



ROBERT MCCARTER

Aldo Van Eyck

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GIANPAOLA SPIRITO

Sapienza University of Rome
gianpaola.spirito@uniroma1.it

Robert McCarter begins his book by stating that Aldo Van Eyck, “one of the most important and influential of the third generation of modern architects, proposed an architecture and urbanism fundamentally defined by and deeply engaged in everyday lives of people who inhabit it”. Responding to the daily needs of man, looking for answers in the exploration of the place and throughout history and offering him a poetic experience of space, are the aims of architecture; an architecture which can play an active role in the construction of a better world. This is the deep change proposed by Van Eyck compared with the architecture for a standardized and global man promoted by the Modern Movement.

McCarter’s book illustrates Van Eyck’s design works together with the principles on which they were founded. It is the first monograph on Aldo Van Eyck published after his death; unlike *Aldo Van Eyck: the Shape of Relativity* by Francis Strauven (1994) and *Aldo Van Eyck: Work* by Vincent Ligtelijn (1999), that were both written with the direct participation of the Dutch architect, it is based on the materials of Van Eyck’s archive and on conversations with Herman Hertzberger and with Francis Strauven. It is illustrated with three hundred images, including drawings and photographs, many of which had never been published.

McCarter provides a very complete and exhaustive study of Van Eyck’s 50-year career, retracing in each chapter the biographical events that led Van Eyck to the development of an idea - which give the title to the chapter - and the works in which that idea gives shape to space. In this way he gives us back the inclusive character and Van Eyck’s ability to reflect

on everything he comes into contact with and the need for an architect to theorise, teach and build architecture.

The first chapter, *The Vernacular of the Heart*, deals with the family - his father was a Dutch poet and his mother was born in Paramaribo, a Dutch colony in South America; the education in England, the university at ETH in Zurich, the several trips to Italy and Tunisia, the beginning of professional activity in Zurich during the war, the meeting with Carola Giedion Welcker who introduced him to the work of avant-garde artists and their rediscovery of the essential. These experiences led him to be interested in primitive cultures, to use simple geometries and determined his way of looking at reality as a set of relationships.

The second chapter, *The Constant and Constantly Changing*, describes the years Van Eyck lived in Holland and worked in the town planning division of the Public Works Department in Amsterdam. In this period he took part to CIAM, designed the entry portal for Amsterdam Ahoy exhibition and the preparation of Cobra’s exhibition in Stedelijk Museum (1949); he travelled for some time in the Saharan desert and when he came back to Holland he designed some playgrounds. They re-elaborate the easy shapes of the sand compounds he had seen in the desert mixed with De Stijl asymmetrical and polycentric compositions.

The third is about *The Aesthetics of Number*, the right-angle grid as an ordering device which relates the repeated elements, building a rhythmical progression. This principle is influenced by De Stijl’s artists and above all by his friendship with the painter Richard Paul Lohse. Van Eyck found the same rhythmic principle in African weavings and prints he collected during his trips. The Dutch architect explained his idea and his relation to urban design at CIAM 9 in Aix-en-Provence in 1953 and used it in his projects for houses for the elderly in Slotemeer (1951-1954), in the town plan for Nagele (1947- 1958) and in the three primary Schools at Nagele (1954-1956).

The fourth, *A House is like a Small City*, talks about CIAM’s experience: during CIAM 9 the younger members formed Team 10 and they were entrusted with the agenda of CIAM 10 (Dubrovnik, 1956) where they proposed the issue of *Human Habitat, the problem of scales of association in the design of the city*. There, Van Eyck showed his design for Nagele and for the playgrounds.

In the last CIAM conference, held in Otterlo in 1959, Van Eyck presented the *Otterlo Circles*. In the first, there was the image of the Parthenon and the writing *immutability and rest*, that of Pueblo Bonito and the writing *vernacular of the heart* and that of van Doesburg’s *Maison particulière* with the writing *change and movement*; in the second circle the photograph of Kayapo Indians dancing in multiple concentric rings. The *Otterlo Circles* represent and synthesize Van Eyck’s ideas on architecture, his ability to rework and mix

suggestions taken from distant worlds and cultures, to shape complex and shared spaces in which opposites reconcile and human beings can inhabit poetically.

In these years van Eyck published some essays on architecture on the Dutch journal *Forum* and he designed the municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam (1955-1960).

The Orphanage sums up all the main issues of his architecture: *the Aesthetics of number* in the square grid that relates the whole and the part, the influence of the Stijl in the asymmetrical, polycentric and diagonal plant, the assembly of elements taken from archaic, classical and modern culture in the use of domes, concrete columns and beams, the primacy of interior place to house everyday life and the creation of threshold spaces where children can move and express freely.

The fifth chapter is titled *The Shape of the In-Between*. The idea of *in-between*, which is closely linked to that of the *threshold* and the concept of *twin phenomena*, demonstrates an adherence to the reality that can no longer be understood through the oppositions: part/everything, little/big, inside/outside, open/close, ect.. In the space sphere, *twin phenomena* mean placing the sensations of the man at the center of architecture and shape places where man can feel simultaneously the two primordial spatial sensations, of freedom and of refuge. These concepts are treated in various essays published on *Forum* and developed in some projects: the Congress building in Jerusalem (1958), Urban design for Buikslotermeer (1962), the Protestant Church in Driebergen (1963), the Roman Catholic Church in the Hague (1963- 1969), the Sculpture Pavilion in Sonsbeek Park, Arnhem (1965-1966).

The sixth chapter, titled *Labyrinthian Clarity*, talks about the early sixties when Van Eyck’s influence was growing rapidly in the Netherlands and in the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam. It was called *Dutch Structuralism* and, as Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, Van Eyck’s thought is based on the belief that reality should be understood in terms of relations rather than functions. Expressions of *Labyrinthian Clarity* are the *Noah’s Ark* by his student Piet Blom (1962) and his Experimental Housing Project (PREVI) in Lima (1969-1976).

The last chapter *Architecture as Built Homecoming* describes the last decades of his life. These are years in which postmodernism is rampant, while Van Eyck continues to conceive *architecture as build homecoming*, a place where the interior experience of inhabitation is provided.

Publishing a book on van Eyck today, in a period of great crisis of the architect’s figure, serves both to make his thoughts known to new generations, but it also means to understand that an architecture that starts from man and his necessities and has the purpose to build places where human beings can dwell poetically.