, the full splendour of the apparition of men filled with Fantasy manifests itself, men who innocently play with the treasures of rationalism. Here an atmosphere that transforms the rigid mass of the walls into a ductile flexible plastic can be found, full of movement, which joyously follows the rhythm of the spatial development”⁴.

The People’s Theatre and the Amsterdam expansion plan as symbols of a new social order

The idea of a new social order took symbolic shape in the People’s Theatre. Wijdeveld started developing his proposal for the People’s Theatre in 1919. The monumental open-air theatre was situated inside the Vondelpark in Amsterdam in the shadow of the seventeenth century perimeter city walls and very close to the area of museums holding the symbols of Dutch artistic culture: the Rijksmuseum, the Concertgebouw, and the Stedelijk Museum.

Roland Holst wrote that the People’s Theatre by Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld represented the place where a new social life developed among the people, a social life of communism, and with it high hopes for a new social art. The word fertilisation used by Dutch intellectuals was not used by chance but arose out of the imposing façade designed by Wijdeveld whose form directly and ingeniously recalled the nude and crude figure of the female organ with a realism that had a precedent in, or at least evoked, the representation in the painting *The origin of the world* by Gustave Courbet. The wide façade, framed from a monumental frontal angle, is certainly the place of fertilisation that “opens and its high doors”⁵ gathering and welcoming the mass of people, designed as if they are small seeds that aspire to reach the inside of the theatre space, a real and true maternal womb, as announced by the organic form of the plan/ layout inside which the birth and representation of a new spiritual life is profiled. It is a sacred place inside which the birth rite is consummated since, as Roland Holst says, the People’s Theatre represents “the place where the people’s holidays are celebrated, stronger than the power of the church”.

So in the words of Roland Holst it seems to confirm that the People’s Theatre is above all an image, the statement of a new social and spiritual order, the representation of the hopes and expectations of many made real, including those of Wijdeveld. The designs published in *Wendingen* magazines issues 9 and 10 of September-October 1919 highlight the urban value of the project. A great road axis, a real and true urban Boulevard which is dotted with buildings composed of towers, passing through the historic Vondelpark. Starting from the fortified walls the boulevard forms an axis in the spatial layout at the end of which is the monumental People’s Theatre showing all of its representative value according to

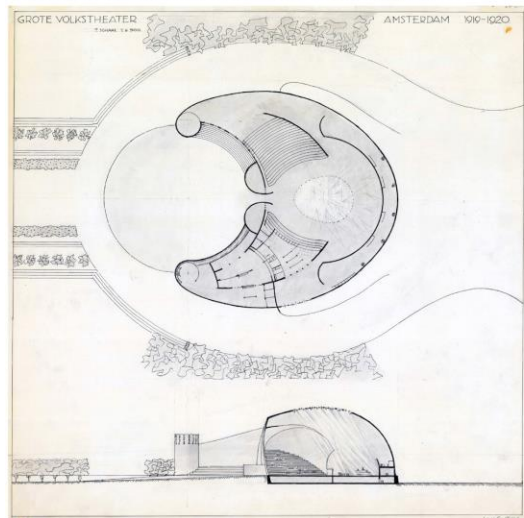
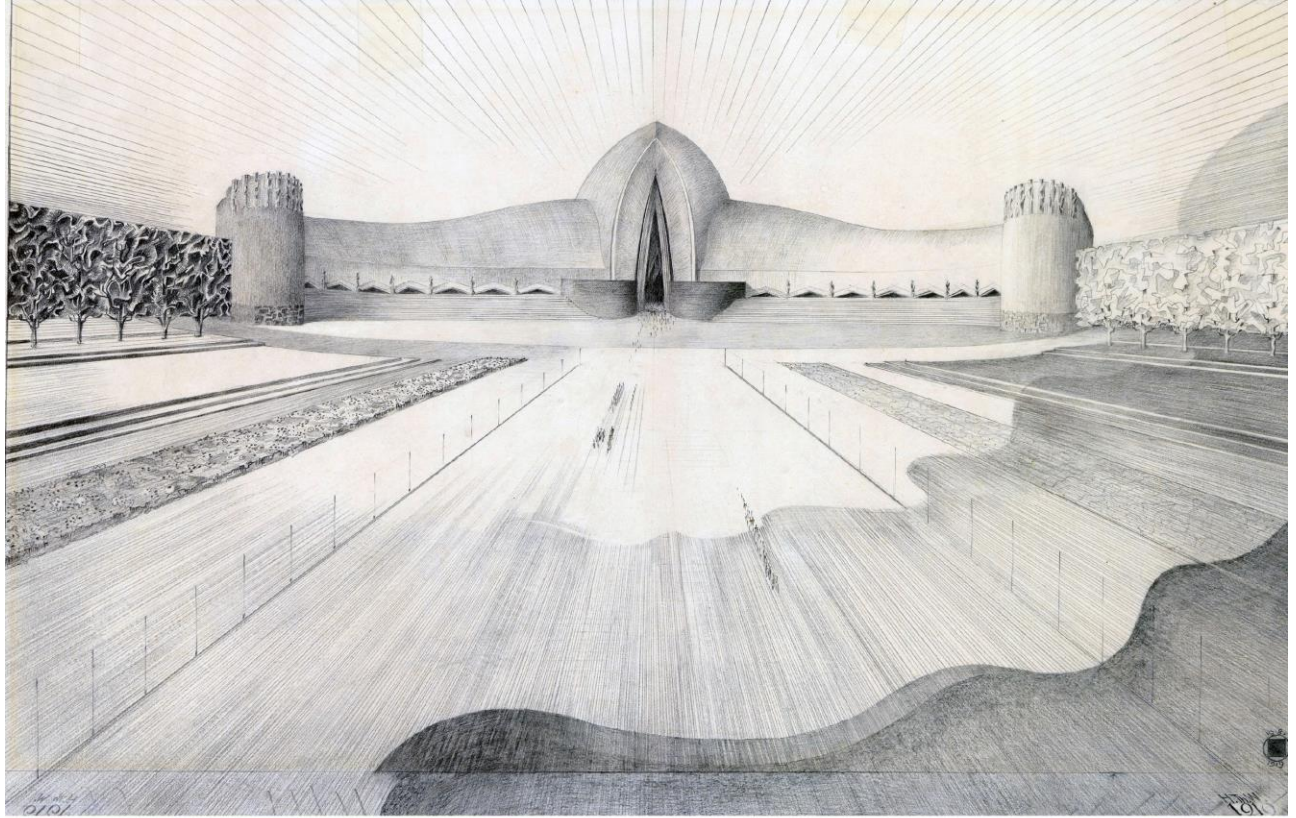


Fig. 2

*Hendricus
Theodorus
Wijdeveld,
Prospective study
of the People's
Theatre (above),
Study of the plan
(below left),
Prospective study
of the inside (on
the right), 1919.*

a compositional tradition whose references lie in the design of the classical city. The Vondelpark appears to be obscured in the designs, its presence deleted. The idea of a romantic park crossed by sinuous paths and lanes is substituted by a modern axis that represents trust in progress and the idea of a new social and urban order. “Let us remember that romanticism about narrow paths and lanes is no more, and life now has different needs for movement of people. We realise that naturalism in the park system of today no longer conforms to modern concepts (...). Only now do large public parks meet the needs established through time offered in daily life and to move people along their wide roads, the beauty of their flowers and trees, their monuments and fountains, and the sight of their great buildings.”⁶ The People’s Theatre reveals its dramatic presence inside this large-scale urban layout at the end of the view provided by the axis. The initial designs, which were drafts not as yet conditioned by the building problem, were liberated in an organic form by proposing an unprecedented formal solution for its layout, which was also raised above ground level, that had nothing to do with typological solutions for a traditional theatre. On the contrary, the geometric rigidity imposed by the form professed by the rationalism of Berlage is overcome by the curved line that probably draws a maternal womb, the true figurative matrix that informs the theatre layout plan. Therefore, it is a place where the future is born out of the chaos of a new order.

The primitive appearance of the inside of the theatre auditorium has nothing appollonian about it. As if in a scene painted by Rembrandt, light and shade meet and collide with each other in a primordial dionysian dance from which the show about life originates, the genesis of a new social order in which the mass of the population takes part and this theatre is not only a spectator but also a major player.

The People’s Theatre represents the birth of a new social order and Wijdeveld aimed to give form to this new social order, as he also proposed in his visionary contemporary plan of 1920 to govern the chaotic growth of the city of Amsterdam in the future for which an exponential increase in population was expected. Indeed, the boulevard that crossed the Vondelpark is the beginning of a new formal order. It seems to be so timid compared to the wide concentric radial avenues that radiate from the ring of the fortified wall towards the outside of the historic city. Buildings composed of towers along the axes state the image of the future metropolis immersed in greenery according to a conception that, as Fanelli says, goes back to the ideal of the green city supported by Goethe and Nietzsche.

Furthermore, chaos and order is a classic plan by Wijdeveld whose perfect geometric regularity inserts itself into a traditional utopia of the ideal city, a concept that can be traced back to the Renaissance and up to the *World Capital* of De Bazel of 1905 and the *Pantheon of Mankind* of Berlage in 1916. The city grows and expands chaotically and shapelessly, defining the distance between the city and the natural world increasingly substitutes the order provided by the radiating concentric axes to integrate the built environment with the natural, preserving the historic city of Amsterdam as a real and true monument in the ideal centre.

Fig. 3

Hendricus
Theodorus
Wijdeveld,
*Planimetry of the
People's Theatre*
(left), Definitive
view of the
theatre (above
left), Definitive
view of the inside
(right), 1919.

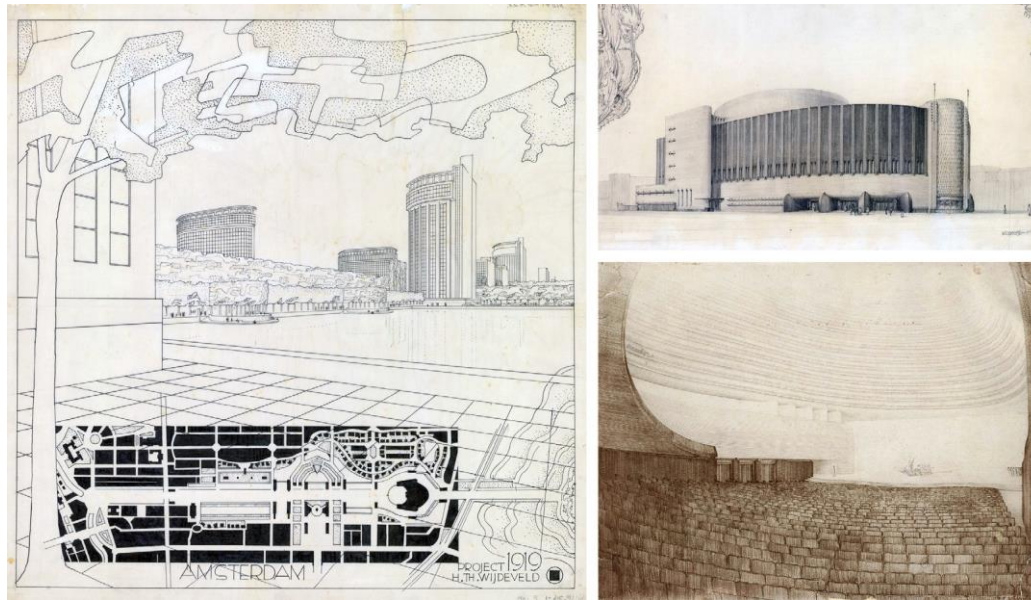
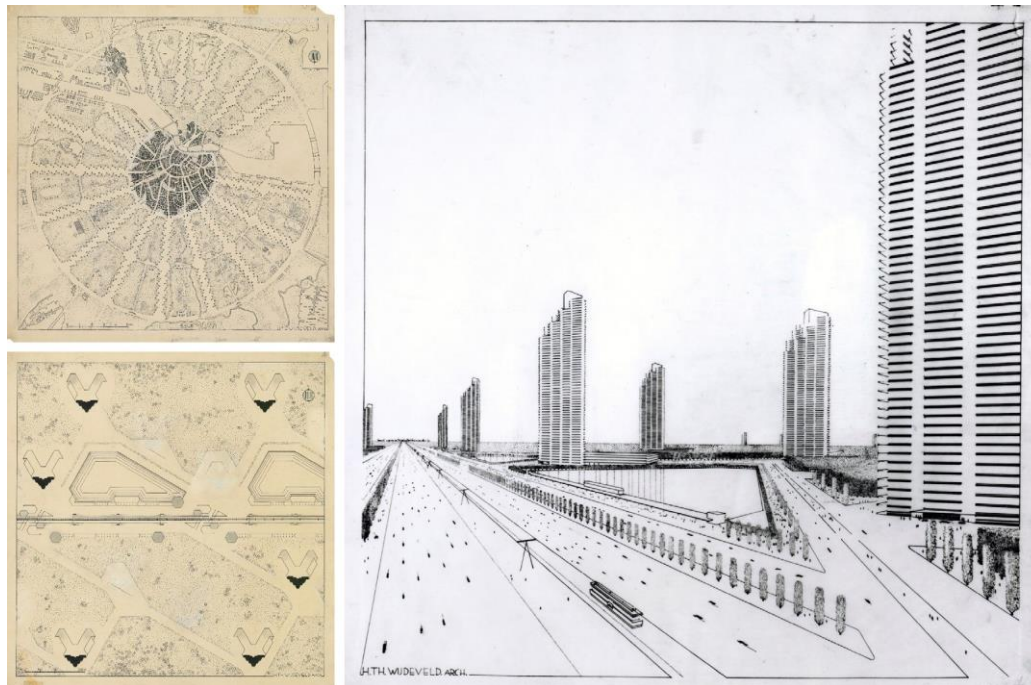


Fig. 4

Hendricus
Theodorus
Wijdeveld, *Chaos
and Order,*
*Expansion plan
for Amsterdam,*
Planimetry
(above left),
*Detailed
planimetry*
(above left), *View*
(right), 1920.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ The idea of the garden city became widely diffused in Holland from the start of the Twentieth century. Among the many developments are the garden neighbourhoods (Tuindorp) of 't Lansink in Hengelo by K. Muller, Philips in Eindhoven by De Bazel, and Boschdrif in Hilversum by Dudok. Exemplary is the garden neighbourhood of Vreewijk in Rotterdam by Granpré Molière.
- ² The model of the walled city is the result of a process of construction of the urban layout that passes through the recognition of the invariant constitutive elements of the reasons for the founding of the city: the transport network and the building typology (blocks of houses) assembled in an organic, living whole. In fact, there is a very close reciprocal relationship between the built fabric (blocks of houses) and the arrangement of the transport network routes (plan) and this remains an exclusive face in the walled city (classical, medieval, renaissance) in a unified whole that is not only the result imposed by a regulatory system governing the functional value or the outcome of a composition that considers the practical aspects of real life, but the method of building the spatial structure of the city where the aesthetic value and the project of the city as a place of representation and custodian of the values of community is fully exalted.
- ³ Hendrik Petrus Berlage, the father of Dutch architecture, was a great supporter of the socialist ideals he believed in as seen in the Pantheon of Mankind project, monumental building committed to the cause of pacifism and the international, presented on the occasion of the exhibition organised at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam by the Association of the Friends of Architecture in 1915. The political commitment of Berlage to community ideals initially found expression in membership of the League of revolutionary socialist intellectuals in Amsterdam (1919) and then in the meeting of the social democratic left. The project for the mausoleum of Lenin celebrates his belief in the principles of the Russian Revolution.
- ⁴ Hendricus Theodorus Wijdeveld in Fanelli, 1968, p. 81.
- ⁵ See the writings of Roland Holst in *Wendingen*, September-October 1919.
- ⁶ Roland Holst in *Wendingen* 9-10, September-October 1919.

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