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Jaap Bakema and the open society

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A man with a mission

Building social relations

Growth and change
In many ways the work and ideas of Jaap Bakema epitomize the best of the architecture of the post-war Dutch welfare state: it is utterly unapologetic about its modernity as well as its drive to be universal and egalitarian. Bakema firmly positioned his office and its production at the heart of the Dutch welfare state. Not only did he, together with his office partner Jo van den Broek, succeed in developing a systemized approach towards housing and planning, integrated design, construction, and advanced typological research, he also presented the construction of the Dutch welfare state as the political process of decision-making. The monumental schemes for complete new towns and for regional planning are demonstrations of an unrelenting determination to overcome the economic misery of the pre-war era and the utter chaos of the Second World War by way of a combination of positivist rationalism and the logic of efficient production employed for the benefit of all.

The gigantic city extension and regional planning projects in particular testify to an ambition that entailed nothing less than a reconceptualization of the Dutch landscape and the national identity. Architecture and planning should and would help bring about a socially just redistribution of wealth and access to power, knowledge and culture. At the same time, Bakema’s work could not escape the paradoxes of a late-capitalist economy. A perfect logic of efficient production employed for the benefit of all. Bakema’s conviction: that architecture and planning should accommodate individual needs and social dynamics and would help bring about a socially just redistribution of wealth and access to power, knowledge and culture. At the same time, Bakema’s work could not escape the paradoxes of a late-capitalist economy. A perfect logic of efficient production employed for the benefit of all.

At the heart of Bakema’s beliefs and runs like a continuous thread through his career is a self-proclaimed ‘social architect’. In the same manner as Wright, Bakema believed that the architect should and could be the agent of change. The role of the architect is to help bring about a socially just redistribution of wealth and access to power, knowledge and culture. At the same time, Bakema’s work could not escape the paradoxes of a late-capitalist economy. A perfect logic of efficient production employed for the benefit of all.

Bakema’s ideas concerning democracy and architecture stemmed from quite a different background, even though he concluded, in a similar vein to Wright, that architecture and planning should accommodate individual needs and social dynamics and would help bring about a socially just redistribution of wealth and access to power, knowledge and culture. At the same time, Bakema’s work could not escape the paradoxes of a late-capitalist economy.

Architecture and democracy – contestations in and of the open society

War and liberation

It was around the moment of the liberation in May 1945 that Bakema started to argue explicitly for connecting architecture with the cause of democracy. Interestingly enough, he did so first outside the immediate architectural debates. Bakema joined the editorial board of the Dutch Resistance periodical De Vrije Kunstenaar (The Free Artist) to produce a special Groningen edition. Around the same time, he also joined the board of the Comité voor Actieve Democratie (Committee for Active Democracy), which campaigned for general elections in the confined period immediately after the war. The left-wing and progressive character of the committee was also evidenced by its uncommonly frank plea for a democratic solution to the crisis in the Dutch East Indies where a war of independence had broken out. As well as testifying to Bakema’s active involvement in political campaigning for the reinstatement of democracy, these activities also reveal Bakema’s association with the informal networks of the Dutch Resistance: so-called Engelandvaarders, connections that would also work to advance his future career. After Liberation many members of this network remained politically active in pursuit of their ideals; Bakema, too, stated that while war was over, the battle for ‘real freedom’ continued, a battle against the system of bureaucracy that according to him had been complicit in the emergence of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s.

The details of Bakema’s involvement in these networks cannot be fully retraced since much of the history of the Resistance is unknown precisely because its work was carried out in secrecy. Two stories from the Bakema family history serve at least to illustrate the affinity of both Jaap and Sia Bakema with these circles. The first concerns Bakema’s attempts to flee to Great Britain and his successive, temporary imprisonment when this action failed; the second is Sia’s concealment of Jewish refugees during the occupation. At that time, the Bakema family lived in Rotterdam in the Bergsolderflat, a modernist gallery-access apartment slab designed by Willem van Tijen together with the office of Brinkman and Van der Vlugt, hardly a secure kind of wartime hiding-place. Yet Sia temporarily took in two girls and a violinplayer, who were in transit to a safer place.

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

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

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

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

**Post-war CIAM 1947–1959**

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

Explicitly political statements were not appreciated in CIAM. Eric Mumford has pointed out how CIAM transformed itself in 1934 into an organization of specialists in response to tensions within CIAM itself, among others between André Lurçat and Le Corbusier. Lurçat favoured a communist revolutionary approach to advance the cause of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, while simultaneously Le Corbusier’s humanism in Aix-en-Provence (1935) and Alcoa (1936) provided a support for a governing “Authority” to implement his planning ideals as reactionary and (too) close to fascism. To avoid an internal split over such ideological matters, it was decided that “no political declarations should be made in the name of CIAM”.

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

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

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

At Hoddesdon, witness the official proceedings of the conference, The Heart of the City, the topic of democracy was raised only very occasionally. The then president of CIAM, Josep Lluís Sert preferred to talk about public spaces in the rather apolitical terms of community life and civic values. It was his view that the architect could only help to realize the “frame or container within which this community life could take place”, but that the end was entirely dependent on the specific “political, social and economic structure of every community”. Only once did Sert refer to democracy, stating that a “free and democratic exchange of ideas leads towards the government of the majority” was preferable to “the rule of the few”, and that civic centers might help in “consolidating” such majority governments.

Sigfried Giedion addressed the topic of democracy more explicitly, albeit in terms of the historical examples of the Greek agora and Roman forum as public spaces for the “formation of public opinion”. Apparently, he was expressing a consensus opinion when he stated that “a city is the expression of a diversity of social relationships which have become fused into a single organism”. Yet in the final summary of the conference there is no mention of political or specific democratic concerns in relation to architecture and city planning.

As has been well documented in the case of Bakema and the Dutch post-war architecture and planning ideal, the socio-political ideals of universal inclusion and diversity were translated almost literally into specific spatial and typological configurations that were a reflection of the population, or at least a planner’s categorization of the various household and income types. At the lower level of the CIAM congress in Otterlo in 1959, organized by Bakema himself, he presented a full-blown regional planning scheme for the urbanization of Kennemerland, a coastal region centered on the city of Alkmaar, 30 kilometres north of Amsterdam. This time, the project was not developed within the Opbouw group, but by his own office, and in particular by Jan Stokla, who was responsible for many of the groundbreaking housing projects of the Van den Broek and Bakema firm.30 Collages of the landscape behind the dunes illustrate how he visually and plastically envisaged the reconceptualization of the Dutch landscape and identity: a vast expansion of the flat, horizontal, man-made polderscape, interspersed with a synecology of elementary verticals that denote the rhythm of the series of ‘village groups’, which comprised a microcosm of typologies to accommodate households from all walks of life.31

In Otterlo, Bakema also felt free to once again connect his ideas of democracy with architecture and planning. Perhaps this was now possible due to the absence of the older CIAM members, who had abandoned the concept of national representation as a basis for its organization, and all national groups had been dismantled by the time CIAM convened for the last time in Otterlo. CIAM members now spoke as individuals, not as national representatives. This reconnection between politics and architecture was also evidenced by the presence of the Dutch State Secretary for the Arts, Mr. van der Lind, who spoke at the opening of the conference about the various responsibilities of the architect as a technician, and the conference in Hoddesdon in 1951, he presented the
Architecture, Art and Didactics

Opening Modernism. On Open Form, Oskar Hansen: sources, including dossiers from American ed’s. ‘Open Form Against a Cold War Background’, in: Joan Ockman, ‘Oskar Hansen’s Radical Humanism: St. Louis: Washington University, 1964; a signed state, see my dissertation, chapter 6 ‘The Great Smithsons did not mention Popper or his 1945 book, Karl Popper’s ideas remains unclear though; the text as published was written after the Otterlo conference although he didn’t present his as a source.

Politecnica di Milano

Drives’, TU Delft 2013, available at: https://repository.tudelft.nl

1 January 1960, Bakema archive, collection B.P.H.

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issue related to the modernization of the city, its public spaces and infrastructure. At Washington University, for example, the design project concerned ‘The Humane Core. A Civic Center for St. Louis,’ at Harvard ‘City Gate Boston’ in relation to a competition for Copley Square, and in Barcelona a study of the area of the old Santa Caterina market. Additional teaching posts included a professorship at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague and prisoner of war.  

The archives of the Van den Broek and Bakema archive codes BAKE_d34-1 to 16. The book Van stoel tot stad was organized in honour of the Prix de la Critique, which had been awarded to Van den Broek and Bakema. The jury report singled out Jaap Bakema’s contribution as representative of the “Otterlo group or Team Ten.” It praised Bakema and the office for their achievements in modern architecture, for the way they had managed to strike a balance between the “emphasis on human relations” on the one hand and the “possibility for personal freedom and ‘intimacy’” on the other. Touching on the issue of authorship, the jury apparently felt compelled to explain why the Prix de la Critique had been awarded to the office rather than to Bakema as an individual. The report commented that Bakema’s activities could not be uncoupled from the office, while also stating that by awarding the prize to the office the jury aimed to honour the “complete development of modern architecture: the pre-war activities of Prof. Van den Broek, the participation in Ospelwijk hence in De 8, the participation in the planning of Nagele, etc…a line from the beginnings of Dutch functionalism to the latest tendencies.” The jury report concluded by stating that the work was a major contribution to and a reflection of a “functional, human and democratic art of building.”

The third occasion on which Bakema deployed the term open society in the Dutch context was at Expo ’70 in Osaka, for which Bakema designed the Dutch pavilion together with Carel Weeber. However, the years around 1970 represent the critical evaluation and contestation of the open society paradigm, as its main topic. Bakema used the term in the famous Van stoel tot stad (From Chair to City) lectures, initially presented on Dutch national television in 1961-63 and subsequently published in book form in 1964. One of the main rhetorical questions posed by Bakema reads: “What will the architecture of an open society be?” The answer immediately followed:

“So, at least such that the forms we build, will make clear that every individual has a right to a declaration of life that suits him.” This statement is accompanied by a sketch of the shopping centre and public spaces in the village of Bergen, next to which he had scribbled: “a multiplicity of things, big and small, each one of which can be visible.”

The term ‘declaration of life’ (‘levensverklaring’ in the original Dutch text) might seem odd, but it needs to be understood in the context of a Dutch society that was still largely religious and divided according to conviction or creed into ‘pillars’ representing the various Protestant and Catholic denominations as well as non-religious socialist and humanist groupings. For Bakema the aim was to go beyond this ‘pillarianization’ of society, to move indeed towards an open society of diversity and inclusiveness. The aforementioned 1951 idea of the ‘core’ is crucial here, for in the core of a city or society the diverse pillars were brought together in a new relationship. This idea of a diverse core was best demonstrated in the village of Nagele, developed iteratively and literally loads used by the jury for the Prix de la Critique for the Dutch CIAM architects that included Rietveld, Van Eesteren, Van Eyck and also Bakema himself. The central village green was planned to accommodate the churches and schools of the various religious denominations as well as a public school plus a few commercial functions. In this way, the Nagele village green embodied the pillarized society of the Netherlands, where each denomination and political grouping had its own separate institutions, while at the same time bringing these ‘pillars’ or communities together in a new spatial condition, or ‘core’. Nagele is included in Van stoel tot stad in the form of a couple of sketches and photos of the village layout and the church designed by Bakema. Captions explain the spatial relations of the community of the church and the village in terms of transitional elements. Although subtilted “a story about people and space”, the recurrent motif in Van stoel tot stad is the question of how to bring people and things together in a modern, industrialized society. Propositions addressing these existential conditions and architectural possibilities are almost diagrammatically, in the suggestion to think of modern housing types in relation to tree heights: below, level with and above the trees. From the smallest scale to megastructure-like projects, it is about creating a new coherence in terms of relations, about how a building can also be a public space, and a staircase a place to meet. 

The answer immediately followed: “What will the architecture of an open society be?” The main topic was coherence in terms of relations, about how a building can also be a public space, and a staircase a place to meet. Bakema used the term “open society” as its main topic. In the Dutch debates, the topic of the open society seemed to have been of less importance to Bakema, although there are at least three major occasions on which he deployed the architectural critic, but also as the celebrated De Stijl art historian, but also as an influential Dutch cultural critic.”

Total number of paragraphs: 64

The understanding of an open society as a society based on a Open Economy rather than a socialist regime of the working classes had already been foreshadowed by the 1962 exhibition Bouwen voor een open samenleving (Building for an Open Society) at the Boymans-van Beuningen museum. The exhibition was designed as a step-wise progression from the initial establishment of the office by Michiel Brinkman in 1913, through successive partnerships, first with his son Johannes Brinkman and then Johannes van der Vlugt, and then Johannes (or Jo) van den Broek and eventually, in 1948 with Bakema. The various partnerships were represented by a selection of groundbreaking projects that became hallmarks of the history of Dutch modernism. The selection started with the projects for housing the working class and an enlightened industrial nation: the Spanjen housing block and the Van Nelle factory. The exhibition concluded with several projects representative of a future post-industrial, service industry-led knowledge economy, with various scale models of projects prominently on display, in particular those for the Euromast tower in Rotterdam, the head office for the national postal cheque and transfer service based in Arnhem, the equally massive office building for the De Nederlanden van 1845 insurance company in The Hague and, finally, the model for the sculptural concrete Auditorium building for Delft University of Technology.

In his Osaka statement Bakema also listed the ‘results’ of the Dutch open society and its integrated knowledge economy. They basically boiled down to the conditions of global, intercontinental communication and trade, such as the expansion of Rotterdam’s port (into Europort); and of Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, alongside large-scale infrastructural works like the Deltaworks. Also included here was the ‘internationalization’ of KLM, Philips and Unilever, as well as Fokker courtesy of its new Fellowship aeroplane.

Here, Bakema’s position and his idea of an open society seemed to converge with that of modern national interest and establishment, or at least he did not draw any clear distinction between them.

Bakema touched on the issue of democracy by describing a general attitude rather than a concrete political programme. Notes on page three combine pragmatism with ‘education’, ‘science’ and ‘art’. In Dutch he added the word mammoet, the nickname for a new and comprehensive education act introduced in 1963 and implemented in 1968, which was aimed at modernizing the national educational system and simultaneously maximizing access to and participation in higher education. Here, in 1968 Bakema also defined the open society to translate these knowledge economy, rather than the collectivist regime controlling economic production, which was his earlier position during the 1940s and ’50s.

It is not difficult to understand why Bakema rejected the form and function of the welfare state as a model for an open society. The welfare state was once seen as an answer to the social unrest and the anxieties that accompanied the ‘modern’ nation state. But the social unrest of the 1960s was not a result of the welfare state. It was a result, Bakema argued, of the modern nation state itself. The open society was a model for a society that was not bounded by the national state, but instead was a network of global social groups. This network was characterized by openness, pragmatism and rationalism. At the same time, this was characteristically the way the new lef—leaning Dutch cultural elite, to which Bakema clearly belonged, embraced modernity and the counterculture.

Yet the fact that Bakema felt it necessary to co-opt the anti-authoritarian Provo movement in his 1970 definition of the open society was also an indication that the earlier openness of democracy, democracy and tolerance were highly controversial. In other words, the criticism that would take a very different turn from that envisaged by Bakema. At this point, Bakema and his Team 10 and Dutch Forum allies were more or less caught between the limitations of the post-war welfare state system and the social unrest of the late 1960s, including the new youth and protest culture. On the one hand they had become representatives of the new liberal mind; on the other hand they had responded critically to its shortcomings and institutions. In the Team 10 debates one can observe an awkward appreciation of the bureaucratic and paternalistic state apparatus that made decisions on behalf of the individual all in order to secure an efficient redistribution system. For instance, in the new preface to the reissued Team 10 Primer from 1968, all the Team 10 members loudly bemoaned the state of affairs, while nevertheless accepting the necessity to build under the conditions of the welfare state.

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

Bakema’s shifting ideas on what an open society could be were also challenged within his own circle of architect friends, however. Famously so in the case of his promotion of the concept of the visual group in CIAM and Team 10. The Smithsons in particular contested the liberal translation of social groupings into three-dimensional schemes as proposed by Bakema. Instead, they proposed something they called the ‘apricot unit’, which remained rather abstract since they refused to give it a well-defined architectural shape or configuration. The Smithsons contended that “social groups are not created by location alone but by community of interest and physical and psychological interdependence. The family can still be tight-knit and possessive when its members are thousands of miles away. Yet the ‘problem of distance’ will still need the ‘uther development’ of a ‘cloistered family’ can be said to be a response to the openness of many districts and classes of a town; and the ‘assessment group’ of the intellectual or artist may be international and non-colonial, yet with more in common than with many neighbours.” Another early and well-known moment of friction is the so-called Hispano-Suiza affair in 1953, when Aldo van Eyck publicly criticized Bakema and his office for accepting the commission for an arms factory in Breda.

Joop Hardy adopted a decidedly ideological position as well, when he denounced the idea of an open society altogether.
in 1964. Speaking about the post-1945 avant-garde, Hardy claimed it was the opposite of an open society. It consisted of ‘almost closed communities juxtaposed to an ‘open society’ which absorbs everything that submits, adapts, socializes.” Speaking of the arts, Hardy also posited that the “open museum that admits every manifestation, attracts every event and, in doing so, neutralizes, invalidates [the avant-garde].”

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

Bakema seemed to embrace the competition and the challenging of his propositions. To him, contestation and critique were part of the discursive game, completely in line with a Popperian understanding of what an open society stands for. A comparison of the design production of those years reveals quite a few parallels. Bakema’s diagram of future urbanization and the interweaving of public and private functions, for example, is reminiscent of Constant’s project. Both men assumed that land should be fully collectivized in order to maximize modernization and freedom, a socialist ideal that was shattered in 1977 when the centre-left coalition government led by the social-democrat Joop den Uyl foundered on a new law that would nationalize agriculture for the many scale models, reproductions, slide shows and other visualizations. The first room immersed visitors in a 1:20 model that occupied the whole space. It showed the complex spatial elaboration of the heart of the plan. A second room gave insight into the principles of the plan with more models, photos and drawings of a multi-level city, a third room contained a classic overview model of the plan as proposed by the city, and a fourth room offered variations on the basic plan, with more explanations as to the overall planning principles, a slide show and a wall with newspaper clippings of the debates and various opinions. There was also a model that could be used in discussions to test different alternatives. The last room was devoted to a selection of work from the Van den Broek and Bakema office as an illustration of developments in modern architecture in the 1960s.

The accompanying catalogue included sheets for comments and even one page with an outline of the area in which citizens could draw their own alternative visions, a selection of which survive in the archive. As well as an extensive explanation by Bakema, the catalogue also contained several fiercely critical newspaper articles, including an alternative proposal from local architects. In addition, during the decision-making process a series of ‘teach-ins’ and ‘hearings’ was organized. Yet, the whole undertaking was undercut by the local city government. In the midst of the public information and participation campaign, the proposal was approved by the city council on 23 June 1969 by a majority of 29 votes in favour and 7 against. The very flexibility of the scheme was one of the reasons why the city government received support from the elected council members, and why they still felt a participation process of citizens was useful. But the decision immediately backfired, since it proved to the critics that the campaign was not wholly sincere as a democratic process.

Bakema, notes for Osaka, p. 2; BAKE d34-16.
85 Bakema, for Frank van Klingerent’s work see Armin van der Laan, Homicide (1972); see also Koos Booma, Dorine van Hengestum, Martijn Nuijs (eds.), Housing for the Millennials, John Habraken and the SAB, 1970-2010, Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2010.
87 Architecture documents mention an amount of over 100,000 guilders, i.e. 220,000 euros today today.
88 Archief van den Heuvel: architecture and democracy
Ultimately, however, the scheme was cancelled, not due to the citizens’ protests, but because of all sorts of new uncertainties caused by, among others, the oil crisis and a newly elected city council. In 1974, the minister for spatial planning decided that the proposal appeared to be unfeasible, precisely because it was too flexible, and hence its future development too unpredictable to receive his support, after which the whole scheme was abandoned.

Between Japan and the Netherlands

Why but did Bakema feel that the megastructure concept would fit his ideal of an open society? Especially given that some very successful housing districts were realized in parallel of the debates about the various large-scale projects such as Cityplan in Eindhoven and Pampus in Amsterdam. In Eindhoven, too, Bakema and his office designed a very popular scheme for an area just north of the inner city. Crucially, it was at the initiative of a few Philips engineers that the ‘Het Hool housing estate came into being.’ They wanted to build their own houses and established a foundation that succeeded in realizing the district together with the Van den Broek and Bakema office, housing associations and the city. The project started around 1961 and was eventually built between 1968 and 1972. It largely followed the concept of the visual group designed to accommodate a wide variety of housing types, including in terms of ownership.

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

From 1959 onwards, Bakema started to elaborate the idea in a more radical way under the influence of his exchanges with Tange and Maki, both of whom attended the Otterlo conference.90 Bakema’s teaching activities in the USA were also crucial in this respect, since they allowed him to continue the conversations with Fumihiko Maki in particular, at Washington University in St Louis where Bakema would teach as a visiting professor in 1959, and at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where Maki ran a ground breaking studio focused on urban design, which was also frequented by Bakema. Arguably, Tange’s Tokyo Bay project of 1960 influenced Bakema’s 1964-65 proposal for the Pampus city extension of Amsterdam. As well as publishing images of the project in Forum, in his sixth ‘Post Box for the development of the Habitat’ newsletter of 12 May 1961, Bakema described Tange’s plan for Tokyo as “the consequence of the idea of an open society”, in particular its ‘linear structure’.91 Other elements of the project he highlighted were the multi-level city, its circulation system, man-made platforms and land reclamation from the sea. In the context of the Eindhoven Cityplan two other remarks by Bakema stand out: the vertical cores as growing points for the new configuration made way for the production of a new kind of landscape approach that allowed room for change and negotiation during the realization process, and provided maximum flexibility without apparent hierarchy. In Taut and elsewhere, participation processes involving vocal action groups, environmentalists and concerned citizens, in combination with the demand to anticipate increasingly rapid changes in planning and politics, all under the watchful eyes of a highly critical media, resulted in an architectural design production that was very different from the heyday of the post-war welfare state.92

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

The formal language of Bakema’s designs of the 1940s and ‘50s, which synthesized notions from the De Stijl movement (continuous space, ascending dimensions), the obverse rationalism of Dutch functionalism, and proto-brutalist, ‘concrete’ realist architecture as exemplified by projects like his modest construction office in Rotterdam, the Hansaviertel tower block in Berlin, and the church in Nagele, made way for a range of ‘impromptu responses’ to the internal logic of the assignment in question, its context and concomitant realization process.102 That the office only expanded further with branch offices and project architects, even ‘democratized’ itself into a new organization as the ‘Architects’ Community Van den Broek and Bakema’, is also part of this history.103 Within the resulting diversity of projects one can detect families of projects, associated with the various project architects, local contexts and the types of assignments.

Yet perhaps this is the ‘open society’ par excellence, the collection of processes of a continuous critique and revision, which ultimately cannot be fully controlled from a singular centre as exemplified by the figure of an author-architect. Bakema himself might have referred here to his favourite Henri Bergson quote: “d’abord je constate que je passe d’état en état”.104 However, this quote should not be understood as a harmonious way of being in the world. That would imply a superficial glossing-over of the real socio-political differences and disruptions that are at stake, and which can only be resolved or overcome through contestation and critique. Even though one might criticize Bakema for not explicitly elaborating such a philosophical foundation and justly complain that all too often such references to a discourse outside architecture amounted to a bypassing of the actual political differences at stake, he himself was acutely aware of the political rifts that governed the architecture office, and of the changing atmosphere in schools of architecture.105

To be sure, Bakema himself never abandoned the project for an open society. It was in his view by definition unfinished. The concept of the megastructure or core-wall building must likewise have remained valid and realistic in his eyes, since in 1975 in the city of Tilburg a partial realization of the idea was eventually built as part of the inner-city Koningwei project, which included a parking garage, a public library and a housing slab. For Bakema, architecture and urban planning were perfect vehicles for creating the platforms – to use a contemporary term – needed for the accommodation of the kind of contestation and criticism that were part and parcel of the open society as an evolutionary process. Some of the key projects in Bakema’s oeuvre were also clearly intended to provoke debate and contestation, Pampus famously so, while others were intended to regulate and accommodate the future development of the built environment, almost as an urban game built on the reciprocities between the users’ patterns and the spatial and material configurations.

One underlying motif in Bakema’s work that seems to have driven it forward was one so crucial to understanding his notion of architecture in relation to that of the open society, was the way he integrated the landscape into all his planning. Maybe it is overlooked because Bakema – despite being an eloquent and prolific speaker and proselytizer – also understated many aspects of his thinking and his firm.47 Landscape was one such aspect, construction and technology two more. When Bakema’s work evolved from a clearly articulated, modernist vocabulary into a language based on process, landscape remained an important ingredient in the planning of the various projects. In the case of Tanthof, it even acquired a completely new role as the formative element of the plan, in terms for instance of the preservation of old polder structures and water management. The series of holiday resorts built for the Sporthuis Centrum company might also serve here as an example of landscaping as an integral part of the development of a language of emergent forms.

The concatenated clusters of bungalows were built for the comfort of the new middle classes and as such, left-wing critics criticized them for being too commercial, as an excess of consumer culture disrupting the natural environment. At the same time, the holiday villages fitted in with Bakema’s ambition to build for the greater number and for the emancipation of the masses and individual citizens, which included the development of a leisure culture. Unlike Bakema’s megastructure proposals, the holiday villages were immensely and enduringly popular. They were planned in such a way as to try to create a balance between the landscape and the new social realities. The houses were (and still are) extremely modest, constructed of bare concrete blocks and natural wood. The concrete block walls do not exceed the ground floor so as to enable small-scale construction by bricklayers rather than large-scale system building using cranes; above the concrete is an all-timber construction. Existing trees were spared, and the new settlements were integrated as much as possible with the natural landscape. The clustering of the houses was done in such a way as to ensure individual privacy and allow a direct relation with nature. Cars are left at the entrance; the holiday parks are developed as pedestrian zones.

The no-frills architecture fits the notion of a primitive hut, of course, very appropriate for a period of holiday, repose and recuperation. But above all, it is a kind of understated architecture that generously accommodates the ordinary and the everyday, and that invites – perhaps even demands – appropriation by the user. At the same time the architectural language is a return to Bakema’s early projects of the late 1940s, before he entered into partnership with Van den Broek, projects in which Bakema demonstrated the elements for the doorstep philosophy, which was to become so popular with his Team 10 friends.106 It shows – once again – how the notions of interrelation and reciprocity are at the heart of Bakema’s approach to architecture. These notions of interrelation and reciprocity, the (proto-)environmental understanding of architecture and planning, imply an unrelenting dynamic.

The interrelational understanding of architecture as part of a larger environment was already present in Bakema’s early ideas on architecture as testified by his description of Rietveld’s design for a weekend home for the Verrijn-Stuart family. In his essay ‘The Free Form’ published in 1941 at the beginning of the Second World War, Bakema spoke of the religious feelings aroused within him, of the force of a “God-nature” captured by Rietveld’s masterful architecture as a spatial art.107 Similar lyrical descriptions are to be found in his wartime diary, and later on when he talked about the “wonder” of human existence and a cosmological experience of “total space”. The notions of horizon, water, trees and an expanding landscape are always present in Bakema’s reconceptualizations of the Dutch landscape and its infrastructure. This is still the place where the project for a modern, open society might be situated indeed, despite the demise of the big projects for ‘total urbanization’ in the 1970s, and the megastructure concept in particular. At the intersection between architecture and planning, housing and politics, this is the assignment: how to inhabit the landscapes of growth and change now total urbanization is becoming a reality?
Herman Verkerk, Piet Vollaard, Aldo Vos, Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning which is Izak Salomons, Johannes Schwartz, Jörg Stollmann, et Amicitia, John Habraken, Herman Hertzberger, is a research collaboration between Het Nieuwe Instituut and culture.

In the papers presented by Baudouin, Sweatman and Brinkman, the emphasis is on the way in which the history and design of the Venice Architecture Biennale has been used as an instrument to develop new urban strategies and to express new ideas about urbanism. The papers by Baudouin, Sweatman and Brinkman also discuss the Venice Architecture Biennale’s role in the development of new urban strategies and to express new ideas about urbanism. The papers by Baudouin, Sweatman and Brinkman also discuss the Venice Architecture Biennale’s role in the development of new urban strategies and to express new ideas about urbanism.

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