

MAGICAL_TRAILER_HOME

Vincent van Rossem

Untitled Space is a dream house, but not the kind of dream house that agents advertise in the "Exclusive Homes" column. It involves other dreams, a combination of dream and memory. It is a feasible architectonic design, for a house or a pavilion, but the architecture is presented in such a veiled way in terms of the representation of its design that the observer does not immediately feel the need to ask questions about profiles or sections and other technical details. It is architecture that does not try to astonish with spectacular construction or flamboyant details, as architects tend to do ad nauseum. The architectonic eye does not get a hold over the design. It searches for something concrete, for the dimensions of the space, for space sequences, something that displays coherence, with a plan, a front door, a meter cupboard. To no avail. *Untitled Space* really is a dream house, and as in dreams the spaces have no dimensions, nor a logical sequence; the familiar forms of the architectonic space have disappeared into a strange world of reflecting glass panels, landscapes and difficult-to-interpret suggestions.

Perhaps these suggestions do not mean anything, but references to Berlage in architectonic design are difficult to ignore. Apart from the Freudian notions evoked by the reflection of the St. Hubertushoeve tower, the idea compels us to contemplate that the history of modern architecture is under scrutiny. The exercise bicycle and the dumb-bell that act as furnishings elsewhere in *Untitled Space* must of course be associated with Le Corbusier, and more generally with the obsessive attention for a healthy body, which in classic Modernism is always expressed with a roof garden. Perhaps the sensual form of the sink also fits in this context, as the bathroom was an important part of modern life. But another association, with the St. Hubertushoeve tower, is also among the possibilities. Random objects quickly take on a terrible meaning in a strange environment. The toilet tank, adorned with an air freshener, may point to rigid toilet-training, and the two motorcycle helmets also raise many questions. In any case, they are masks that are often used during assassinations in the Amsterdam underworld. Is the anonymity of Modernism being questioned here? Or the unwillingness of modern architects to mask the functions of a building with decoration? Anyway, people do live in *Untitled Space*, people who use the telephone and go cycling, as everyone does in the Netherlands, but nothing betrays their true identity. They knew who Berlage was, and Le Corbusier, so Mondriaan and Paul Klee belong to the canon as well. However, it is possible that they prefer more contemporary art – a painting by Eric Fischl would not be out of place in *Untitled Space*. Modernism did not provide the liberation that the prophet of the movement, Sigfried Giedion, proclaimed. "Befreites Wohnen" never became a reality; the functionalists translated this ideal of the avant-garde into a proper walk-up flat intended for the masses, with a balcony and a shower. That was amazing progress, but it was not liberation. The oppressive middle-class interiors, like Otto Wagner still used to design, even for himself, had to make way for a fresh emptiness with some tubular steel furniture on linoleum, but transforming the human spirit into a fresh emptiness as well was not successful. The

enterprise for which Freud had laid the foundations around 1900 continued to grow and flourish. The unnamed space in *Untitled Space* appears to be an attempt to revive the avant-garde's pursuit of "befreites Wohnen". The traditional concept of living has been reduced to an abstraction, the emptiness of a hotel room. *Untitled Space* is a transitional space, for people who have gone adrift, but even here, the attempt to put middle-class culture behind is not successful. History appears as a phantom, as a reflection in the Modernist glass. The native country is omnipresent, not only Berlage but also the ever-dynamic Dutch landscape of water, harbours and power pylons. Consequently, *Untitled Space* becomes a sort of panorama, in which not only the history of Modernism is showcased, but also the current state of affairs in the area of urban development and architecture.

Traumstadt und Traumhaus

In 1930, Walter Benjamin reviewed *Das steinerne Berlin*, written by Werner Hegemann, a respected architecture critic in Berlin at the time. The subtitle of the book reads "Geschichte der größten Mietskasernenstadt der Welt". It is a critical book, in which the eventful history of the city of Berlin, with all its missed chances, is described in exhaustive detail. The "Mietskasernen", the cheap, nineteenth-century tenements of industrial Berlin, were, according to Hegemann, a tragic low point in architectonic and urban development, and around 1930 that was actually a generally accepted point of view. Benjamin did not contradict this criticism, and he showed respect for Hegemann's historical knowledge, but nonetheless the tone of the book was not to his liking. In his opinion, the criticism of the Mietskasernen was too fierce. Of course, objectively speaking, Hegemann was absolutely correct, but the book lacked sympathy for the historical necessity of the Mietskaserne, as well as any respect for the loathed world of city life. "Das ist ihm fremd," wrote Benjamin, "daß die Mietskaserne, so fürchterlich sie als Behausung ist, Straßen geschaffen hat, in deren Fenstern nicht nur Leid und Verbrechen, sondern auch Morgen- und Abendsonne sich in einer traurigen Größe gespiegelt haben, wie nirgend sonst, und daß aus Treppenhaus und Asphalt die Kindheit des Städters seit jeher so unverlierbare Substanzen gezogen hat wie der Bauernjunge aus Stall und Acker."

Benjamin thus introduced a form of architectural criticism that has rarely been imitated. It is not customary to view a building in its historical context. And it is even less customary to devote thoughts to the human life that is inextricably linked to the history of buildings. Of course, the crowning touch is the evening sun, which is reflected in the window panes of the Mietskaserne. This observation is lethal to Hegemann's argument. He is unmasked as a man without feeling. His criticism of the tenements has no depth because, argues Benjamin a few lines later, "Was man vernichten will, das muß man nicht nur kennen, man muß es, um ganze Arbeit zu leisten, gefühlt haben." In his view, only an experience of empathy and sympathy can shed light on the darkness of history. When he criticized Hegemann in 1930, Benjamin had already been working for several years on his research about nineteenth-century Paris that would only be published long after his death as *The Arcades Project*. This unfinished research confronted him time and again with unsolvable methodological problems. His Marxist friends, united in the Frankfurt School, had serious objections to his working method, and his non-Marxist friends, especially Gershom Scholem, a friend from his youth in Berlin who had gone to

Jerusalem, were actually of the opinion that he was wasting his time with Marxist jargon.

It is impossible to give a summary of *The Arcades Project*. The most important source of inspiration was Charles Baudelaire, the poet of high capitalism. Benjamin had already written a great deal about him in 1926 when a novel by Louis Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris*, gave him the idea to use the arcades as a key to the recent past of the nineteenth century, which in his eyes was already shrouded in a nearly impenetrable fog of myth, suppression and disinterest. By penetrating and understanding the submerged world of the passages, such was the assumption, the true social nature of nineteenth-century capitalism could be revealed. Only then, according to Marx, would the avenue to freedom be opened, but it was necessary to first understand the spell that capitalism had cast on humanity. Baudelaire had preceded him in this, as the intrepid pioneer of modernity, but he had articulated this spell poetically, and Benjamin saw it as his task to complete Baudelaire's work with a historical analysis. Unlike his friends in Frankfurt, who had a strong preference for abstractions, he strived to really do justice to the concrete manifestation of history, like an art critic strives to do justice to a work of art. That was still possible in the late twenties of the twentieth century because time had stood still in the arcades. Hegemann probably dismissed Benjamin's comment about the reflection of the evening sun in the tenement windows as nonsense, but Benjamin himself really concentrated his energies on that problem because architectural criticism that is blind to the experience of buildings, that has no eye for signs of wear, left behind after all by countless footsteps on the hardest of bluestone, this kind of criticism will never understand what the purpose of architecture is, at least not since the nineteenth century. Before that time, architecture served the gods, as well as rich fools who thought they were gods. But in the nineteenth century, everything changed. To save his skin, Baudelaire removed his halo; the artist had to relinquish his lofty status in order to come to an understanding with modernity. The arcades, the unprecedented possibilities of building with steel, and the sea of tenements were the heralds of a new world in which architecture would also play another role.

Apart from a number of attempts to arrive at some kind of synthesizing introduction, *The Arcades Project* consists of notes on cards, neatly ordered according to a series of themes. It is an overwhelming amount of material, which probably gave Benjamin the feeling that it could evolve into something. But this peculiar mix of notes, with fragments of Marxist analysis, pieces of Freud, and many observations as well, often in the form of quotes that could generally speaking be referred to as art criticism, is precisely what shows that the intended core fusion of all this intellectual energy was impossible. As far as architecture is concerned, Benjamin was clearly charmed by *Bauen in Frankreich, Eisen, Eisenbeton*, Sigfried Giedion's debut in 1928 as a theorist and spokesman for Modernism. Gustav Adolf Platz's *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit*, which appeared one year earlier, is also mentioned somewhere, more or less in passing. It is Giedion who provided inspiration. "Versuch," notes Benjamin, "von Giedions These weiterzukommen. Er sagte: 'Die Konstruktion hat im 19. Jahrhundert die Rolle des Unterbewußtseins'. Setzt man nicht besser ein: die Rolle des körperlichen Vorgangs, um den sich dann die 'künstlerischen' Architekturen wie Träume um das Gerüst des physiologischen Vorgangs legen?" Apparently Benjamin had some

difficulty with the imagery that relegated steel constructions in the nineteenth century to the subconscious. "Die 'Kritik' des 19. Jahrhunderts also, um es mit einem Wort zu sagen, hat hier einzusetzen, nicht die an seinem Mechanismus und Maschinismus, sondern an seinem narkotischen Historismus, seiner Maskensucht, in der doch ein Signal von wahrer historischer Existenz steckt, das die Surrealisten als die ersten aufgefangen haben. Dieses Signal zu dechiffrieren, damit hat der vorliegende Versuch es zu tun." So, in addition to Baudelaire, Marx, Freud and Giedion, the Surrealists were also emerging. "In einer Passage ist der Surrealismus geboren worden. Und unterm Protektorat welcher Musen!" Benjamin then refers to the historical fact that Breton and Aragon held meetings with their Dada friends starting in 1919 in the Passage de l'Opéra, to escape the artists' colony of Montparnasse and Montmartre. In his novel about this above-mentioned arcade, which was cut short in 1926, Aragon describes "une mythologie moderne": "des mythes nouveau naissent sous chacun de nos pas." The arcade gradually changes into a dream world, "le paysage fantomatique des plaisirs," "ce laboratoire des plaisirs," "ruines des mystères d'aujourd'hui." Benjamin saw in this "fièvre de fantasmagorie" an opportunity to penetrate the deepest secrets of the nineteenth century: "Hier spiegelte mit Süffisanz das Jahrhundert seine allerneueste Vergangenheit. Hier war das Altersheim der Wunderkinder." He felt, however, that Aragon should have interpreted the dream; what was missing in his opinion in *Le Paysan de Paris* was the essence, namely the awakening, in which the true nature of the arcades, as "Tempel des Warenkapitals", should have been revealed. Yet this awakening remains a theoretical and problematic event, even though Benjamin formulates, here and there in *The Arcades Project*, extremely suggestive metaphors for this problem, such as: "Breton und Le Corbusier umfassen – das hieße den Geist des gegenwärtigen Frankreichs wie einen Bogen spannen, aus dem die Erkenntnis den Augenblick mitten ins Herz trifft." The combination of dream interpretation and Marxist dialectics that Benjamin tried to emulate ultimately seemed more of a burden than a blessing. It is also apparent, from early notes, that he initially intended to use a more traditional form of exegesis as method. For example: "Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen. Ich werde keine geistvollen Formulierungen mir aneignen, nichts Wertvolles entwenden. Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich nicht beschreiben sondern vorzeigen." According to Gershom Scholem, this was the working method for which Benjamin really had a talent, and in this respect *The Arcades Project* was a brilliant albeit unfinished study. Detractors may argue that it is nothing more than a huge collapsed bookcase, but perseverance will be rewarded. Those who spend enough time reading back and forth between the fragments that began taking shape in the course of the years, will gradually see the picture emerge that Benjamin must have had in mind. Taken together, all the quotes, notes and observations form a slowly revolving ball of mirrors, like they have in discos, in which the nineteenth century is illuminated in all its facets. It was also the farewell to an era, an attempt to examine the cultural battlefield around 1930: "was sind die Ruinen der Bourgeoisie?"

Eisen, Eisenbeton

"Als ich ihr Buch bekam," Benjamin wrote to Giedion in 1929, "elektrisierten mich die wenigen Stellen die ich las. Ich studiere an Ihrem Buch die herzerfrischende Differenz von radikaler

Gesinnung und radikalem Wissen. Sie haben das Letztere, und darum sind Sie imstande, die Tradition aus der Gegenwart heraus zu erleuchten, oder vielmehr zu entdecken." Indeed, *Bauen in Frankreich* was a radical book. The large steel constructions of the nineteenth century had already been amply discussed and comprehensively written about. Initially, steel was considered an unsuitable material for true architecture because it does not provide a monumental picture due to the hasty constructions that are possible. At the beginning of the twentieth century, steel received increasing recognition as a building material with distinctive properties. As a theorist and historian, Giedion made a strategically brilliant move by claiming nineteenth-century steel constructions as the prehistory of Modernism: "unsere Tradition." "Man erkennt gleichzeitig, in erhöhter Sicherheit, daß das Bauen, das man heute als 'neu' bezeichnet, ein legitimer Teil jener Entwicklung ist, die sich durch das ganze Jahrhundert zieht." The examples of steel architecture from Giedion's argument have been incorporated into all the literature about the history of Modernism, but the radical architectural theory that he formulated based on those examples seems to have meanwhile been forgotten. In the Netherlands, Modernism deteriorated into a stylistic mannerism that was nourished in educational institutions without criticism, hence the disdainful term "didactic Modernism", thought up by Hans van Dijk. Hans Ibelings subsequently launched the concept of "Modernism without dogmas" to describe the cheerful work of a generation of designers who no longer had any inkling of the radical ideas that the pioneers of Modernism had formulated. It is probably useful to study these dogmas again because in the meantime it has become clear that Modernism without dogmas is nothing more than a banal fraud. Fifteen yearbooks of "Architecture in the Netherlands" give a fairly accurate picture. In particular the Vinex¹ locations currently demonstrate a form of languid middle class in architecture, which would have horrified Giedion. Architectonic design in the Netherlands has degenerated into a product defined by middle-class culture. That was certainly not the original intention of Modernism; on the contrary, it was a movement that wanted to be the vanguard of turbulent social change. The avant-garde saw possibilities of giving modern art, "neues Bauen" and new scientific insights a central role in society. "Das Leben als Gesamtkomplex zu erfassen, keine Trennungen zuzulassen," Giedion believed, "gehört zu den wichtigsten Bemühungen der Zeit." Steel made it possible to radically revitalize architectonic design, in which especially the spatial relation between a building and its environment was given a totally different character. The most famous example, the Eiffel Tower, makes it all clear: "an Stelle eines massiven Turmes ein offenes Gerüst auf geringe Dimensionen kondensiert. In ununterbrochen wechselnden Verschneidungen dringt die Landschaft ein," wrote Giedion. The manifestation of objects was no longer static but dynamic. Streets became a stream of motion. The pursuit of open-space planning in urban development would bring an end to the walling in of urban space, and architects strived to make the borders between inside and outside as transparent as possible. This new world, full of vitality, was already imagined by painters and also by avant-garde

¹ VINEX is the Dutch government's housing policy, formulated in the early 1990s (VINEX stands for the Fourth National Report on Physical Planning Extra). One of the policy's aims was to reduce the use of cars. Consequently, locations were chosen near cities and public transportation stations, in the hope that residents would use the latter or their bicycles.

photography, but Giedion was looking for the theoretical consequences for architectonic design, which would eventually become the dogmas of Modernism. "In den luftumspülten Stiegen des Eiffelturms, besser noch in den Stahlschenkeln eines Pont Transbordeur, stößt man auf das ästhetische Grunderlebnis des heutigen Bauens: Durch das dünne Eisennetz das in den Luftraum gespannt bleibt, strömen die Dinge, Schiffe, Meer, Häuser, Maste, Landschaft, Hafen. Verlieren ihre abgegrenzte Gestalt: kreisen im Abwärtsschreiten ineinander, vermischen sich simultan." All this had already been built by previous generations, in the nineteenth century, and with that the foundation for further developments was laid. "Die Aufgabe dieser Generation," suggested Giedion, referring to his own generation, born around 1890, "ist in die Wohnform umzusetzen, was das 19. Jahrhundert nur in abstrakten und uns innerlich homogenen Konstruktionen zu sagen vermöchte."

Structural steelwork offers the opportunity to make a house transparent, a composition of spaces that flow into each other and in which inside and outside melt together. In France, Le Corbusier was the leading architect in this field. Giedion greatly admired his work, but he was not blind to the faults of the great master, his tendency to re-aestheticize living with the resources of modern art, and his laziness as designer. "Er ist nicht ein so präziser Konstrukteur wie Auguste Perret, noch zeigen seine Häuser je bis in den letzten Handgriff überlegte Funktion eines J.J.P. Oud." Le Corbusier villas are not modest pied-à-terres, nor are they ostentatious houses, even though the projects were commissioned by affluent people. Luxury, argues Giedion, cannot express itself in the use of expensive materials and other common architectonic means. These houses are purely and solely luxurious in a spatial sense, like sculptures people can live in: "Luxus in Luftvolumina, die in Durchdringung und Zusammenklang das neue Sehen Gestalt werden lassen." The new aesthetic experience that the steel constructions of the nineteenth century had made possible received a continuation here in the spatial transformation of middle-class homes. A comparison with the plans of the country houses that previous generations had built, especially in England, shows that Le Corbusier really did have a totally different vision of modern living. "Es gibt," writes Giedion, "nur einen großen, unteilbaren Raum, in dem Beziehungen und Durchdringungen herrschen, an Stelle von Abgrenzungen." This meant, however, that the complex social hierarchy of the English country house had to be abandoned. Living in a house by Le Corbusier was also a new social experience. The house, it seems, invites, or even imposes, a certain form of exhibitionism. Is it even possible, Giedion asks himself, "eine solche von Luft, wie von Scheinwerfern umspülte Terrasse zu durchqueren, ohne das Gefühl zu haben: Ich bin auf dem Theater?" Civilized living has of course always been a form of theatre, also in Norman Shaw's English houses and Hermann Muthesius' Berlin houses. But that was a bourgeois culture with a deeply rooted respect for the differences between the upper class and the servants, the differences between men and women, and the need of individuals to be able to work on their diaries alone and undisturbed. In Le Corbusier's houses, the middle class began a new life. It would be completely unthinkable, for example, for a Victorian sir and madam to sunbathe naked on the roof terrace. Here and there, Benjamin makes a few remarks about the new culture of living. In a 1929 review of the book *Spazieren in Berlin*, written by his friend Franz Hessel, he remarks that late nineteenth-century Berlin had become a landmark again for a form of living that is

disappearing: "denn in der Signatur dieser Zeitenwende steht, daß dem Wohnen im alten Sinne, dem die Geborgenheit an erster Stelle stand, die Stunde geschlagen hat. Giedion, Mendelssohn, Corbusier machen den Aufenthaltsort von Menschen vor allem zum Durchgangsraum aller erdenklichen Kräfte und Wellen von Licht und Luft." In his essay about Surrealism, published in the same year, Benjamin indicates that in his opinion there are radical elements in the new culture of living. "Im Glashaus zu leben ist eine revolutionäre Tugend par excellence. Auch das ist ein Rausch, ist ein moralischer Exhibitionismus, den wir sehr nötig haben. Die Diskretion in Sachen eigener Existenz ist aus einer aristokratischen Tugend mehr und mehr zu einer Angelegenheit arrivierter Kleinbürger geworden."

The unexpected connection between Benjamin and Giedion enriches the accepted image of early Modernism in an illuminating way. The villas from the twenties appear in a different light. They are still the incunabula of twentieth-century architecture, but in the meantime one can also speak of "Traumhäuser" in the spirit of Benjamin. People lived in these houses, children grew up there, and now that the twentieth century is over, the question arises to what extent these houses, just like the arcades in that time, offer the possibility to reveal the secrets of an entire era. This kind of twentieth-century criticism is not confronted by "Maskensucht", and even less so by an intoxicating form of historicization. On the contrary, the heart of the matter is a peculiar pursuit of exposure: modern city people live in houses of glass, which in Benjamin's eyes was also considered a self-indulgent desire, "ein moralischer Exhibitionismus." The criticism of Modernism should occupy itself with the true nature of that exhibitionism. The architectonic avant-garde, co-organized by Giedion in the CIAM, Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, neutralized that problem quickly by focusing on cheap tenements, "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum", the theme of the second congress in 1929. In a certain sense, that problem also concerned a form of exhibitionism, because it focused on elementary questions, the naked truth of living. There was no longer room for the complex forms of discretion that architects such as Shaw and Muthesius could still give shape to in complicated plans. The avant-garde significantly influenced living in the twentieth century. An urban development formula was conceived for mass housing construction, "Rationelle Bebauungsweisen", the theme of the third congress, and the resulting combination of stacked minimum dwellings and open-space development determined the face of twentieth-century cities. But precisely this triumph of Modernism in public housing construction is now being debated: apparently modern housing is still a problem. The alternative offered by Dutch architects and the people commissioning the projects is a terraced house in a Vinex location. Everyone knows that this is not the solution. Architects in particular think it is a humiliating brief. At the time, Ben Merkelbach and his friends in "the 8" already referred to it disdainfully as "cardboard architecture", and also as "vagrant artistry", decorative nonsense revolving around developers' standard plans. Perhaps minimum dwellings are by now an outdated problem, but in any case elementary questions were raised. The intellectual poverty of the contemporary Vinex housing units indicates that the problems of middle-class housing were somewhat hastily brushed aside by the avant-garde in those days. Now that the drive for middle-class housing appears to have survived the era of public housing construction, the significance of Le Corbusier's houses that Benjamin and Giedion found so exciting has been

rediscovered. What secrets of the middle class lie hidden in those incunabula? A return to the essential questions of modern living would require more research by contemporary architects into the original ideas of Modernism. Everyone knows Le Corbusier's formula, "une machine à habiter," but the true meaning of this living machine is just as puzzling as the true meaning of the arcades.

"Es gab eine Passage du Désir"

This note by Benjamin does not only register a fact, but also suggests an idea. Incidentally, the Passage du Désir is not mentioned by Johann Friedrich Geist in his book *Arcades*. Perhaps this Passage only existed in Benjamin's own fantasy. Aragon spoke of "ce laboratoire des plaisirs." The old people's home of the *wunderkinder* reflected the intoxication with commodity fetishism, and Benjamin wanted to penetrate this dream of desires and longing. The Passage du Désir was nothing more than a passageway to the deepest desires of the nineteenth century. Now that the *wunderkinder* of the twentieth century, the pioneers of Modernism, have become a memory, the question arises what would be a suitable old people's home. If the *wunderkinder* of the nineteenth century haunt an arcade, where is the avant-garde of the twentieth century to be found? In the Bauhaus in Dessau? Or in the famous houses that together form a kind of international open air museum? The Bauhaus still seems the best suggestion, as it was after all the epicentre from which the shockwaves of radical ideas spread. And if there is one building in Europe that represents the desire of the avant-garde for a new world, like a Passage du Désir, then it is certainly the Bauhaus. But in the meantime it has been declared a monument, a museum piece with a place on the World Heritage List, and the avant-garde did not like museums.

Giedion, who studied art history with Heinrich Wölfflin, was the first to formulate, in the introduction to *Bauen in Frankreich*, a vision of the avant-garde's historiography. He begins with the observation that historians do not stand above but in their time, just like poets, musicians and architects. "Wir haben," Giedion thus writes, and at that moment the art historian himself plays a role in art history, "keine Furcht vor der Vergangenheit. Vergangenheit, Gegenwart, Zukunft, sind für uns untrennbarer Process. Aber wir leben nicht nach rückwärts, wir leben nach vorn." This idea was until then anathema for most historians. "Leider," states Giedion, "benützte der Historiker den Überblick, den seine Beschaffung mit sich brachte, um die ewige Berechtigung des Vergangenen zu verkünden, und die Zukunft damit totzuschlagen. Zumindest aber, um hemmend die Entwicklung aufzuhalten. Die Aufgabe des Historikers scheint uns heute die entgegengesetzte zu sein: Aus dem ungeheuren Komplex einer vergangenen Zeit jene Elemente herauszuschälen, die zum Ausgangspunkt der Zukunft werden." It is essential for the future to understand the connection between the past and the present. Benjamin called that Giedion's "radical knowledge".

The radical knowledge was not a data bank full of useless facts but a process, and in a certain sense even a design process; Giedion designed a history of architecture. This edifice took its definitive shape in the book *Space, Time, and Architecture*, published in America in 1941. It was a vision of the development of modern architecture that remained current for a long time, both for architectural historians and for architects. But somewhere in the course of the fifties, the original radical élan of this thinking was lost. Architectural history once again became a proper academic

discipline, despite attempts by Manfredo Tafuri and Ed Taverne to turn back this neoconservative tide, and architectonic design drowned in the bureaucracy of public housing. In 1958, on the occasion of Gerrit Rietveld's seventieth birthday, Aldo van Eyck wrote about the "foolish masquerade of form" being produced in "architecture factories" under the supervision of bunglers who no longer had a serious thought about architecture and spent all their time in meetings.

Untitled Space

Since then, architectonic design in the Netherlands has become more attractive but not less foolish. When success and fame are the only motivators for architects, thinking becomes by definition impossible because radical knowledge is a criticism, a cultural revolution that cannot be financed by institutional investors and their henchmen in the building industry. The process of the past, present and future – indivisible in Giedion's view – comes to a standstill when dialogue has ceased to exist between form and content, when design has nothing but a decorative function any more. *Untitled Space* raises the issue of architectonic design again, not only the relation between form and content, but also many other design issues, such as the relation between inside and outside, and the aesthetics of transparency and reflection. The theme of "befreites Wohnen" sets the tone, but the more abstract thought of the avant-garde also plays a role, the "Raumdurchdringungen" that Giedion found so interesting, and the criticism of middle class living that Benjamin identified in Modernism. *Untitled Space* represents the downfall of middle class interiors; the design engages Benjamin's question: "was sind die Ruinen der Bourgeoisie?"

Would that not be a suitable senior citizens' dwelling for the *wunderkinder* of the twentieth century? It is not even a real house, but a theoretical representation, a process of thought in the form of a digitalized model. Here, the *wunderkinder* are confronted with the consequences of their own thinking, in which even their secret agenda cannot be concealed, because *Untitled Space* also gives room to the hedonism that was not foreign to the avant-garde. Just as the arcades reflected the intoxication with commodity fetishism, *Untitled Space* reflects the dream of the transparent home, in which human existence can also become transparent, and where the oppressive secrets of middle-class private life blow away like withered leaves. Any reference to the classic houses of Modernism is carefully avoided; even Farnsworth House is something completely different. The only material dominantly present is glass, but then as a medium for a game with transparency and reflection, which makes *Untitled Space* literally an unnameable space. "Es gibt," argues Giedion explicitly, "nur einen einzigen unteilbaren Raum." This space is not static but dynamic, a space that opens the eyes, that jolts the architectonic perception, like Cubism had done for painting.

In this senior citizens' dwelling, the pursuit of spatial complexity and ambiguity can once again be carefully contemplated. The questions posed by Le Corbusier and Giedion are asked again, but in a sharper, more radical way. Because the degradation of bourgeois living that has been taking place since 1928 is also reflected in *Untitled Space*. There is no longer an interior, not even a modern interior, and the residents of *Untitled Space* camp out, like squatters in their own house, no longer living in the traditional sense of the word. It remains to be seen whether Mies,

Gropius and Le Corbusier would really feel comfortable here. But in any case there is plenty to think about: Berlage, for example, whom Mies did in fact give thought to, and the development of modern architecture in general. Even the view changes constantly. The Bauhaus building and the Meisterhäuser in Dessau are getting bored standing in quiet streets in provincial towns, but *Untitled Space* is not restricted to a particular area. The glass does not reflect one view but all conceivable views, the vitality of a changing world. And Berlage's St. Hubertushoeve can be replaced by other historical designs, such as the Jahrhunderthalle in the former Breslau or even the pyramids of Gizeh. The past, the present and the future are under discussion again in *Untitled Space*. The avant-garde's language of form no longer means anything, but the restless spirit of these *wunderkinder* can still offer a great deal to architectonic thinking.

¹ VINEX is the Dutch government's housing policy, formulated in the early 1990s (VINEX stands for the Fourth National Report on Physical Planning Extra). One of the policy's aims was to reduce the use of cars. Consequently, locations were chosen near cities and public transportation stations, in the hope that residents would use the latter or their bicycles.