

Space, light and art

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After 1945 in the Netherlands a heated discussion about the Reconstruction arose between the Traditionalists and the Functionalists. The dispute was decided in favor of a moderately modern architectural style, which by 1950 had really come off the ground. Five years later the interest in the 'Delft School' of M.J. Granpré Molière had virtually disappeared, but also 'Het Nieuwe Bouwen' (the Modern Movement in architecture) of the period between the two World Wars could not in the same way continue to appeal to architects. They looked around in the countries that had also come to life again and felt especially attracted to the new Italian and Scandinavian architecture and design, which did not fail to do its seminal work in this country. There was a renewed interest in Frank Lloyd Wright and some of his writings were translated into Dutch. The Brazilian Oscar Niemeyer was praised here because of his lively but controlled plastic qualities. From our own recent past the meanwhile forgotten 'De Stijl' was brought forward, not only because this school did not allow any individual predominance in the arts, but also because it considered the unity of the arts as a basis for sound development of art and culture. This revival was supported by what in retrospect has become a famous 'De Stijl' exhibition of 1951, which was organized by Wil Sandberg and Hans Jaff in the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum.

In this atmosphere of hope, expectation and new plans also the early work of Gerrit Th. Rietveld (1888-1964) was rediscovered: his unusual red and blue chair of 1918 and his "bouwsel" ("structure", a term often used by him) for Truus Schröder of 1924. In fact he was rediscovered himself as well and the influential architectural critic J.J. Vriend wrote that Rietveld "accepted social vilification and direct misery in order to hold on to something as vague as an ideal". A statement like that is nowadays perhaps interpreted as being rather melodramatic, but in fact it is based on the hard reality of that life. What was attractive in his work from the 'Nieuwe Bouwen' period was the imaginative layout of the houses and their sober, spatial lyricism without any drag residue. In fact he aimed at an architectural style that showed 'sober assertion' and not at monumentally.

The eventual recognition of and admiration for his work and ideas secured him many commissions in the last fifteen years of his life. Among those were some buildings for the exhibition of the visual arts. In 1953 he was commissioned by the then Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences to design the permanent Netherlands Pavilion for the Biennale in Venice. This was completed a year later and almost at the same time he started on a temporary exhibition space for sculptures commissioned by the Stichting Sonsbeek in Arnhem. In the latter half of the fifties Rietveld renovated the exhibition hall of the Rijksacademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, and later built De Zonnehof for the municipality of Amersfoort. In 1963, a year before his death, he started on the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh in Amsterdam for which unfortunately he only made a first rough draft.

These five projects have in common that they serve to exhibit the visual arts and that they were designed by an architect who sought elementary solutions, the interaction of interior and exterior space and the cooperation of light.

It is meaningful to compare the pavilions in Venice and Arnhem because of their obvious similarities and differences, which partly stem from the list of demands. In Venice the requirement was a sheltered environment in a mostly public park and in Arnhem we are dealing with a shelter for sculptures for one summer exhibition in a not then public park. The Pavilion in Venice, at first view, gives a cubical and introvert impression which makes one think of a statement by Berlage in 1905, in which he in fact accounts for the Amsterdam Koopmansbeurs designed by him: "Architecture is the art of enclosing space and therefore a building should not in the first place be an outward manifestation. The enclosure of space is achieved by erecting walls: before anything the bare wall should be shown in its simple beauty and all ornaments should be avoided with meticulous care." It is as if Rietveld scrupulously wanted to express these views, but there is more to be observed. The north side of the pavilion adjoins the limits of the park, does not demand attention and consequently became a blank wall. The other three sides face the park and were given glass walls for a quarter of the width and three quarters of the height, as a result of which the cubical and enclosed elements were counterbalanced.

At the south side, at the bottom of the glass wall, a receding glass door with some entrance steps was put in at an angle of 45 degrees. This resulted in a striking relation between outer and inner space, which is so characteristic of a "bouwspel" by Rietveld. On the inside all these walls and holes with and without glass have an optimal effect and it is here that we are reminded of Rietveld's own words in the *International Revue* 10 of 1928: "The reality that architecture can create is space."

This sounds like a paradox, because any reference to material resources has disappeared: Berlage in 1900 needed "the bare wall in all its simple beauty" to make clear his ideas. Rietveld hardly a generation later spoke only about space and only allowed the material aspect an unnamed and inevitable presence, which could be, however, of great and transparent beauty. He was very well aware of this, for to the question asked him in 1960: "Do you see yourself as a successor to Berlage?" , he immediately replied: "Yes, but he did not go far enough". What he wanted to say here is to the highest degree represented in the Sonsbeek Pavilion, of which a reconstruction is to be found in the statue garden of the Kröller Museum.

Here, with a minimum of material means, however varied, an architectural space was created which in places is almost entirely part of the natural environment. The remarkable talent for such spatial fabrics he shared with Frank Lloyd Wright, who then spoke of "borrowed space".

The emphatic quality of Sonsbeek is also present in Venice, but there it was given a more classical peace. The low glass partitions and the high white walls do not suggest an exterior performance to break the monotony of a building block but they pertain to the internal arrangement and incidence of light.

The glass walls are at the extreme ends of the flatly covered central space. The higher white walls partly enclose the exhibition rooms proper, which each have a glass partition above that central ceiling, virtually invisible from within and without. Incident rays of light can be filtered by slats and at all times give the impression of coming from an unknown source. A mystical power, which is related to the two side chapels of Ronchamp, where Le Corbusier in the same period (1950-1954) designed a comparable light effect.

What is so special about Rietveld's Biennale Pavilion is that its apparent simplicity is ideal for the purpose of exhibiting, because there is no rivalry between architecture and object. This made Rietveld an ideal designer for exhibition buildings. In principle the Amersfoort museum De Zonnehof has the same qualities, which fortunately have been preserved intact. The same really holds good for the reconstruction of the Sonsbeek Pavilion in the statue park of the Kröller Museum, which we owe to a posthumous tribute to Rietveld by his friends and colleagues. They were of the opinion, as indeed is stated on a stone beside the pavilion, that Rietveld "made clear with this construction that architecture can have a clarifying, purifying and exhilarating influence on our lives." . The exhibition hall in the Rijksacademie was altered and originally had a favorable incidence of light in a spacious, but imperceptibly subdivided room. He never really got round to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh because of his death in 1964.

The Biennale Pavilion in Venice is of such an excellent design that it gives great inner peace in spite of the many three dimensional effects and in spite of the incidence of light. The great importance of such a "bouwsel" makes one think of Rietveld's reputation, which was especially based on his work from De Stijl period. This bias bothered him, as appears from a remark of his towards the end of his life: "They are always on about those early days, but since then I have worked another forty years". In the meantime he has also achieved great fame as a designer of homes for a new kind of living under the supremacy of light, air and space. As a third category we can add his exhibition buildings, because in them with a comparable supremacy of space and light, the objects should inevitably exist in their own right. The Netherlands Pavilion in Venice demonstrates this at each Biennale.