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# LEARNING SPACE

## PLAYGROUNDS VS *CHILDREN'S GAMES*



Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio", Chieti-Pescara
Dottorato Culture del Progetto: Creatività, Patrimonio, Ambiente

*They are mastered gradually, taking their cue from tactile reception,*
*through habit.*
*Even the distracted person can form habits.*

W. Benjamin

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# Abstract

This research begins with an observation: the poor quality of a significant portion of the contemporary built and architectural environment is also linked to a widespread lack of knowledge of, and sensitivity towards, built space. People inhabit and move through spaces of limited quality without possessing the tools needed to recognise their characteristics and assess their effects. The ability to demand high-quality spaces presupposes, in fact, a developed spatial awareness. The research therefore asks how greater attention to urban and architectural space might be fostered, including among non-specialists, and how the distance between specialist knowledge and common understanding might be reduced.

The central hypothesis is that spatial education does not consist exclusively in the intentional transmission of knowledge, but is developed primarily through bodily, sensory and often incidental experience. Space is understood by moving through it, measuring it with the body, touching it, lingering within it and playing. Becoming aware of space means developing, even in preliminary and unconscious forms, a different way of perceiving and feeling.

The concept of incidental learning, considered in relation to Colin Ward's reflections, constitutes the main theoretical framework of the research. Incidental learning is a process that does not arise from a predetermined educational programme but develops through everyday, spontaneous and unforeseen experiences. In relation to space, it involves perception, memory, movement and bodily awareness. The city can thus become an educational environment.

The analysis of play activities in urban space provides the starting point of the study, based on the conviction that the formation of perception and the acquisition of spatial awareness begin during the earliest years of life, through play and in an unintentional manner. Repeated movement, physical contact and bodily measurement establish the first relationships with space. Play enables children to appropriate places, interpret them, establish boundaries, construct rules and transform what they encounter into a device for action.

The first part of the research, divided into three chapters, addresses the relationship between play and the incidental experience of space. The first chapter defines the theoretical framework and reconstructs the educational value of the street, direct experience and children's play, with particular attention to Colin Ward and Herman Hertzberger. The second and third chapters examine two case studies: the playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978 and the series *Children's Games*, initiated by the artist Francis Alÿs in 1999.

The playgrounds are spaces specifically designed for play, while Alÿs's films record spontaneous actions taking place in ordinary, residual or apparently unsuitable spaces. On the one hand, there is the architect's intention to create conditions capable of accommodating play; on the other, there is the ability of children to read and transform space through gesture, rules and imagination.

The second chapter reconstructs van Eyck's artistic and architectural education and relates the playgrounds to several key aspects of his thought: elementarism, the relationship between large and small, the concept of the threshold, the *in-between realm* and *labyrinthian clarity*. The playground is interpreted as a composition of relationships between elementary forms, materials, changes in level, boundaries and the urban context. Five cases are analysed through archival documents, photographs, site visits and observations of their present-day uses. Their educational value lies in their ability to support actions, interpretations and forms of appropriation that cannot be entirely predicted.

The third chapter examines *Children's Games* and shifts the focus towards spaces not designed for play. The films reveal children's ability to recognise the physical characteristics of a place and adapt them to an action. Road markings, slopes, ropes, fences, debris and imaginary boundaries become instruments for movement, the construction of rules and the invention of relationships. Play suspends ordinary uses and reveals the latent possibilities of space, emerging as a bodily, social, cognitive and aesthetic practice.

The second part extends the investigation from incidental experience to intentional educational activities and forms of transmitting spatial knowledge. The fourth chapter examines the contribution of art and demonstrates how twentieth-century artistic research mitigated the primacy of vision by introducing increasing attention to the bodily, perceptual and tactile dimensions of experience. Marinetti's Tactilism, the *Vorkurs* taught by Itten and Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus, Bruno Munari's workshops, the exhibition *Dylaby*, and the work of Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman place materials, movement, touch, balance and the participation of the viewer at the centre of experience. The body becomes both the measure and the instrument of knowledge.

The fifth chapter reconstructs a number of explicitly educational practices in which direct experience of the city, making and the transformation of space become educational tools. It examines the work of Patrick Geddes, Colin Ward, Riccardo Dalisi and the Global Tools group, all of whom challenged the separation between school and life, education and the city. Direct observation, walking, manual work, play, self-construction and collective action complement or replace verbal instruction. Spatial education thus emerges as a transdisciplinary field situated between architecture, art, pedagogy and social practices.

The sixth chapter examines the public communication activities of Bruno Zevi, Jaap Bakema and Yona Friedman. Through print media, radio, television, drawings, manuals and simplified languages, the three architects sought to make the qualities of modern space understandable

and to democratise architectural knowledge. Zevi translated architectural criticism into images and models through accessible language; Bakema, in the television programme *Van Stoel tot Stad*, related objects, buildings and cities to forms of collective life; Friedman developed a visual language capable of overcoming linguistic and cultural differences. These experiences demonstrate the pedagogical and political value of architectural communication, but also the limitations of a predominantly one-way transmission of knowledge.

The research employed a range of investigative methods: archival research, site visits and surveys, observation of patterns of use, interviews and work conducted within an international academic context. Archives and collections in the Netherlands, Italy and the United States were consulted, providing access to manuscripts, photographs, drawings, films and television recordings. Visits to Amsterdam made it possible to observe the surviving playgrounds, their transformations and their present forms of use. Interviews with architects, historians, curators and individuals directly involved in the events under examination supplemented written sources with memories, interpretations and personal experiences.

The research is also supported by an extensive body of visual material, resulting from the archival investigations and serving as a primary source for the analysis of the case studies. The visual atlas forms an integral part of the research apparatus. Text and images are intended to be read comparatively: the linear discourse of the written text is accompanied by a visual narrative constructed through juxtapositions, analogies and resonances.

The materials analysed demonstrate that spatial awareness arises from the interweaving of bodily experience, play, spatial quality, the everyday use of the city, the contribution of the arts and the mediation of architectural knowledge. It does not coincide with specialised technical competence, but rather with a form of attention, sensitivity and critical judgement. Through movement, touch and multisensory perception, the body constitutes the first instrument through which space is understood. Learning, however, also derives from the ability to interpret experience and recognise its qualities.

Spatial education cannot therefore be entrusted to a single discipline or confined to places formally designated for instruction. It may develop through direct experiences, educational activities and communication tools. Streets, playgrounds, museums, media and the ordinary spaces of everyday life constitute environments in which learning takes place through use, observation and relationships. To educate people about space means enabling citizens to observe, interpret and critically assess the environment in which they live.

# Table of Contents


15 **Introduction**

15 Reasons for the Research

17 Structure of the Research

19 Methodology and Research Tools

23 **PART 1. LEARNING SPACE**
**Play and incidental spatial experience Two case studies**

25 **1. Preliminary considerations**

25 1.1 Experience and Incidental Learning

28 1.2 The Educational Value of the Street according to Herman Hertzberger

35 1.3 Street Play and Physical Experience in the Northern European Tradition

42 1.4 Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds and Francis Alÿs' *Children's Games*: Rationale for the Selection

45 **2. Induced Experience of Space: Aldo van Eyck's Amsterdam Playgrounds**

46 2.1 Education and the Salons of Carola Giedion

49 2.2 Reading the Playgrounds: Key Issues

49 2.2.1 The Great Riot

51 2.2.2 Elementarism

53 2.2.3 The In-between Realm

54 2.2.4 Labyrinthian Clarity

56 2.3 Playgrounds: Tools for Imagination

56 2.3.1 Genealogy

59 2.3.2 The Value of the Abacus

64 2.3.3 The Value of the Child's Experience in the City

67 2.3.4 Playgrounds on Display

72 2.3.5 Five Playgrounds

75 Beginning of the series: Bertelmanplein, 1947

77 Playground and colour: Zeedijk, 1955

79 Playground in the park: Vondelpark, 1961

81 Playground and urban expansion: Arent Janszoon Ernststraat I–IV, 1964

84 Towards the conclusion of the series: Korte Koningsdwarsstraat, 1977

86 2.4 Some closing considerations

**91 3. Spontaneous Spatial Experience: *Children's Games* by Francis Alÿs**
91 3.1 Education with Nani Valle at IUAV: *Progetto Palmanova – Il Ritorno degli Animali*
92 3.2 Reading *Children's Games:* Key Themes
95 3.2.1 Observation of the city and the documentary attempt in Mexico City
97 3.2.2 The First Interventions in the City: Working in Residual Spaces, *In-Between* Spaces
98 3.2.3 Walking, Repetition, and Failure
101 3.3 *Children's Games:* An Urban Fable
101 3.3.1 Genealogy of the Project
103 3.3.2 The Value of the Series
105 3.3.3 The Child's Experience in the City
109 3.3.4 *Children's Games* on Display
111 3.3.5 Five *Children's Games*
112 Playing with Urban Signs. *Children's Game #23: Step on a Crack*
115 Playing with the Slope of the Terrain. *Children's Game #29: La Roue*
119 Playing with Enclosures. *Children's Game #48: A Corda*
120 Playing with Proximity. *Children's Game #34: Appelsindans*
122 Playing with Imagination. *Children's Game #19: Haram Football*
124 3.4 Concluding Remarks

**127 PART 2. LEARNING SPACE**
**From Unaware to Aware Learning**

**129 4. Learning Space: The Contribution of Art**
131 4.1 Tactilism
132 4.1.1 The *Manifesto del Tattilismo* by Marinetti
137 4.1.2 The Bauhaus: the Vorkurs of Itten and Moholy-Nagy
142 4.1.3 Bruno Munari: tactile workshops and the exhibition *Le mani guardano,* Beaubourg, 1977
146 4.2 Performative and Site-Specific Research
147 4.2.1 Dylaby 1962
152 4.2.2 Robert Morris
156 4.2.3 Bruce Nauman

**163 5. Learning Space: The City as an Educational Environment**
165 5.1 Patrick Geddes: The Value of the Direct Experience of the City in Learning
173 5.2 Colin Ward: Incidental Education in Built Space
181 5.3 Radical Pedagogies: *Global Tools* and the Heuristic Learning Promoted by Riccardo Dalisi

**191 6. Learning Space: The Use of Mass Media and a Simplified Language**
192 6.1 Bruno Zevi: Militant Criticism and Mass Media
201 6.2 Jaap Bakema and the Television Programme *van Stoel tot Stad.* From the Chair to the City
213 6.3 Yona Friedman: Communicative Urgency and the Invention of a New Language

223 PART 3. LEARNING SPACE
Concluding Reflections

223 7. Concluding Reflections
225 7.1 Synthesis of Results and Comparison Between the Case Studies
228 7.2 Spatial Education and Transdisciplinarity
230 7.3 Future Perspectives. Towards the City as a Third Educator

233 APPENDICES

235 Interviews
238 Tess van Eyck
244 A Group of Amsterdam Residents
251 Vincent Ligtelijn
255 Jacoba H. Mulder
259 Ingeborg de Roode
263 Max Risselada
270 Francis Strauven

279 Bibliography
286 Webography
289 Acknowledgements

# Introduction

## Reasons for the Research
## The Issue: The Poor Architectural Quality of the Contemporary Built Environment

As early as 1923, Le Corbusier identified the cause of the «current misery of architecture»[1] in the inability to see and the lack of aesthetic sensitivity on the part of the client: the «EYES THAT DO NOT SEE» belonged to bankers, industrialists, merchants, but also to the average person, indifferent to the qualities of the spaces they experienced and inhabited. According to the Swiss master, the solution is to «demand space» — but making a demand presupposes a developed spatial awareness. «Man comes into the world equipped with eyes, but only learns to see through a slow process of education», Gropius would write in *Apollo in Democracy*. In today's society, characterized by excessive specialization of knowledge and an educational system founded on pure rote learning, «the capacity for sensitive perception has remained atrophied, and with it the sense of beauty. [...] Only through a slow educational process that stimulates visual experience from the very earliest childhood can we awaken understanding»[2].

In the not-so-distant past, before architecture became established as a specialized discipline, building was a practical knowledge rooted in tradition and therefore in the community. A community which, as Steen Eiler Rasmussen noted, «took part in forming the dwellings and implements they used. [...] The anonymous houses were built with a natural feeling for place, materials, and use and the result was a remarkably suitable comeliness»[3]. Today, within a society dominated by abstract, notion-based knowledge, the houses and spaces in which people live often lack quality, without them even being aware of it. Citizens move through and experience poorly qualified urban spaces, most often in a state of distraction, as noted by Benjamin[4].

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1 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (1923), J. Rodker, 1927.

2 Walter Gropius, *Apollo in the Democracy: The Cultural Obligation of the Architect* (1967), McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968.

3 Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (1957), The MIT Press, 1964, p. 5.

4 Walter Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica* (The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, 1936), Einaudi, Torino, 2024, p. 35.

And yet it is precisely within domestic and urban space that we take our first steps, learn to know the world, and begin to understand it through our senses. The quality of space inevitably shapes the quality of our learning processes; it inevitably shapes the formation of our very being. We may therefore ask: how can we foster a demand for high-quality architecture? How can we cultivate, even among non-experts, a sensitivity toward adequate architectural and urban environments? And, further, how can we bridge the gap between specialized knowledge and common knowledge when it comes to space and architecture?

## Spatial Education as a Possible Response

Starting from the assumption that the poor quality of the contemporary built environment is also linked to a widespread lack of architectural knowledge and sensitivity within civil society, the present research argues that developing spatial awareness is fundamental, and that this process unfolds primarily through bodily experience—often spontaneous and unplanned. To acquire a consciousness of space means to develop—even in its earliest and most unconscious forms—a different way of perceiving and sensing, one that inevitably involves an aesthetic dimension.

On the one hand, it is necessary to promote a broader public and political debate aimed at defining educational programmes on the built environment from early childhood onward, within compulsory schooling, bringing together diverse forms of expertise and integrating into school curricula activities of spatial literacy and awareness—much as has long been the case in several Northern European contexts. On the other hand, we argue that it is also possible to stimulate greater spatial awareness by experiencing certain architectural works directly.

Alongside traditional learning processes implemented through structured educational actions, we maintain that it is indeed possible to foster sensitivity through the experience of space itself, in line with what Colin Ward describes as incidental education: a form of learning that does not arise from an intentional didactic plan but develops as a by-product of everyday experiences—spontaneous and often unforeseen. It is an education that happens "by chance," without any explicit external orchestration, yet capable of generating meaningful knowledge and competencies. In spatial terms, incidental education manifests itself in the ways children invent games with whatever they find around them, transforming streets, squares, or ordinary objects into opportunities for exploration and relation.

It is precisely the analysis of playful actions in urban space that constitutes the starting point of this research, grounded in the conviction that the formation of the gaze and the acquisition of spatial awareness take place in the early years of life, through play and in a non-intentional man-

ner. Through repeated movement, physical contact, and bodily measure, the first modes of relating to space are structured. Play thus represents a privileged mode of spatial learning, allowing the child to appropriate, interpret, and transform space. As Bruno Munari observes, it is in childhood that perceptual and constructive competencies are sedimented through play, making a conscious gaze possible later on: «since it is almost impossible to modify an adult's way of thinking, we must focus on children. The men and women who will form our future society are already here now; they are 3, 5, 7 years old... If we are concerned with changing society for the better, we must take care of these individuals who are already among us. [...] In twenty years' time, we may have a different public [...] one that will have memorised, through play, as a child»[5].

## Structure of the Research

The research thus begins with the analysis and comparison of two emblematic case studies: the theoretical and practical work carried out by Aldo van Eyck in postwar Netherlands, and the contemporary artistic research of Francis Alÿs. Specifically, the study examines the role of the body and the importance of the physical experience of the user in Aldo van Eyck's architecture, and how his attention to tactile aspects stems from his artistic knowledge and, consequently, his aesthetic sensitivity. How did the lessons of the twentieth-century avant-gardes influence van Eyck's concern for the user's experience? What pedagogical and educational value can be attributed to the experience of spatially qualified architectures, such as the playgrounds of Amsterdam? How much spatial awareness does a user acquire when engaging with these architectures?

Van Eyck's design and theoretical work is compared with the artistic research of Francis Alÿs, particularly his project *Children's Games*. This work consists of a cataloguing of childhood actions and games across various spaces, more or less degraded, in both urban and rural contexts: an interdisciplinary endeavor operating at the intersection of art, architecture, and anthropology.

Van Eyck's activity is one of design, aimed at inducing specific behaviors and bodily experiences in space. Alÿs' work, in contrast, consists of documenting actions and events in spaces that are either unplanned or poorly designed, arising from a more or less conscious appropriation of the space and the objects within it for playful purposes.

This contrast leads to a further reflection: can spatial education also emerge from the experience of unplanned and unqualified spaces? And what distinguishes it from spatial education generated by the experience of deliberately designed spaces?

The comparison of the two case studies is further supported, in the

5 Bruno Munari (ed), *Il laboratorio per bambini. Progetto e metodo del primo laboratorio per bambini alla Pinacoteca di Brera a Milano 1977*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1981, p. 5.

second part of the research, by an analysis of the work of certain architects, designers, and artists who, through their communicative, design, and educational activities, have contributed to the dissemination of spatial knowledge, including—especially—among non-specialists, developing their own pedagogical strategies.

Early twentieth-century avant-garde artistic research, even before architecture was formalized as a discipline, made a significant contribution to mitigating the dominance of the visual over bodily experience. As Benjamin argued in his famous essay on the reproducibility of art, tactility is a defining characteristic of the modern. From this, the thesis emerges that tactile approaches in art have produced, and continue to produce, repercussions for architecture. Beyond tactility, the multi-sensory engagement of the spectator with the artwork, polymaterial approaches, and performative artistic investigations are all practices that prompt art to explore space in novel ways, with effects that can also be observed in architecture.

The study then turns to the work of several architects—Patrick Geddes, Colin Ward, Riccardo Dalisi, and the post-1968 group Global Tools—who, drawing on lessons from the art world and from "deschoolers," challenged traditional, almost exclusively verbalistic educational systems. Through heuristic and exploratory practices, and through actions in urban space, they developed specific pedagogies aimed at sharing architectural culture.

Finally, the research examines the communicative and educational initiatives of three architects—Bruno Zevi, Yona Friedman, and Jaap Bakema—who, in the aftermath of the Second World War, sought to involve society in architectural debate through various media. However, their activities fall within the category of purely didactic education based on the unidirectional transmission of knowledge: that is, knowledge passed vertically from the expert to the public, without providing real opportunities for dialogue, interaction, or active participation by the recipients.

The research is further supported by a dual apparatus. On the one hand, it draws on the reflections of scholars, architects, and individuals directly involved in the events examined, collected through interviews and meetings conducted by the author over the course of the research. On the other hand, it is supported by an extensive iconographic apparatus, resulting from long-term and in-depth archival research, which accompanies the text and helps to complete and clarify the theoretical and critical issues addressed in the dissertation, assuming the role of a primary source for the analysis of the case studies.

At the completion of the dissertation, this work is accompanied by an iconographic atlas that does not serve a merely illustrative function, but is conceived as an integral part of the research apparatus. Text and images are intended to be read in a comparative manner: alongside the linear and argumentative discourse of writing unfolds a visual narrative constructed through juxtapositions, analogies, and resonances. Internal cross-references guide the reader between these two dimensions, inviting a non-sequential, oscillating mode of reading in which images do not translate the text, but rather question it, expand it, and at times even contradict it. Within

this interplay, meaning emerges in the intermediate space between word and image, enabling a broader and more sensitive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

## Methodology and Research Tools

The development of the present work was based on an integrated approach, employing and intersecting multiple media and investigative channels, including archival research, site visits and surveys, interviews, and engagement within an international academic environment.

Archival research provided an indispensable foundation for reconstructing the historical and critical context. Numerous collections and archives were consulted: the Nieuwe Instituut and the library of TU Delft, the archives of the University of Pennsylvania and Washington University, the municipal archive of Amsterdam, materials from Dutch television, the Getty Institute, IUAV in Venice, and the Van Eyck Foundation. The investigation was further enriched by access to private documents, such as the personal archives of Professor Francis Strauven, the leading biographer of Aldo van Eyck. This work allowed for the collection of primary sources, manuscripts, photographs, drawings, and recordings, all essential for a critical reading of the analyzed case studies.

Site visits and surveys played a central role in integrating theoretical analysis with direct experience of the places. Remaining playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck in Amsterdam were observed and documented, as well as the orphanage and the Nagele school, in relation to the educational and non-educational architectures of Herman Hertzberger and Jaap Bakema. Observations focused not only on spatial and constructional features but also on the ways in which users engaged with these spaces, paying particular attention to daily gestures and play practices. These activities were complemented by visits to exhibitions and installations addressing themes of play, public space, and education, with particular attention to exhibitions of Francis Alÿs's work held in different institutional contexts, from the Venice Biennale to the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.

Interviews enriched the research with plural perspectives, enabling the collection of firsthand memories, critical interpretations, and personal reflections. Architects, architectural historians, curators, and figures connected to the case studies were involved in a dialogue aimed at clarifying the role of play and bodily experience in urban space and architecture. These testimonies allowed for the comparison of archival sources and field observations with experiential viewpoints, thus consolidating a qualitative dimension of the research.

Finally, the work conducted at the Department of Architecture of TU Delft provided a privileged context for critical reflection. The research took place in an international environment, characterized by ongoing exchanges with scholars, doctoral researchers, and faculty engaged in the study of twentieth-century architecture and contemporary practices.

This context not only enabled the verification of hypotheses and methodological approaches but also situated the results of the research within a broader framework enriched by interdisciplinary comparison.

The combination of these methodologies—documentary, experiential, dialogical, and academic—made it possible to address the research subject in all its complexity, integrating historical and contemporary dimensions, architectural design and artistic practice, individual experience, and collective context.

# PART 1. LEARNING SPACE
## Play and incidental spatial experience
## Two case studies



Violette Cornelius, *Untitled.* Nederlands Fotomuseum. Opening photograph in Aldo van Eyck's manuscript *The Child, the City and the Artist*, 1962. Courtesy of the Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.

# 1. Preliminary considerations

## 1.1 Experience and Incidental Learning

Everyday experience inherently contains an educational potential: can incidental spatial experience—that form of learning which does not arise from predefined educational intentions—be transformed into a moment of spatial learning?

The concept of incidental learning is rooted in the reflections of Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, and Colin Ward, who emphasize the value of direct, autonomous, and spontaneous experience.

In *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich argues that

> «Universal education through schooling is not feasible. [...] The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring»[1].

Incidental learning, therefore, refers to a learning process that is neither organized nor planned by an institution, but occurs spontaneously, without any deliberate intention: through playing, working, travelling, and encountering others. This form of learning differs from formal education in that it allows individuals to engage directly with reality, to experience causes and effects, and to develop autonomous capacities of judgment, guided by their own interests and initiative.

Incidental learning thus unfolds through interaction and physical experience, through the understanding and subsequent interpretation of space. It is a process that involves perception, memory, movement, and awareness of one's own body in space, as well as an understanding of the social and cultural relationships that define the environment.

> «Things are basic resources for learning. The quality of the environment and the relationship of a person to it will determine how much he learns incidentally. [...] School removes things from everyday use by labeling them educational tools. [...] The general physical environment must be made accessible, and those physical learning resources which have been reduced to teaching instruments must become generally available for self-directed learning»[2].

By criticizing the state school system, Illich argues that alternative forms of learning take place through concrete experiences, explorations,

1 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society,* Harper & Row, New York 1971, pp. XIX-XX.

2 ibid., pp. 79-81.

and direct actions that enable individuals to orient themselves, adapt, and actively participate in life. Already Paul Goodman, psychologist and mentor of Ivan Illich, emphasized that

> «until quite recently, in all societies, both so-called primitive and highly civilized ones, a large part of education was incidental [...]. Generally speaking, this incidental process fits the nature of learning better than direct instruction. The young person experiences causes and effects rather than pedagogical exercises. Reality is often complex, but each young person can grasp it in their own way, in their own time, according to their interests and initiative»[3].

According to Goodman, the archetype of successful incidental education is the child learning to speak: an «extraordinary intellectual achievement that is universally accomplished» without any structured school-based intervention. Only in the last two centuries, in industrialized countries, has formal schooling replaced much of this natural process.

Colin Ward, architect and urban theorist, takes up the reflections of Illich and Goodman, emphasizing the importance of the urban environment as an educational space. In his writings, posthumously collected in the Italian volume *L'educazione incidentale* (*Incidental Learning*), Ward highlights how cities, streets, squares, workshops, and spaces for play can become environments in which learning occurs spontaneously. As Francesco Codello observes in his introduction to the collection,

> «this incidental dimension thus represents a genuine alternative to structured and programmed learning, constituting an authentic response to that curiosity, that spontaneous search, that natural and instinctive need to learn which lie at the foundation of a deep and coherent libertarian education»[4].

Through the establishment of *Urban Studies Centres* and the publication of the *Bulletin of Environmental Education* in 1970s Britain, Ward demonstrated how teaching people to observe, use, and modify urban space constitutes a concrete form of incidental education—namely, a form of spatial learning generated by the urban environment itself.

Colin Ward further writes:

> «This capacity for vivid sensory experience, commonplace among children is an aspect of the world that the adult has lost, not just because the senses are dulled by familiarity, but because there is an actual measurable physical decline in sensitivity to taste, to smells, to colour and to sound»[5].

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3 Paul Goodman, *Summerhill, esperienza di educazione incidentale* (Summerhill: An Experience of Incidental Education), in Becchi E. (ed), Summerhill in discussione, Franco Angeli, Milan 1975, p. 135.

4 Francesco Codello, *Introduction*, in Colin Ward, *L'educazione incidentale* (Incidental Learning), edited by Francesco Codello, Eleuthera, Milan 2014, p. 14.

5 Colin Ward, *The Child in the City*, The Architectural Press, London 1978, p. 22.

Incidental learning is also, and above all, rooted in bodily and sensory experience: learning primarily means engaging in direct experience through the body and the senses, in real situations. It is in this way that the child acquires language, learns to move through space, and comes to understand the limits and possibilities of their own body. Social space thus becomes an educational network: the street, the workshop, the home, and places of work have, for centuries, been the true environments of incidental learning. In other words, as Illich had already argued, education is not confined to institutional settings, but is realized through participation in community life.

Incidental learning therefore represents a mode of education integrated into everyday life, in which the body, the senses, and social space play a fundamental role. The city, in its physical and social forms, can become a powerful educational tool, capable of fostering awareness among citizens and enabling them to intervene actively in their own environment: «The city is in itself an educational environment, and we can use it as such if we learn how to handle it, control it, or modify it»[6].

6 Colin Ward, *L'educazione* ... cit., p. 96.

## 1.2 The Educational Value of the Street according to Herman Hertzberger

Herman Hertzberger developed a line of thought that can, to some extent, be aligned with the reflections outlined above. Indeed, he devoted significant theoretical and design attention to the educational implications arising from the experience of space.

Atlas, pp. 17-19.

Since the 1960s, Hertzberger has promoted a different way of understanding the architectural discipline—one that moves beyond any form of self-referentiality and places human beings and their needs at the centre of the discourse, shaped by the lessons of Aldo van Eyck, *Forum*, and Team 10. Founder of the *Berlage Institute* and designer of numerous schools and public buildings, Hertzberger is also the author of essays and texts that have shaped entire generations of students; his *Lessons in Architecture* are particularly well known.

In *Space and Learning*, the third collection of his lectures, the architect conceives the city as a large school—a space for lifelong learning, where the senses can be exercised and knowledge and awareness, including spatial awareness, can be acquired. Education and, more broadly, the various experiences encountered throughout life have, according to Hertzberger, a profound impact on who we are:

> «experiences are the building materials of what we have to offer. The potential richness of what we create lies only in the experiences we have acquired and now possess. The more experiences we have, the more we can imagine, and the more images we can make, and this is entirely dependent on our imaginative capacity to put ourselves in someone else's place. The architect, like anyone else, is restricted to images of situations of things which he has experienced in one way or another, or at any rate to images which have penetrated to him»[7].

Born in Amsterdam in 1932, Hertzberger spent his childhood in the southern residential district of the city, Amsterdam Zuid, designed by Hendrik Berlage. The son of a physician, Hertzberger recalls how the time spent walking through the neighbourhood streets while accompanying his father on house calls allowed him to acquire, unconsciously, a great deal of architectural knowledge:

7 Herman Hertzberger, *Architecture for people*, "A+U", March 1977, no. 75, p. 143.

> «without realizing it, I was being given an education in architecture, absorbing all their details the doorways, façades, canopies, bay windows and the different shapes of windows. The more I practise my profession, the more I realise that I was also absorbing, perhaps more than anything else, the atmosphere of that exceptionally and beautifully proportioned, intimate and yet spacious neighbourhood. The urban space, that particular urban structure so characteristic of Berlage»[8].

Decades later, Hertzberger still recalls the sensations derived from the physical experience of those places, the daily journey between home and school, and the many architectural presences encountered along the way, such as the red steel structures of a building under construction by Dirk Roosenburg[9]. He also remembers the tactile experience of rounded stones along a staircase: «I remember exactly how it felt to sit on them. [...] It is so important that such buildings be approachable, tangible»[10].

The design attention that Hertzberger pays to haptic experience—that is, experience registered through the hand and the entire body, sensing texture, weight, temperature, and so on—derives largely from the Montessori education he received from childhood through high school. Frampton describes this method as «a philosophy of life rather than a mere alternative pedagogical technique»[11], capable of enabling the child, and later the adult, to construct knowledge autonomously. In Montessori schools, the child is indeed free to choose their activities within a highly stimulating environment, specifically designed in relation to different stages of development, and within open classrooms where students of varying ages can interact and support each other throughout the learning process.

The most interesting aspect of the Montessori method lies in its ability to acquire theoretical knowledge through physical, and above all tactile, experience: learning occurs through the exploration and manipulation of objects that guide the child toward the acquisition of abstract concepts, such as mathematics.

«Each child is encouraged to develop an awareness of and responsibility for their own territory»[12], learning to take care of the space and objects within it through domestic activities such as cleaning.

Autonomous spatial exploration is also strongly encouraged in Montessori schools: children are free to choose where to position themselves, being able to use all areas of the school during lessons. This freedom of exploration fosters in the child the ability to appropriate space. Hertz-

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8 Maaike Behm, Maarten Kloos (eds), *Hertzberger's Amsterdam*, ARCAM/Architectura & Natura Press, Amsterdam 2007, p. 12.

9 Dirk Roosenburg was the maternal grandfather of Rem Koolhaas.

10 M. Behm, M. Kloos (eds), *Hertzberger's* … cit., p. 14.

11 Kenneth Frampton, *Het structurele regionalisme van Herman Hertzberger. De bestaansreden van de architectuur in een getayloriseerd tijdperk* (Hertzberger's structural regionalism. The raison d'être of architecture in a Taylorized era), "ARCHIS", December 1986, p. 8.

12 Herman Hertzberger, *Space and Learning. Lessons in Architecture 3*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2008, p. 78.

berger—husband and father of Montessori teachers, and designer of several schools in the Netherlands that adopt this method—thus describes Montessori education as a pedagogy of space:

> «Offering a range of possibilities presupposes an organization of space. Everything must have its place. Children walk through the Montessori school in a kind of promenade: in this way, they discover all the possibilities offered to them. Montessori's thought is therefore particularly attentive to the idea of space»[13].

For Hertzberger, the value of any educational action does not lie merely in the transmission of knowledge, but in the development of critical and creative capacities:

> «education is a wider thing than 'what you ought to do' and 'what you are supposed to know' but a whole, creative attitude where you go beyond what you ought to do. [...] Education is about how to live together, relationships with other people, knowing how to negotiate, how to help people with difficulties, to have a creative approach to everything [...]. Creativity is not just for art – like making paintings – but exploring situations»[14].

Education and spatial experience, therefore, assume a fundamental role for the architect in the formation of the individual, capable of fostering abilities and awareness through which each person can engage critically with reality.

## «A Product of Team 10»

Hertzberger's vision of an architecture attentive to the needs and experience of its users also derives from the work carried out within the editorial board of the journal "Forum", alongside the Dutch members of Team 10, Aldo van Eyck and Jaap Bakema. This experience would profoundly shape the young architect, who would later define himself as «a product of Team 10»[15].

"Forum"[16], the journal of the Dutch association *Architectura et Amicitia* (A et A), published from 1946 onwards, underwent a decisive change of direction beginning in 1959. Under a new editorial board selected by

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13 Herman Hertzberger interview by Chiara Baglione, *Learning landscape. Chiara Baglione intervista Herman Hertzberger*, in "Casabella" 750/751, p. 61.

14 Herman Hertzberger, interview by Emma Dyer, *Interview with Herman Hertzberger* (2016), Architecture and Education, February 3, 2016, https://architectureandeducation.org/2016/02/03/interview-with-herman-hertzberger/(accessed February 2025).

15 Clelia Tuscano, *I am a product of team 10.* Interview with Herman Hertzberger, in Max Risselada, Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.) T*eam 10 1953-81. In search of a Utopia of the present*, NAI, Rotterdam 2010, p. 332.

16 On the history of "Forum", see Maristella Casciato, *"Forum": architettura* e *cultura nei primi anni Sessanta* (Forum': Architecture and Culture in the Early 1960s), in "Casabella" 606, november 1993, pp. 48-53.

Dick Apon and composed of Jaap Bakema, Aldo van Eyck, Joop Hardy, Gert Boon, and Jurriaan Schrofer, a young and enthusiastic recent graduate, Herman Hertzberger, joined the magazine as secretary. An experience that the architect would later describe on several occasions as a form of "post-doctoral training." The new editorial board imposed a clear shift in the journal's agenda, committing "Forum" to the discussion of an architecture capable of responding to human and social needs, in close and inseparable dialogue with art, philosophy, and literature. It was within "Forum" that Hertzberger encountered—and made his own—van Eyck's notions of the large–small relationship, the concept of threshold, in-between space, place, and encounter: themes that would become integral to his personal poetics and architectural language.

Already in the second issue produced by the new editorial board—issue no. 8 of 1959—the theoretical and formal premises of the project for the new Montessori school in Delft, which Hertzberger would design the following year, can be clearly identified.

As stated in the English-language editorial, the issue

> « has only one subject: the inhabitable town—the inhabitable house; architecture both human and worthy of a human being. Consequently house and street, door and window, balcony and roof-terrace have become new problems. Through and in architectonic forms man meets himself and his fellow-men—himself and everything else.

Encounter and threshold; house and street. The threshold between people and the threshold between things. As an introduction to the 'problem of the threshold' another problem »[17].

The entire issue was thus devoted to the relationship between individuality and collectivity, through a formal investigation aimed at responding to the human need to live together, to foster collegiality and conviviality. It becomes necessary to rethink and place at the centre of architectural practice the space of the threshold—the space between things and between people—as «the first step in creating a sense of community is to create a place in which one can be oneself »[18].

## The City as a Large School: Lifelong Learning

Drawing in particular on Aldo van Eyck and Leon Battista Alberti, Hertzberger adopts the expression *small city–large house* and rereads it in educational terms: the school becomes a small city, and the city a large school.

In the introduction to *Space and Learning*, Hertzberger argues that it is no longer possible to confine learning to formal, school-based education alone. Rather, it is necessary to begin reflecting on modes of lifelong learning that extend across the entire course of our lives—a form of learn-

17 *Drempel en ontmoeting: de gestalte van het tussen*, "Forum" n. 8, 1959, English summary, p. 1.

18 ivi, p. 272.

ing that no longer concerns only the spaces of the school.

> «With learning expanding beyond the school curriculum it is important that our entire environment is educational. Just as continuing education (*éducation permanente*) is no longer confined to school hours, so with learning leaving the school territory and embracing the surroundings as a whole we can speak of "boundless education". Then not only does the school become a small city but the city becomes an exceedingly large school. This is a call to make the city instructive, a "Learning City", in other words a stimulating, meaningful environment that points people»[19].

On the one hand, the classroom, as conceived by Hertzberger, becomes a learning landscape, animated by a series of micro-events that make it perceptually engaging and stimulating; on the other hand, the urban landscape is understood as a site of non-formal learning.

From his earliest projects of the 1960s, Hertzberger developed a personal vocabulary of forms—a repertoire of elements he refers to as an "urbanism of details": details that animate his spaces, such as display windows, seating elements, stepped platforms, tables, and raised surfaces, all designed to stimulate the appropriation of space by those who inhabit these architectures. The expression *urbanism of details*, an oxymoron, describes a landscape of micro-spaces, details, and deliberately fixed objects: a learning landscape.

Moreover, the city—especially the historic city—is morphologically and functionally suited to become a school. Like a school, the city is a place of human relationships, «a community in which everyone's ideas and opinions are reciprocally connected through a wide variety of contacts within a broad and ramified network»[20].

For Hertzberger, the historic city, with its level changes, terraces, staircases, squares, and open spaces, remains a constant reference for the design of his architecture: spaces of variable scale, human in measure, that offer citizens the possibility of multiple uses. Not only the spaces of the historic city, but the city as a whole is, for Hertzberger, instructive. Referring to the thinking of the "deschoolers," the Dutch master argues that the home-to-school journey is highly educational for a child, even when it does not involve spaces of particular architectural quality. Walking and navigating traffic, crossing markets, encountering monuments or museums, observing singular buildings, passing through parks and gardens—these are all actions within urban space that foster specific forms of awareness in the child. In this way, the street becomes a school: «the experiences that children in particular absorb from the city are their most important source

19 Herman Hertzberger, *Space and Learning* …, cit., p. 9.

20 ibid, p. 205.

of education, besides what they learn at home and officially at school»[21].

Thus, urban space—understood as a place of unplanned and unforeseeable events—precisely by virtue of its unpredictability leaves open new possibilities for learning:

> «What we here call 'space' is comparable with 'learning' as opposed to 'education'. Education is instruction in the so-called required subject matter. Learning, by contrast, is about the space left over or open outside the institutionalized paths: the space of the in-between, of the as yet undetermined. New discoveries, possibilities, images and experiences arise precisely by looking along and therefore beyond what is already defined, that which is established. Perhaps we might be able to live in an entirely regimented and defined world where everything is static. But there would be nothing new to learn, beyond the acknowledged ways. And with each sliver of land marked off and labelled, the room for discovery and adventure is itself smothered by our mania for regulating everything, being at best the official play space, arranged and established and therefore impervious to new experiences and interpretations»[22].

The city, with its interpretable forms and devices, thus becomes a space for learning. Hertzberger repeatedly returns to the concepts of interpretability of form and indirect learning: a fixed architectural element, usable in different ways and open to interpretation by the user, acts as a mediator of spatial knowledge. In this sense, the playgrounds of Amsterdam, the roof terrace of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, and the actions of Christo all reinterpret public urban space.

> «We find space for discovery and learning where things are not governed by clarity, such as in only partially defined or undesignated contexts. And this is without even considering obscure spots, abandoned buildings, forgotten corners, alleyways, buildings fallen into disuse whose original meaning is lost to us. It makes a big difference what kind of neighbourhood you grew up in; whether the environment was rife with stimuli and experiences but also whether there were intriguing items in the streets and on the houses that occupied you, puzzled you or opened your eyes to something»[23].

For Hertzberger, then, the city becomes a place of learning when it arouses curiosity, when it becomes interpretable, when it stimulates thought and the association of ideas: a place of discovery, even when spatially modest or weakly defined.

Learning and architecture share connections and purposes. According to the Dutch master, learning is a spatial action that takes place in our minds: learning does not mean collecting and storing data, as a computer does. Learning means creating connections and logical relationships. Learning means creating paths—like those of a city—that branch out.

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21 ibid, p. 213.

22 ibid, p. 212.

23 ibid, p. 228.

> «Our brains don't get fuller but in fact gain space, a view of oneself, insights, prospects. This increased space in the brain can be looked upon as an increase in the number of associations, thereby forging new links between centres. To learn is to create order and coherence in the mind, to form structures where there had been none.
>
> Making space is applying structure where emptiness or chaos once prevailed. Learning. then, is a way of creating space in one's head; space for other aspects, ideas, relations, interpretations, associations. So learning is perhaps the finest imaginable approach to the concept of space»[24].

Space and learning also share linguistic expressions: «many words and expressions relating to learning have spatial connotations. Develop. unearth, unfold, unveil, discover, explore, depth of meaning. aim too high, over one's head, sunk in thought, grasp of the material. get one's head round a fact, immerse oneself, disclose, unpack, insight, in-depth, dissect, open mind, search, fathom, bring home, fall into place»[25].

> «Architects have to use everything they influence or create to support people in the struggle against alienation from their surroundings. [...] Everything we make has to offer a helping hand to the people to let them become more intimate with their surroundings»[26].

In conclusion, while design action must shape spaces that welcome human beings and make interpretation possible, the city itself—through its functional and morphological indeterminacy—is also a place of learning and the acquisition of awareness, above all spatial awareness.

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24 ibid, p. 67.

25 ibid

26 Herman Hertzberger, *Looking for the beach under the pavement*, in "RIBA JOURNAL", August 1971, volume 78, n. 8, p. 323.

## 1.3 Street Play and Physical Experience in the Northern European Tradition

Far removed from the idealized and angelic representations of childhood typical of Christian painting, the Protestant and Calvinist culture of Northern Europe paid particular attention to children's street games, portraying the child with realism and, with it, their primordial ludic instincts. Here, without any claim to exhaustiveness, we attempt to outline a number of emblematic references.

Atlas, p. 20.

### Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Play as an Urban Reading

In *Children's Games* (1560), Pieter Bruegel the Elder records with great precision the presence of children in public space, probably in the city of Antwerp. Painted for the Habsburg Governor-General of the Netherlands[27], the work depicts around two hundred children engaged in more than eighty different ludic actions within the urban space. In the Flemish square—opening out among buildings, courtyards, and narrow passages—groups of young inhabitants transform the city into a constellation of micro-ludic scenarios. There is no single center: the painting is composed of a multitude of micro-events and compels the viewer to follow the trajectories of bodies, revealing the rhizomatic nature of street play. Steps, sidewalks, pillars, and balustrades become supports, edges to be jumped, lines to be traced; architectural elements function as unintentional infrastructures capable of generating spatial experience.

The density of the painting, however, produces an additional value: Bruegel the Elder does not depict isolated children, but communities that, through play, learn social relations, implicit rules, and temporary hierarchies. It is a laboratory of urban coexistence: the representation highlights childhood's capacity to freely appropriate the city, reinventing its use beyond what is prescribed. There are no dedicated structures present: a handrail, a barrel, a threshold are enough.

Bruegel's painting is important not only because it documents specific games, but because it reveals a mindset: in the Northern tradition, the street is an educational, permeable, everyday place. The absence of adults is significant—autonomy is a condition of growth. In this sense, *Children's Games* operates as a critical lens on the city as an informal pedagogical device.

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27 Amy Orrock, *Homo ludens: Pieter Brugel's Children's Games and the Humanist Educators*, in "Journal of Historians of netherlandish Art", vol. 4, issue 2, DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2012.4.2.1

Within the crowd of more than eighty recognized activities, the street emerges as a stage ready to accommodate the unforeseen. It is here that the child exercises an implicit right to the city: the right to time, to controlled risk, to spatial experimentation. This vision resonates with earlier pedagogical writings by Erasmus of Rotterdam, particularly *De ratione studii* (1511) and *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530), in which the author emphasizes the importance of respecting childhood as a moment of spontaneous learning, educating children with firmness but also with attention to their playful and curious nature. Erasmus's manual quickly became popular in schools, where it was read both for its practical advice on decorum and for its elegant grammatical style.

## Children's Games in Delft Tiles

Walking through the streets of Delft's historic centre and entering one of the many souvenir shops, alongside tulips, wooden clogs, and small gabled houses, one easily comes across tiles depicting *Children's Games*. These are the well-known Delft tiles, part of so-called *Delftware*: tin-glazed earthenware, often decorated in blue on a white background. Production developed in Delft from the early seventeenth century onward, partly in response to the importation of Chinese porcelain that reached the Netherlands through the Dutch East India Company[28].

Originally conceived as wall coverings, Delft tiles represent one of the most enduring and recognisable expressions of Dutch material culture. Produced using a technique that has remained largely unchanged for centuries, the tiles—measuring approximately 13 × 13 cm—were shaped in clay, coated with a white tin-based glaze, and hand-painted, predominantly in cobalt blue. After a second firing, the decoration fused with the glaze, giving the tile a vitreous brilliance and high durability. Production, widespread in centres such as Rotterdam, Utrecht, Makkum, and Harlingen, continues today in a few historic manufactories, including Koninklijke Porceleyne Fles ("Royal Delft"), founded in 1653 and still active. Tiles constituted a significant segment of production: hundreds of millions are estimated to have been produced during the two golden centuries of Dutch tile making.

During the seventeenth century, tile decoration shifted from vegetal and "Chinese" motifs inspired by imported porcelain to scenes of everyday Dutch life: men and women in traditional dress, trades and professions, soldiers, horsemen, portraits, and ships. Among the most common subjects was *children's games*, an autonomous iconographic genre dedicated to children's play that has remained popular for over four centuries and

28 Jolanda van Iperen, Kate van Lookeren Campagne, Isabelle Garachon, Margot van Schinkel, Katrien Keune, Femke Diercks, *The White Glaze of Delft Blue: A Comparative Study of Historical Recipes for the White Tin Glaze Used in Delftware and Other Dutch Tin-glazed Earthenware During Their Heyday (c. 1600–1800),* in "Studies in Conservation" vol. 70, n. 3, pp. 187–204.

is still produced and sold today[29]. The earliest tiles depicting playful scenes date from the first half of the seventeenth century and show children engaged in activities such as skipping rope, playing marbles, leapfrogging, spinning tops, or making paper windmills.

As argued by Hans van Lemmen[30], historian and specialist in architectural ceramics, the iconography of street games likely draws on an already established visual tradition in Flemish painting and printmaking. Works such as the aforementioned *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1560) and the drawings by Adriaen van de Venne—engraved by Jan Verstraelen in 1625 under the title *Kinderspel*—provided a figurative repertoire that decorators translated into the small scale of ceramics, fixing in essential images the vitality of urban and collective play.

Dutch historians have identified approximately ninety different games, some of which have remained unchanged for over four centuries (badminton, golf, marbles, skipping rope, flying kites, or swinging), while others have disappeared because they were tied to now-extinct rural practices, such as bouncing a pig's bladder.

Over the centuries, the theme of childhood play has taken on different meanings. From a symbolic perspective, it could allude to the Seven Ages of Man or to the cycle of the months, with seasonal activities such as sledding in winter or swimming in summer. In seventeenth-century Dutch representations—deeply influenced by Calvinist ethics—play also becomes a moral allegory. In the emblem books of Roemer Visscher and Jacob Cats, for instance, soap bubbles refer to the transience of life (*homo bulla*), stilts to vanity, and spinning tops to the futility of existence. These interpretations, however, do not negate the affective and documentary dimension of the images, which remain valuable testimonies of childhood culture and everyday life in past centuries.

Widely used in fireplaces, kitchens, and domestic interiors—as attested by the paintings of Vermeer and de Hooch[31]—tiles depicting children's games also circulated extensively abroad, particularly in Great Britain, where they were imported to decorate houses and taverns.

Although belonging to a "minor" tradition of decorative art, these tiles contain a remarkable visual power and a rich layering of social and symbolic meanings. They document the continuity of play as a universal expression of childhood and testify to how, in Dutch culture, the representation of everyday life—and childhood in particular—was recognised as a subject worthy of celebration, transmission, and integration into the domestic spaces of ordinary life.

In the historic *Stadstimmerwerf* in Leiden (Kort Galgewater 22), a municipal building dating back to 1612, it is still possible today to observe

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29 Hans van Lemmen, *Children's Game on Dutch Delftware Tiles*, in "Journal of the tiles & architectural ceramics society", vol. 3 1990, pp-22-27.

30 ibid.

31 See the two Dutch paintings *The Milkmaid* by Johannes Vermeer and *Woman with a Child* in a Pantry by Pieter de Hooch, both housed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Both works depict domestic scenes rendered with great attention to detail. In each painting, the skirting board is composed of Delft tiles, whose iconographic themes are closely related to the subject depicted: putti in the former case, and scenes of street games in the latter.

an original seventeenth-century tile decoration in blue-and-white maiolica depicting a series of *kinderspeltegels*. The long entrance corridor of the building is entirely clad, along the lower portion of the walls and the skirting, with blue tiles on a white background: hundreds of tiles showing children playing with hoops, balls, on swings, flying kites, skipping rope, and using various musical instruments.

It is noteworthy that in the same city of Leiden, a few centuries later, Johan Huizinga would teach at the university and write his celebrated essay *Homo Ludens*.

## *Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga

*Homo Ludens* by Johan Huizinga was first published in Amsterdam in 1939 in German and translated into Italian in 1946. In the introduction to the 1973 edition, Umberto Eco writes:

> «*Homo Ludens* possessed many qualities capable of provoking and intriguing Italian readers: an impudent taste for interdisciplinarity, a liberal curiosity toward non-European cultures, and an uninhibited courage in levelling, in the eyes of inquiry, the products of 'high' culture with the everyday manifestations of life»[32].

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga formalises the concept of play as a foundational element of civilisation. For Huizinga, play precedes and accompanies culture, shaping norms, rituals, and social relations.

> «A HAPPIER age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of ***Homo Sapiens***. [...] hence modern fashion inclines to designate our species as ***Homo Faber***: Man the Maker. But though ***faber*** may not be quite so dubious as sapiens it is, as a name specific of the human being, even less appropriate, seeing that many animals too are makers. There is a third function, however, applicable to both human and animal life, and just as important as reasoning and making- namely, playing. It seems to me that next to ***Homo Faber***, and perhaps on the same level as ***Homo Sapiens***, ***Homo Ludens***, Man the Player, deserves a place in our nomenclature. [...] it was not my object to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play. The aim of the present full-length study is to try to integrate the concept of play into that of culture»[33].

In the first chapter of the essay, *Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon*[34], Huizinga identifies a set of characteristics com-

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32 Umberto Eco, *Introduzione in Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens* (1938), Einaudi, Torino 2023, pp. VII.

33 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the play-element in culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1980, pp. IX-X.

34 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*… cit. , pp. 1-27.

mon to ludic action—characteristics that include the experience of space, time, and repetition—and which allow us to read play as a significant moment of learning.

Huizinga writes that play is a free act; it is not imposed. Precisely for this reason, it takes the form of an action separated from everyday life, a temporary threshold through which one enters to inhabit an "other" time, endowed with its own internal and autonomous purposes.

For Huizinga, play is a serious action that interrupts ordinary life in both time and duration: «It is "played out" within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. [...] It plays itself to an end»[35].

Play thus has a precise duration in time; it is a suspension of everyday life that finds an exact spatial location. The player chooses and establishes the space within which the ludic action occurs: the arena, the field, the circle drawn on the ground, the gaming table, the theatrical stage, or the courtroom all take shape as symbolic places carved out of the ordinary fabric of life—true "magic circles" within which different rules apply. Within this enclosure, an absolute yet temporary order is generated, structuring movements, positions, and turns. Play imposes rhythm, balance, and variation; it therefore exercises an eminently spatial role, based on boundaries, paths, distances, and relations.

Every game is founded on a set of internal rules that are absolute and indisputable, defining what is valid within the temporary world opened by play. One cannot be sceptical about the rules of the game: either they are accepted, or the game simply ceases to exist. If they are violated, the enchantment is broken, the magic circle dissolves, and the "normal world" breaks in. Rules are not merely constraints; they are the framework that allows the emergence of a parallel and autonomous order, into which players voluntarily choose to enter.

This collective entry produces community. According to Huizinga, those who play together develop a sense of belonging that survives beyond the duration of the ludic action. Participation in an exceptional situation—separate and distinct from ordinary norms—creates bonds, rituals, and shared memories. It is an ephemeral but powerful community, capable of sedimenting into lasting cultural forms. In many archaic cultures this is evident in ritual games, where the suspension of the ordinary world is total and charged with mystery, pointing toward deep collective dimensions. The same principle, however, can be read on a smaller scale in childhood: in the act of play, a temporary suspension of real order manifests itself—a parenthesis of possible worlds.

The Dutch scholar further adds that play belongs to the realm of aesthetics, beginning with the very terms we use to describe it. They are

« terms with which we try to describe the effects of beauty: tension, poise, balance, contrast, variation, solution, resolution, etc. Play casts a spell over us; it is "enchanting", "captivating". It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony »[36].

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35 ibid, p. 9.

36 ibid, p. 10.

On the basis of Huizinga's reflections, we can therefore argue that play constitutes a powerful device for spatial learning. Space is not understood in abstract terms, but lived: delimited, transformed, traversed, and interpreted. The community that emerges through play further shapes these places, attributing shared meanings to a threshold, a wall, or an urban void. The suspension of the ordinary world does not alienate one from space; on the contrary, it allows space to be observed more closely, appropriated, and explored in terms of what it might become. Play thus educates us to space, teaching us not only how to move within it, but also how to imagine it, negotiate it, and reinvent it.

In light of this, the reasons for our interest in the work of Aldo van Eyck and Francis Alÿs—and for the decision to place them in dialogue—become more evident.

## Iona & Peter Opie: Children's Games in Streets and Playgrounds

In 1969, Iona and Peter Opie published *Children's Games in Streets and Playgrounds*, one of the most extensive and detailed investigations ever conducted into spontaneous children's play. The volume, the result of more than twenty years of direct observation and correspondence with schools and families across Great Britain, brings together hundreds of descriptions of games, rules, chants, and ritual formulas transmitted orally among children. It is the third title in a trilogy devoted to children's culture, begun with *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951) and *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), and it marks a turning point in the anthropological and social understanding of childhood.

As the authors note in the introduction:

> «It seems to be presumed that children today (unlike those in the past) have few diversions of their own, that they are incapable of self-organization, have become addicted to spectator amusements, and will languish if left to rely on their own resources. It is felt that the enlightened adult is one who thinks up ideas for them, provides them with 'play materials,' and devotes time to playing with them. [...] Our accounts of these games are based on information from more than 10,000 children attending local-authority schools in England, Scotland, and eastern part of Wales; [...] The fact is that there is no town or city known to us where street games do not flourish. Indeed, during twenty years' inquiry, we have no met a child who was unable to tell us something interesting, and who did not unwittingly increase the size of our files»[37].

The Opies' meticulous study collects and systematizes more than 2,500 games played without any equipment, relying solely on the use of

37 Iona e Peter Opie, Children's Games in Street and Playground, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, pp. V-VI.

the body, by children between the ages of six and twelve. These are games that children practise spontaneously outdoors, usually away from adult supervision. Team sports and games requiring adult oversight are deliberately excluded from the catalogue:

> «we concentrate for the most part on the rough-and-tumble games which, though they may require energy and sometimes fortitude, do not need even the elementary equipment of bat and ball. We are interested in the simple games for which, as one child put it, 'nothing is needed but the players themselves'! »[38].

The 2,500 games are therefore divided into twelve categories:

Starting a game;
Chasing games;
Catching games;
Seeking games;
Hunting games;
Racing games;
Duelling games, divided into contests requiring strength, courage, and skill;
Exterting games;
Daring games;
Guessing games;
Acting games;
Pretend games.

It is worth emphasizing that the classification developed by the Opies places the body at the centre, as both protagonist and primary language of relationship. Every movement implies a pact: who touches, who runs away, who hides, who falls, who rescues. It is a disordered yet rule-governed dance, in which strength, speed, dexterity, and even resistance to pain become tools of mutual knowledge. The collective energy that runs through these games is what keeps them alive: a continuous negotiation between competition and cooperation, danger and safety, contact and isolation, proximity and distance.

Their observation of everyday, anonymous, and collective play thus becomes a lens through which to understand not only children's culture, but also the capacity of urban space to generate learning, relationships, and a sense of belonging.

Children choose corners, steps, doorways, the gaps between buildings—minimal spaces that, once traversed by the playful gesture, are transformed into territories governed by their own rules. The Opies' observation focuses on this capacity for spontaneous "re-appropriation" of space: the ways in which children delimit a play area, establish boundaries, and construct zones of passage or waiting. In this sense, their research can also be read as a cartography of the everyday: a mapping of the urban

38 Ibid.

micro-spaces that childhood transforms into fields of experience.

## 1.4 Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds and Francis Alÿs' Children's Games: Rationale for the Selection

The research therefore begins with the analysis and comparison of two case studies: what role does playful and incidental experience play, in these cases, in the acquisition of spatial awareness? On one hand, the hundreds of playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1978 represent a deliberately designed mode of experiencing public space; on the other hand, Francis Alÿs' *Children's Games* document spontaneous forms of experiencing urban space. The choice of these two case studies allows us to explore two extremes of the experiential spectrum: on one side, the architect's intention to provide tools that guide, stimulate, and enhance free spatial experience; on the other, the freedom, improvisation, and imagination of children who transform the urban space into a space for play.

Aldo van Eyck and Francis Alÿs are figures separated by time but united by a special sensitivity to the way humans—and especially children—inhabit space. On one side, an architect whose training and artistic sensibility led him to a theoretical and design-oriented attention to childhood. On the other, an artist with an architectural background, who has investigated, observed, and documented—from the 1990s to the present—how inhabitants experience and live urban space. Aldo van Eyck (1918–1999) is an architect who, as we shall see, built a constant bridge between architecture and the visual arts. For him, childhood was a key to rethinking the modern city, which he considered too abstract and functional: his school and university experiences, together with encounters with avant-garde artists in Zurich in the late 1930s, allowed him not only to develop a theoretical and almost philosophical corpus, but also to consciously design the hundreds of playgrounds in Amsterdam in the post-war period (estimated at over seven hundred). In Amsterdam's playgrounds, children's behavior is guided and amplified through forms and playful devices designed to activate the body, perception, and imagination. Van Eyck designs so that children can experience space directly, corporeally, and haptically. As Francis Strauven writes, Aldo van Eyck

> «gave new momentum to the notion of architecture as a language with an emotional impact and a social-cultural scope, as the primary visual medium with which human society expresses and reveals itself. He defined architecture as 'built meaning'»[39].

39 Francis Strauven, *Introduction*, in *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of Relativity*, Architectura & Natura, Amsterdam 1998, p. 9.

Francis Alÿs (1959), a Belgian artist trained as an architect, follows a different yet equally significant trajectory. Moving to Mexico City in the early 1990s, he chose not to practice architecture in the traditional sense but instead to focus on observing the spontaneous uses of urban space. In *Children's Games*—a series begun in 1999 and still ongoing—Alÿs examines how children reinvent the city through minimal actions: jumping over a crack, rolling a wheel, marking water with a stone. For Alÿs, play is a way of reading the city from below, through its inhabitants who are most sensitive to changes in context. His attention to space is not design-oriented but phenomenological: he is interested in how people construct meaning by moving, touching, and transforming what they encounter. The *Children's Games* series is both a visual and poetic atlas of children's street games around the world and a catalogue of actions in urban space, demonstrating how spatial knowledge can emerge—even fortuitously, incidentally, and beyond any pedagogical intention. The city's space, not specifically designed for learning, can become a site for acquiring spatial awareness through repeated gestures, interaction with the urban environment, engagement with others, and the establishment of shared rules.

Van Eyck and Alÿs thus come from adjacent disciplines—architecture and art—and share the same fundamental question: what happens when a child's body encounters space? The first seeks to create favorable conditions, constructing places that stimulate perception, relationships, and imagination. The second observes what occurs spontaneously when children appropriate the city even in the absence of dedicated spaces. The choice to pair Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds with Francis Alÿs' *Children's Games* stems from the desire to examine incidental spatial experience from two complementary perspectives: on one side, designed, intentional space conceived to accommodate play; on the other, lived, unpredictable space inhabited through children's initiative. These two poles—design and occurrence—are not in opposition but represent two sides of the same educational experience, generated when the body encounters space.

In both cases, the act of moving—jumping, pushing, tracing, repeating, rolling, climbing—initiates haptic, bodily, tactile learning that builds spatial awareness. Van Eyck seeks to create the conditions for this to occur; Alÿs observes the modes and rituals of these events as children appropriate the city. Examining them together therefore means investigating the relationship between design and use, intentionality and spontaneity. It means recognizing that spatial education is not born solely in spaces designed for children, nor does it end in the incidental dimension of spontaneous play, but lives in the tension between these extremes. It is precisely in this tension that the child's body becomes a critical tool, capable of revealing spatial qualities that often escape the adult gaze.



Photograph of the playground at Transvaalplein 17–22, Amsterdam, July 1953. Amsterdam City Archives.

# 2. Induced Experience of Space: Aldo van Eyck's Amsterdam Playgrounds

*Just as one places a bench because one wants to sit, a lamp-post because one wants to light the street, a newsstand because one wants to buy newspapers, I am putting a play-dome there because children want to play.*

Aldo van Eyck, 1962

Architect, writer, collector, and art scholar, as well as a passionate connoisseur of poetry, literature, and anthropology, Aldo van Eyck (1918–1999) occupies a prominent position in postwar European architecture. He joined CIAM[1] in 1947[2] at the invitation of Cor van Eesteren, immediately expressing his reservations about the Modern Movement and the dogmatic tone of the *Congrès Internationaux*. For the Dutch architect, CIAM should have been a place for profound analysis of postwar reality, a moment for the formulation of a new language, and a laboratory of experimentation that looked to society, art, and science with renewed spirit.

> «Architecture- he wrote- is a constant rediscovery of constant human values translated into space. Man is always and everywhere essentially the same. [...] Modern architecture has been harping continually on what is different in our time - harping on its scientific, technological potential- to such an extent even that it has lost touch with what is not different; with what is essentially the same. This grave mistake was not made by the poets, painters and sculptors. On the contrary, they never narrowed down experience. They enlarged and intensified it; tore down not merely the form barriers as did the architects, but the emotional ones as well» [3].

1 *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), active between 1928 and 1959, dedicated to the promotion of the principles of the Modern Movement.

2 Francis Strauven, *Introduction into CIAM – Preparation of the sixth CIAM Congress*, in *Aldo van Eyck. The shape of Relativity*, Architecture et Natura, Amsterdam 1998, p.109.

3 Aldo van Eyck, *The in-between realm*, in *The Child, the City and the artist. An essay on architecture* (1962), Vincent Ligtelijn e Francis Strauven (Eds.), SUN, Amsterdam 2008, p. 130.

His projects, writings, and reflections on the languages of art and architecture, on the value of imagination, on the potential of childlike and primordial instincts, and on space and time derive to a large extent from the education he received and from a series of experiences van Eyck had at a young age. As Kenneth Frampton argues, «no other member of Team X seems to have set out to attack at the roots the alienating abstraction of modern architecture, perhaps because no one else had the advantage of van Eyck's anthropological experience»[4].

## 2.1 Education and the Salons of Carola Giedion

Atlas, p. 25.

His biographical circumstances led him to develop the ability to observe reality in a critical and original manner. Born in the Netherlands, he moved to England, to London, where his father, Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck, a philosopher and poet, worked as a foreign correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *NRC*. He often stayed at the home of his maternal grandparents in the Netherlands: his grandfather had for decades served as a school inspector in Suriname and Latin America, in addition to teaching physics and botany and conducting ethnographic research. Constantly engaged in the study of literature and ethnography, both his father and grandfather were important points of reference for the young Aldo. Francis Strauven writes that « from his earliest youth, he learned to view things from differing viewpoints. Two sets of parents, two domestic situations, two languages, two cultures (with an exotic third over the horizon) meant as many different frames of reference»[5].

These biographical conditions predisposed the young van Eyck to read the *relativity* of things, a concept that would occupy an important place in his later theoretical and architectural research.

Atlas, pp. 26-28.

In London he attended the *King Alfred School*, a coeducational[6], anti-authoritarian school inspired by the ideas of the Swiss pedagogue and philosopher Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, according to whom education must proceed from the observation of reality. The school adopted a heuristic, discovery-based methodology, placing students in front of problematic situations in order to induce them to identify solutions and to arrive autonomously at the definition of their own knowledge, according to modes and rhythms best suited to them. Lessons took place predominantly in a park, and the young van Eyck could choose where to position himself in space, moving his desk at will into the greenery, under an oak tree, or into the interior spaces of the wooden sheds that made up the school. This possibility of exploring space, of moving, of autonomously choosing one's own way of inhabiting it, together with the great variety

4 Kennet Frampton, *Le vicissitudini dell'ideologia CIAM e Team X, critica e controcritica 1928-1968,* in *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1982), Zanichelli, Bologna 1984, p. 326.

5 Francis Strauven, *Youth and Education*, in *Aldo van Eyck. The shape* …cit., p. 13.

6 In the 1920s, this constituted a singular exception.

of workshop-based experiences related to art, ceramics, and construction, profoundly marked the future architect, who at the age of six was already involved in the construction of an open-air theater by the school's headmaster. Joseph Wicksteed was a man of rare literary erudition and a renowned scholar of William Blake, whose passion he passed on to van Eyck. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* would in fact remain a constant point of reference for the architect: the idea of an Arcadian world in which innocence and experience are not conditions tied to age, but rather to a status, to a capacity to observe the world with a gaze free from external conditioning, recurs repeatedly over the years in his reflections and projects.

Van Eyck would in fact address childhood not only in his playground projects, but also in those for the Nagele School and the Amsterdam Orphanage. He looked to the child for the ability to embody primordial instincts, the same ones rendered into poetry by Blake: childhood in fact develops elementary forces, spontaneity, and the imaginative creativity typical of artists and scientists, which he would experience during his university years. According to van Eyck, childhood is a way of being, a «full-fledged form of life, an integral part of society, physically indispensable and spiritually inspiring».[7]

If the years in England were decisive in later formulating personal theories on education and in developing a passion for English literature and poetry, Aldo van Eyck's university years in Zurich coincided with his encounter with the world of contemporary art, to which he would always refer in the elaboration of a personal formal language and in the formulation of theories that identified, in the legacy of the avant-gardes, a revolutionary capacity to which modern architecture should aspire. He attended the prestigious Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, where in 1942 he formed a close friendship with Carola and Sigfried Giedion: she introduced the young architect to the world of contemporary art, he to that of postwar architecture.

Atlas, p. 29.

Carola Giedion-Welker (1885–1975), or C.W., as she liked to be called, was one of the first art historians with a classical training to devote her energies to contemporary art[8]. After studying in Munich, she moved to Zurich together with her husband. There, the couple met László Moholy-Nagy and Hans Arp, who put them in contact with leading contemporary artists and intellectuals, among them Piet Mondrian, Constantin Brâncuși, Paul Klee, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, and James Joyce. Carola Giedion studied the work of avant-garde artists, arriving at the formulation of precise theories that van Eyck would always take into account: she regarded all the "isms," all the different avant-garde currents—Dadaism, Surrealism, Constructivism, and others—as components of a single great movement that had brought to light a new vision of the world, a new "reality." The primary aim of contemporary art is to rediscover the essential: as Klee maintained, «art does not reproduce what

7 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, …* cit., p. 22.

8 Francis Strauven, *Making acquaintance with Carola Giedion-Welcker*, in *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of…* cit., p. 76.

is visible, but makes visible what is not always so», going beyond mere retinal representation and proposing instead to narrate the world in its essence.

Carola Giedion saw in the young van Eyck a flame, an ability to make the theories and events of the worlds of art, literature, and poetry his own. In an interview for a television program in 1976 she stated:

> «It was very striking, for example, how he was acquainted with the whole of English literature, with the classic and the modern writers from Swift to Joyce, and how he could quote passages from books and stimulate you to read other texts. [...] When we were together, he was like a flame. He was a very spontaneous person who managed to absorb all spiritual events in politics, art and daily life, and to render them with an extraordinary strong individuality»[9].

Similarly, van Eyck recognized in the art historian the ability to live fully, from within, the contemporary transformations of the spirit, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with artists.

> «Carola Giedion is one of those who have never approached the contemporary transformation of the spirit from without. [...] She belongs to their spiritual family, they to hers. She has loved them and understood them as brothers»[10].

The experiences the young van Eyck had during his Zurich period not only enabled him, about a decade later, to translate his thoughts into words, but also allowed him to return to the Netherlands—in the autumn of 1946, at the conclusion of the Second World War—equipped with a culture of interdisciplinary and international scope, ready to translate these artistic and philosophical references into concrete design actions.

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9 From an interview by Ton Neelissen with C.W., held in Zurich in 1976 for the programme De vuurvogel, dedicated to Aldo van Eyck, in Francis Strauven, *Making Acquaintance with Carola Giedion-Welcker*, in Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of… cit., p. 83.

10 Aldo van Eyck, *Ordovico Viricordo*, in *The Child,* … cit., p.34.

## 2.2 Reading the Playgrounds: Key Issues

Van Eyck was one of the few architects able to express himself masterfully both through architectural practice and through critical and textual work. In his articles, his writings, and in the celebrated essay *The Child, the City and the Artist*, he formulated expressions that are still in use in contemporary architectural language and that testify to van Eyck's particular aptitude for poetic and philosophical reflection, as well as to his attention to the ethnographic, anthropological, and artistic dimensions of the discipline.

As Francis Strauven states in an interview with the author:

> « 'Identity', the 'in-between', 'doorstep', 'place and occasion', the understanding of architecture as 'built meaning', the 'multi-meaning' of architectural form, 'polycentrality' as an alternative to classical subordinative centrality, all of these are notions that became part of international architectural thinking and speaking. Today they seem so evident that one thinks they were always common matter, since time immemorial. But I remember clearly the architectural terminology of around 1960, when the architectural discourse was purely functionalistic, both in the architects' talking and their teaching, just like in their international publications. It was AvE who introduced and thematised the above-mentioned notions in the course of the sixties, after which they gradually penetrated through a multitude of channels into architectural thinking. The introduction of a range of new concepts in the international terminology of a whole professional field, that's indeed no triffle. I think it's an extraordinary achievement. So, remarkably enough, AvE appears to have exerted a broader international influence through his writings than through his buildings »[11].

### *2.2.1 The Great Riot*

C.W. introduced the young van Eyck to the world of contemporary art and shared her reflections with him: the artist approaches reality with a spontaneity similar to that of the child or of so-called primitive man, managing to grasp its internal contrasts. One–many, subject–object, universal–individual are some of the pairs of opposing phenomena that Aldo van Eyck would soon theorize as *twin phenomena*, of clear Blakean derivation. Francis Strauven maintains that C.W. opened the young architect's mind to concepts and intuitions that had belonged to van Eyck's world since childhood: «The experience of the world in terms of mutually attunable polarities, the reconciliation of these polarities by the construction of symbolic forms and the crucial role of intuition and imagination in this process, were all notions with which he had grown up»[12], and which he

11 Itinerant interview, between the living room and the archive of Prof. Francis Strauven, Leuven, September 12, 2025, around 2:30 p.m., Appendices, p. 277.

12 Francis Strauven, *Making acquaintance with Carola Giedion-Welcker,* in *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of…*, cit., p. 82.

would soon formalize in his writings, but even earlier in the projects for the Amsterdam playgrounds.

Indeed, during the years in Zurich (1942–1946), his encounter with C.W. and with the leading figures of contemporary art enabled Aldo van Eyck to theorize what he would later call *The Great Riot*, that is, the great revolution carried out by artists and scientists, which the world of architecture was slow to understand and to apply: «the miracle they brought about has still affected no more than the periphery of architecture»[13].

The *miracle* brought about by art consisted in establishing that what we see is not reality, but only a point of view on it: «one is well aware of the fact that in art one cannot hope to represent in the image things as they are, nor even as they manifest themselves in all their living brilliance»[14]. Van Eyck reproached modern architecture for having become enslaved to form and technological innovation: «imagination is our last stronghold»[15]. It was necessary to think of architecture and the city as the materialization of relationships—formal and human—rather than as a collection of architectural facts disconnected from one another. «The culture of particular forms is approaching its end; the culture of determined relations has begun», a statement by Mondrian that van Eyck was fond of making his own.

Van Eyck appreciated the De Stijl movement; he had the opportunity to study Mondrian's works from Carola Giedion's collection and to share his theoretical reflections. In his essay on figurative and abstract art, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, published in the anthology *Circle*, Mondrian went so far as to argue that abstract art, by fleeing figuration, aims to render a relative and objective reality of a universal character, as opposed to the subjective and individual reality reproduced by the retinal image. «Universal beauty does not arise from the particular character of the form, but from the dynamic rhythm of its inherent relationships»[16], Mondrian states at the opening of his essay.

Similarly, van Eyck would come to argue that architecture must go beyond the limits of immediate vision, avoiding concerns of a merely formal nature, in order instead to identify relationships between parts: «The mere fact that habitat planning is arbitrarily split into two disciplines - architecture and urbanism - demonstrates that the principle of reciprocity has not yet opened the determinist mind to the necessity of transforming the mechanism of the design process»[17]. For a house is like a small city and a city is like a large house, he maintained, citing Leon Battista Alberti.

Van Eyck would return repeatedly over the years to the value of imagination. Already during the Sixth CIAM, held in Bridgwater in 1947, a passionate intervention by Aldo van Eyck during the discussions of the

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13 Aldo van Eyck, *The Great Riot,* in *The Child,* …cit., p. 29

14 Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and pure Plastic Art (Figurative Art and Non-Figurative Art)*, in J. Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo (eds.), *Circle. International survey of constructive art*, Praeger, New York 1937, p. 52

15 Aldo van Eyck, *Holland and De Stijl*, in *The Child,* … cit., p. 41

16 Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* ...cit., p. 41.

17 Aldo van Eyck, *A Home for Twin Phenomena*, in *The Child,* …cit., p. 60.

commission chaired by Giedion on Architectural Expression—which emphasized the artistic value of the discipline—prompted Le Corbusier to exclaim: «Enfin l'imagination entre les CIAM!»[18].

Later, in the celebrated issue of "Forum" entitled *The Story of Another Idea*, van Eyck would write:

> «Imagination remains the only common-denominator of man and nature, the only faculty capable of registering spiritual transformation simultaneously, and thus of significant prophecy. It is the prime detector of change. Although architecture— planning in general— answers very tangible functions, ultimately its object differs in no way from that of any other creative activity, i.e. to express through man and for man the natural flow of existence. The more tangible functions— those implied by the word functionalism"— are only relevant in so far as they help to adjust man's environment more accurately to his elementary requirements. But this, after all, is no more than a necessary preliminary»[19].

Imagination is therefore, for van Eyck, the faculty that allows architecture to move beyond the level of mere functionalism and to reconnect with the profound meaning of human existence: imagination does not operate as an alternative to reality, but within it; it is the element that transforms concrete data into occasions, that endows places with their capacity to host relationships, and that continually renews the bond between human beings and their environment. It is the instrument that allows architecture to remain human, and to restore to human beings the complexity, richness, and dignity of their experience of space.

## 2.2.2 Elementarism

Atlas, pp. 31-33.

The concept of relativity was also investigated by van Eyck in temporal terms, through the study of the archetypal forms of archaic art and architecture: for the Dutch architect, every human artifact derived from an imaginative process and contained within itself the experiences of the past.

Influenced by Surrealist artists, van Eyck approached archaic art (he considered the term "primitive" derogatory). During his university studies he found, in a bookshop in Zurich, a historic issue of the Surrealist journal "Minotaure" (1933, no. 2), *Mission Dakar–Djibouti 1931–33*, dedicated to the celebrated ethnographic expedition led by Marcel Griaule. In this issue, in addition to reading the research of the French ethnographer, he was able to appreciate photographs of Dogon masks and ritual objects, as well as the earthen architectures of North African tribes.

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18 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of…* cit., p. 118.

19 Aldo van Eyck, *Bridgewater*, in "Forum" n.7 1959, p 205.

This passion for archaic art, ethnography, and anthropology—already evident in a very young van Eyck during his years in England, when on the journey between London and the Sidcot School in Somerset he had on several occasions been able to admire the majesty of Stonehenge—was cultivated over the years. Van Eyck undertook several journeys to North Africa with his wife Hannie between 1947 and 1952.

Subsequently, his interest focused on the Dogon villages of Mali and the Pueblos of New Mexico, and from the 1970s onward this interest led him to visit a vast number of sites and to collect, almost obsessively, ethnic art artifacts from all over the world and from every historical period[20].

Thanks to this constellation of experiences, Frampton was able to speak of an "anthropological experience" when commenting on van Eyck's role within Team Ten[21].

What van Eyck understood was that, in architecture as in art, primordial forms were present—forms that the historical avant-gardes had succeeded in appropriating and translating into their artistic practice, and which van Eyck had had repeated opportunities to appreciate in Zurich. The sculptures of Arp, of whom he was a friend and great admirer, embodied a natural fusion between geometric rhythm and organic archetypes. These same essential forms would become a constant in his language and in his design practice, starting precisely with the Amsterdam playgrounds.

Strauven writes in this regard:

> «the intention to achieve a fusion of the organic and the geometric already appears in his own work, notably in the playgrounds he designed for the centre of Amsterdam. In these modest yet particularly refined samples of urban design he had evolved an elementary form language of his own, an idiom which constituted a synthesis of the geometry of De Stijl and the purified organicism of Brancusi»[22].

The Amsterdam playgrounds are in fact designed through the use and composition of elementary and tectonic forms: sandpits and cylindrical concrete elements are set in opposition to slender linear metal structures or to elements with more complex geometries.

The primary forms—circles, cylinders, planes, lines—are not abstract reductions, but condensations of meaning, prompts that invite gesture, play, and relationship. In his playgrounds, architecture returns to being a primary and shared language, capable of speaking to everyone because it is built from simple forms that are, at the same time, older than human imagination.

The language of architecture «must be elementary so that it is accessible to as many people as possible. At the same time it must, as said, aim

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20 At present, van Eyck's collection of ethnic art is no longer housed in his residence. For an account of the artworks and their arrangement within the architect's domestic spaces at the house in Loenen, see Alejandro Uribe's doctoral dissertation, *Aldo van Eyck: le Musée imaginaire. La casa de Aldo y Hannie van Eyck en Loenen aan de Vecht*, Universitat Politècnica de València, 2018.

21 See Note n.5.

22 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. Architettura moderna e cultura Dogon*, in "Lotus International" n 114 2002, p.124.

to re-evaluate the elementary aspects of life and thereby make existence simpler and more joyful»[23]

## 2.2.3 The In-between Realm

It is from Martin Buber's philosophy that van Eyck derives the idea of the "in-between," the *In-between Realm*—the realm of the intermediate—perhaps Aldo van Eyck's most celebrated expression, still widely used in contemporary architectural discourse, though often misunderstood in relation to its original meaning.

Van Eyck devotes the third chapter of *The Child, the City and the Artist* to the concept of the In-between Realm and, quoting Buber, writes: «on the other side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, in the narrow borderline where I and You meet lies the in-between realm»[24]. According to Buber, authentic relation occurs *in-between*, in the threshold where I and You encounter and recognize one another. It is a place of reciprocity and presence, where neither dominates the other and where meaning is generated.

For van Eyck, therefore, the *In-between Realm* is a place that is neither private nor public, neither interior nor exterior, neither closed nor open: it is a relational condition made concrete through architectural form. It is the place of encounter, of relationship, of mediation between opposites.

As early as 1925, Paul Klee, in his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*[25], referred to the space between polar forces, defining it as *Medialgebiet* (medial domain): for the artist, the generative space of form corresponded to the zone in which lines, points, movements, and tensions become figures. As Mario Lupano writes in the afterword to the Italian edition of the Sketchbook, for Klee

> «to compose does not mean to reduce the multiplicity of languages to a single unity, but to recognize the internal articulations of the naturalness of the universe. [...] In the creative act, opposites coexist in a dense interplay of references between affirmation and negation, without it being possible to clearly identify a single, univocal alternative»[26].

Van Eyck appropriates the reflections of both Buber and Klee in order to define the In-between space as the space of relationship, the space in which *twin phenomena*—pairs of opposing phenomena of everyday life—meet. The In-between space is the space of the threshold, of the door, of the window, between inside and outside; it is the space of the shoreline, between water and land. It is a space that architecture must employ and

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23 Francis Strauven, Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of... cit., p. 150.

24 Martin Buber, *Das Problem des Menschen* (1943) in Aldo van Eyck, *The In-between Realm*, in *The Child, …* cit., p. 54.

25 Paul Klee, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch*, Bauhausbuch, Munich, 1925.

26 Mario Lupano, *Sul «Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch»*, in M. Lupano (ed.) *Paul Klee. Quaderno di schizzi pedagogici*, Abscondita, Milan 2002, p. 66.

fill with meaning.

Two issues of "Forum" were also devoted to the In-between Realm: issue no. 8 of 1959, conceived by van Eyck and edited by Joop Hardy, entitled *Drempel en ontmoeting: de gestalte van het tussen* (Threshold and encounter: the form of the in-between); and issue no. 3 of 1960/61, *Deur en raam* (Door and window). The in-between must breathe—inhale and exhale—together with human beings: it is simultaneously openness and protection, freedom and security, movement and stillness.

Even before "Forum", and prior to *The Child, the City and the Artist*, these theoretical and conceptual reflections had already been translated by van Eyck into architecture. The Amsterdam playgrounds are extensions and prolongations of the domestic threshold: spaces that welcome, invite play and interaction, and are legible with the clarity characteristic of his elementary language. As van Eyck himself writes in the *Lost Identity Grid* presented at the 10th CIAM in Dubrovnik, "The playground as core and extension of the doorstep." They are extensions of the threshold; spaces of the in-between; spaces that are neither fully built nor empty. They are not specifically designed for play, but rather allow themselves to be freely interpreted by citizens, as will be discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

## 2.2.4 Labyrinthian Clarity

> «What matters is not space but the interior of space -and the inner horizon of that interior. The large house - little city statement (the one that says: a house is a tiny city, a city a huge house) is ambiguous and consciously so. In fact, its ambiguity is of a kind I should like to see transposed to architecture. It points, moreover, towards a particular kind of clarity neither house nor city can do without. A kind which never quite relinquishes its full meaning. Call it labyrinthian clarity. Such clarity (ally of significant ambiguity) softens the edges of time and space and transcends visibility (allows spaces to enter each other and occasions to encounter each other in the mind's interior). It is kaleidoscopic. The in-between realm is never without it»[27].

Right-size goes hand in hand with it (and so, of course, does the inner horizon of space).

The expression *labyrinthian clarity*, which van Eyck develops and frequently employs in his writings as well as a design principle, is clearly an oxymoron: it represents an essential principle capable of synthesizing the polarities through which the world is expressed. It denotes the ability to reconcile complexity and legibility, multiplicity and unity—the space of *twin phenomena*. The image of the labyrinth does not evoke confusion, but rather the idea of a space that invites movement, exploration, and relationship. Clarity, on the other hand, is neither simplification nor

27 Aldo van Eyck, *Labyrinthian Clarity*, in F. Strauven, V. Lingtelijn (eds.) *Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947-1998,* SUN, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 472-473.

geometric rigidity, but the condition that allows space to be inhabitable, intelligible, and familiar.

Van Eyck was convinced that the modern city had lost this dual nature: too often ordered to the point of sterility, or chaotic to the point of indifference. *Labyrinthian Clarity* is his response. It means designing spaces that offer multiple paths without losing coherence; spaces that do not impose a single direction, but guide discreetly; spaces in which a child can move freely without feeling lost.

In van Eyck's work as a designer, this principle is articulated first and foremost through the Amsterdam playgrounds: places that are minutely articulated yet immediately legible, where every element suggests possibilities without ever prescribing them. It is a space whose clarity emerges through movement, rather than through static vision.

## 2.3 Playgrounds: Tools for Imagination

Aldo van Eyck was convinced that architecture—understood as an art—and space—understood as place—possess the capacity to educate citizens. In a 1957 article for the magazine *Goed Wonen*, he wrote that the Amsterdam playgrounds and the equipment he designed for them were *tools for imagination*:

> «they represent a conscious attempt to visually engage the child's movement within the city. Moreover, they are places where energy condenses and spreads; indications of a stronger sense of community belonging. Places in which the city's inhabitant rediscovers himself»[28].

All the objects designed by van Eyck, in fact, possessed a plural potential of use: they were fixed structures, characterized by essential forms and materials that, precisely in their elementariness, offered a variety of interpretations and modes of use, capable of stimulating the imaginative capacity of citizens—not only of the youngest ones.

Herman Hertzberger writes, in an interview preserved in the archives of the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam:

> «Children's playgrounds such as those designed by Van Eyck are in fact a prosthesis for an amputated city. After all, the city itself ought to be a large playground. CIAM theories turned play into a function, and playgrounds for children were designed accordingly, whereas in every Indian city or in any other culture, children can play with everything that is there. This is a good example—by way of illustration—of how Team Ten disagreed with CIAM and how ***Forum*** sought to address the issue and to realize it, so to speak. [...] Architects must work in such a way that cities acquire the characteristics of a playground, like the old canal houses with steps and railings that function as one large playground»[29].

### 2.3.1 Genealogy

Atlas, p. 42.

It is important to remember that, as early as the late nineteenth century, Amsterdam already showed particular attention to children's play experiences: volunteers and neighborhood associations organized spaces for play, later gathered under what became the *Amsterdamse Speeltuin Vereniging* (ASV, Amsterdam Playground Association). The so-called play gardens were not public gardens in the traditional sense, but enclosed spaces, privately managed, where children could use playground

28 Aldo van Eyck, *Het kind en de stad*, in "Goed Wonen", October 1957, p. 207.

29 Interview met Herman Hertzberger, Delft 10 mei 1983, Nieuwe Instituut, Herman Hertzberger, HERTd785.

equipment such as slides and swings and take part in recreational, musical, and gymnastic activities[30].

Although managed and maintained privately, their existence attests to a special societal concern for play and leisure activities. The first of these play gardens opened in 1880, funded by wealthy citizens, including the industrialist Nicolaas Tetterode, socially committed to the welfare of workers and their families[31].

Access to these spaces, however, was not free: members paid an annual fee, while occasional visitors had to purchase a day ticket. In this sense, play gardens were not truly public spaces but closed institutions, both physically (fenced, monitored, protected) and ideologically (linked to a specific social or religious membership) [32].

By the 1930s, due to the economic crisis of 1929, municipal subsidies to the ASV were reduced. Funding decreased further after World War II, when the need to provide accessible and truly public play equipment in a rapidly transforming city such as postwar Amsterdam conflicted with the exclusive nature of these spaces.

Alongside these privately managed spaces, there were, albeit in small numbers, public spaces equipped for play: Piet Krammer, an architect associated with the Amsterdam School, designed, as an employee of the Public Works Department, a series of wooden sandboxes accessible by three or four continuous steps defining their edges—the same sandboxes that van Eyck would later incorporate into his playgrounds[33].

Beyond these few public play spaces and the private play gardens, before World War II children in Amsterdam mostly played in the streets, sharing space with adults and vehicles, often generating disorder and safety issues. Authorities attempted to restrict street play for children, officially banning it in 1942[34].

It was in this context—between the decline of the association model and the Municipality of Amsterdam's search for new forms of play space—that the first experiments by the Public Works Department began. This period marks the crucial passage toward Aldo van Eyck's innovative vision, which would radically rethink play not as an activity confined to enclosed, privately managed spaces, but as an integral part of everyday urban space.

When Aldo van Eyck returned to the Netherlands in the autumn of 1946, he began working at the Department for Urban Development (*Afdeling Stadsontwikkeling*), led by Cor van Eesteren. Under the supervision

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30 For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of play spaces in the city of Amsterdam, see Lianne Verstrate, Lia Karsten, *The Creation of Play Spaces in Twentieth-century Amsterdam: From an Intervention of Civil Actors to a Public Policy*, in Landscape Research 36 (1), pp. 85–109, doi:10.1080/01426397.2010.536205.

31 ibid. p. 92.

32 As reported by Lianne Verstrate and Lia Karsten, early twentieth-century Dutch society was "pillarized," meaning it was organized into four social groups (pillars), each of which managed its own social institutions (schools, churches, newspapers, universities) as well as its own play spaces.

33 Ingeborg de Roode, *The Play object: more durable that snow*, in L. Lefaivre, I. de Roode (eds.), Aldo van Eyck. The playgrounds and the city, NAI, Rotterdam 2001, p.84.

34 L. Verstrate, L. Karsten, *The Creation of Play Spaces* … cit., p. 91.

of Jacoba Mulder, an engineer and urban planner who had been working in that office since 1930, he initially contributed, at least for a period, to the city's General Expansion Plan. At twenty-eight, he did not hesitate to express doubts about the department's planning methods and Van Eesteren's design ideas.

As Jacoba Mulder recounted to Francis Strauven in an unpublished 1982 interview[35], his first assignment was a small subdivision plan south of the Rivierenlaan, on the curve of the Amstel. Van Eyck worked on this project for a long time without providing any updates, until Mulder decided it was time to check his progress. She found him sitting in front of a large blank sheet: nothing had been drawn yet. When asked how he was proceeding, Van Eyck replied: «Well, I designed a chair, and I have been working on it for a year. I worked on it every day». According to Mulder, until he fully understood all the data of the subdivision, Van Eyck would not draw anything.

She then decided to assign him a new task: designing a playground, the first in a long series, in a southern Amsterdam neighborhood, Bertelmanplein—one of the few playgrounds still existing despite numerous modifications.

Mulder stated to Strauven:

> «At that time in Amsterdam, there were actually only a limited number of playgrounds, not accessible to everyone. They belonged to the *Amsterdams Speeltuin Verbond*, the city playground association. They were fenced plots with sandboxes, swings, seesaws, and so on. But for children who did not have a playground in their neighborhood, there was practically no play equipment. I lived in one of those neighborhoods without any playgrounds. I remember seeing one morning a little girl with a shovel looking for soft soil to play with, and she couldn't find any. You know, Amsterdam is completely built on beautiful sand, but near the planted areas there is that layer of black soil. It seemed so sad to me, and it made me realize that it would be appropriate to build at least one sandbox in every neighborhood»[36].

Even during World War II, the Public Works Department discussed the possibility of converting abandoned or unused areas into playgrounds, while emphasizing the importance, for hygiene reasons, of making the usual sandboxes out of concrete rather than wood, and equipping these parks with metal climbing structures[37].

In this climate of growing attention to the quality of spaces for children, van Eyck's intervention marked a true turning point. What the architect did was to rethink space through a sandbox—following Dutch tradition and the Public Works Department's new guidelines—along with some concrete elements and a climbing structure. The 1947 project

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35 See Francis Strauven, *Interview with J.H. Mulder* – 30 March 1982, Appendix p. 255, Thanks to Francis Strauven for kindly making it available to the author.

36 ibidem.

37 Ingeborg de Roode, *The Play object: more durable that snow*, in L. Lefaivre, I. de Roode (eds.), *Aldo van Eyck. The playgrounds* … cit, p.85.

was so well received by citizens that the City Council soon allocated a substantial sum, one million guilders, to build a number of playgrounds in the capital. The number of these spaces grew exponentially over time: Mulder recalls, «in 1950 there were 12, in 1955 54, in 1960 234, and in 1965,437. Today (1982) there are more than 700. Van Eyck designed most of them, including all the play equipment, the various climbing domes, arches, and structures»[38].

The initial impetus for the creation of the first playground is therefore attributable to Jacoba Mulder, as is the identification of the plots to be reclaimed to the Department for Urban Development. But it was the fervor of the young van Eyck—with extraordinary artistic sensitivity—that transformed those residual lots into a network of spaces capable of reshaping the city's urban landscape.

Atlas, pp. 43-51.

## 2.3.2 The Value of the Abacus

Four years after the realization of the first playground, during the 1951 CIAM in Hoddesdon, Sigfried Giedion—then engaged in research on archetypal forms in art and architecture—drew the Congress's attention to the children's playgrounds of Amsterdam. He expressed his appreciation for the effect that Aldo van Eyck's elementary and archetypal compositions had on urban life, as they were capable of encouraging playful action. He stated to the Congress:

> «A few days ago I had another experience in Amsterdam. I saw the children's playgrounds that have been created under the guidance of Van Eesteren and designed by a young member of the Dutch CIAM group, Van Eyck. They have been made from very simple elements—a large sand pit, some upright steel hoops, a parallel pair of tree trunks lying horizontally. But these simple elements are grouped so subtly— with a background of the Stiji movement and modern art which injects some kind of vitamin into the whole thing— that they act as fantastic starting points for the child's imagination. These playgrounds also, simultaneously, fulfil another function. A formerly useless piece of waste ground has been transformed, by an extremely careful layout, into an active urban element»[39].

What van Eyck did in order to design the subsequent playgrounds was to define an abacus of elements with simple forms and materials. These were, as he described them, *borrowings from the city*, made of inexpensive materials that were easily available in the post-war period. As his wife Han-

38 Francis Strauven, *Interview with J.H. Mulder* – 30 March 1982, Appendix p. 256.

39 Sigfried Giedion, *Historical Background to the Core*, in Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, Josep Lluis Sert, Ernesto Natan Rogers (eds.), *The Heart of the City: Towards the humanization of urban life*, Pellegrini and Cudahy, New York 1952, p. 18.

nie van Eyck stated in an interview with Ingeborg de Roode, «Aldo made things that stimulated children's imagination. Today's objects encourage passive play»[40]. Hannie van Eyck was referring to her husband's aversion to the use of fairy-tale or animal-like forms in playground design—forms that, in his view, would not stimulate children's imagination because they were too clearly defined and therefore open to little interpretation.

Thus, in a lecture delivered in 1962, van Eyck argued that «playground equipment has to be real, just as a telephone box is real because you can phone in it and a bench is real because you can sit on it. An aluminium elephant is not real, since an elephant is meant to move, and as an object in the street it is unnatural. A child can make anything out of a simple form. If a play apparatus represents an animal from the start, the form dictates its construction so much that it puts an end to pure play»[41].

The playgrounds designed by van Eyck are open to the free interpretation of their users and employ forms akin to those found in Mondrian's paintings and Arp's Dadaist sculptures: elementary geometric forms, linked to one another through precise relationships. Van Eyck adopts a language that lends itself both to individual and collective use, and his compositions consist of a set of recurring elements: the sandpit, reinforced-concrete cylinders, climbing structures, and balance beams.

The sandpit represented the central element of these spaces. Van Eyck reintroduced the wooden sandpits already present in Amsterdam—such as those designed by Piet Kramer in the late 1920s—transforming them into a defining feature of the city's playgrounds, an element that would change the face of Amsterdam between the 1950s and the late 1970s.

The sandpits took on different forms and dimensions depending on the site: square, triangular, circular, hexagonal, ranging from 5 to 15 metres in size. They were prefabricated concrete basins, edged by a chamfered wall approximately 30 cm high, which allowed adults to sit and was easily climbable for children. The sandpits could be «experienced kinds of receptive bodies, welcoming and sheltering the playing child»[42], and they suggested contrasting tactile sensations: hardness and roughness through the concrete, softness and malleability through the sand. «The materials always seemed robust and solid. I still remember the edge of the sandpit with a sort of pebbled surface», recalls, in an interview, a resident of Amsterdam who frequented the playgrounds as a child[43].

> «A large variety of sandpits has been evolved. Some can be regarded as standard shapes [...] others are built up from standard elements used throughout in order to comply with the specific problems of a given site.

40 Ingeborh de Roode, Interview with Hannie van Eyck, in L. Lefaivre, I. de Roode (eds.), Aldo van Eyck. The playgrounds …, cit., p. 15.

41 Aldo van Eyck, *Over de vormgeving van speeltoestelen en de inrichting van speelplaatsen (On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds*, lecture in Marcanti, Amsterdam, 1962) in V. Lingtelijn F. Strauven (eds.) *Aldo van Eyck. Collected articles*…cit., p. 114.

42 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. Modern Architecture and Dogon Culture*, in "Lotus International" n 114, 2002, p.124.

43 See interview in the Appendix, *Interview with a group of Amsterdam residents who played in Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds between the 1950s and 1970s*, 5–7 November 2025.

> The largest circular sandpits used have a diameter of 50 feat, whereas the smallest, used in the new quarters where each housing group has its own small playground, have a diameter of 15 or 20 feet. Two distinct kinds of concrete elements ware developed: that with a flat top equal to the total breadth of the element— approximately 14 inches— affords excellent possibilities for children who like running along something fairly narrow. Mothers of very small children can sit near them whilst they play. The other kind, with a flat top which does not extend the full width of the element, has the advantage that the children can empty their sand moulds on the lower level, so that less sand is spilt—a constant problem since wind is almost always blowing that sand into the houses. All sand pits have a concrete bottom 3 feet below the level of the sand in order to prevent children digging tunnels too deep, a game which can easily prove fatal»[44].

Van Eyck also frequently used concrete cylinders, placed either inside or outside the sandpit and offering multiple uses: seats, stepping elements in an uneven path, or small tables within the sandpit. They were arranged according to precise compositions: in straight lines, suggesting a ground line or a path; or in circular formations, recalling megalithic structures or Brancusi's sculptures. Occasionally, they featured small recesses where rainwater would collect, becoming an opportunity for further play and reflections.

Opposed to these concrete elements were light components made of metal tubing: the climbing structures. These too were based on primary, archetypal forms, whose complexity increased over time. There were basic structures, shaped like an inverted "C", used by children for somersaults, with heights ranging from 80 to 100 centimetres. Their placement within the playground also varied, and they were sometimes used as elements separating the play area from the city (and from automobile traffic).

Alongside these tubular elements, a whole family of more complex climbing structures developed—many of which are still in production today[45]—specifically designed by van Eyck, initially in galvanised steel and, from 1954 onwards, in anodised aluminium. From the simple arch, the designs evolved into domes, and later into conical or funnel-like forms. These were not structures intended for children of a specific age, nor did they impose a fixed function; rather, they allowed children to explore space through their bodies and to invent different uses: climbing, huts, lookout hills. Tools for imagining or discovering things and space on one's own.

From the 1960s onwards, the complexity of these structures increased further: van Eyck developed hexagonal, honeycomb-like forms and designed metal structures that, like fountains, emitted sprays of water.

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44 Aldo van Eyck, Shapes of sandipts on playgrounds in Amsterdam, Holland, in Alfred Ledermann, Alfred Trachsel, Spielplatz und Gemeinschaftszentren, The Architectural Press, London 1959, p. 44.

45 It is easy to encounter these climbing structures in various Dutch cities today, although without the same effective compositional logic that characterised the original playground designs. The company BoerPlay, in fact, continues to produce these structures. See the website: https://www.boerplay.com/en/producten/?_productlijn=classic-play (accessed July 2025).

Mrs Evelien Donker, a resident of Amsterdam, recalls:

> «I played at the playgrounds of Columbusplein and Bilbaoplein. At Columbusplein I went every day, it was my favorite playground. In summer, water would come out of one of the metal climbing structures—such a delight! There was also a large igloo, where I spent many hours climbing, hanging, and swinging: partner flips, hanging with arms or legs (in the knee fold). I would hang upside down, just swinging and watching the world upside down. Wonderful. I played with neighbors or school friends, but also alone, and I didn't mind at all»[46].

From the 1960s onwards, van Eyck also patented concrete climbing structures: elements to climb and jump on, composed of assembled modular units—square or hexagonal—of varying heights.

In addition to metal and concrete, van Eyck used wood, not only for benches but also for balance beams: wooden beams arranged horizontally on supports just a few centimetres above the ground, marking directions and enriching the motor, visual, and haptic experience of the play spaces.

Through these few elements, which together form a true abacus, van Eyck attributed new value to the city's spaces, each with its own constraints and characteristics, by adopting precise compositional strategies based on the visual weight of the elements. Francis Strauven argues[47] that what held these elements together was a focus, generally marked by the sandpit, which never occupied the geometric centre of the site. The visual weight of the main element was counterbalanced by the careful positioning of the other components, smaller in scale—compositions highly attentive to the perception of the city's inhabitants.

Through all these elements, the hand, the body, and direct contact with surfaces become an integral part of the experience of space: the roughness of concrete, the temperature of metal, the porosity of sand or stone guide an immediate, instinctive form of learning that precedes vision and conditions perception. It is through this physical proximity that the elements of the playgrounds acquire a living character, no longer mere items of urban furniture but matter with which children establish a daily dialogue. The value of tactile experience stems from a particular aesthetic sensitivity that, although never explicitly articulated by van Eyck, in the author's view derives from a broader artistic sensibility. It is no coincidence that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote the *Manifesto of Tactilism*, which placed touch at the centre of aesthetic experience, promoting an active, bodily and plural perception of the work: a cultural climate that cannot but have contributed, at least in the background, to shaping the material awareness underlying van Eyck's attention to the tactile quality of architecture.

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46 See interview in the Appendix, A Group of Amsterdam Residents, p. 245.

47 Francis Strauven, *Projects and Teaching 1947-55*, in Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of …, cit., p. 150.

Van Eyck would in fact write: «architecture should transcend the sensorial limitations of immediate visibility, i.e. that it cannot be guided by formal preoccupations or rely on perceptive impact alone»[48].

Van Eyck was opposed to concealing, through colour, not only the natural finish of the elements but also that of the bare walls that most often bordered the playgrounds. Even in response to explicit requests from the Public Works Department of the City of Amsterdam, he maintained that he preferred «what he called the 'positive' aspect of the 'plastic' reality of their roughness».[49] Only one case constitutes an exception: the playground designed for the Zeedijk neighbourhood in 1955, demolished in 1977, for which van Eyck persuaded the authorities to commission a pictorial work by his friend and brother-in-law, the artist Joost van Roojen, along the walls enclosing the space. It was a geometric, colourful and continuous composition that intertwined with the chaos of the surrounding houses and buildings, resulting in a successful collaboration between artistic and architectural intervention.

About a decade after the construction of the first playground, Aldo van Eyck would recall:

> «Since the end of the war I have had the opportunity of adapting a large number of sites to the needs of children by re-designing them. Of these, some 70 have been completed in the densely built-up quarters of Amsterdam and about an equal number in new housing districts, where the problem is less acute. The sites thus adapted were for the most part there, waiting (as many similar sites are waiting in every city of the world), forsaken, useless and dead: innumerable formless islands and plots left over by road engineers and demolition workers; often better suited for use by children than for development as ornamental public gardens. The effect on the city at large of what has been done so far is fundamental because it influences more than just the children who play there. These playing children demonstrate the latent possibilities of urban renewal in general. With the aid of a little concrete, wood and aluminium there have come into existence social centres: places where children and parents meet, true extensions of the doorstep - for it is on the doorstep that the outside and inside worlds, the spheres of collective life and of individual life, intersect»[50].

48 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, …* cit., p. 49.

49 From a letter by A. van Eyck to the Director of Public Works dated 27 August 1951, in Liane Lefaivre, Space, *Place and Play*, in L. Lefaivre, I. de Roode (eds.), *Aldo van Eyck. The Playgrounds …* cit., p. 29.

50 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child and the City*, in A. Ledermann, A. Trachsel, *Spielplatz und…* cit., p. 37.

## 2.3.3 The Value of the Child's Experience in the City

In their essential character, playgrounds were—and continue to be, despite the small number that have survived—extraordinary devices for physical exercise and bodily exploration. Stripped of all superfluous elements, their structures invited running, climbing, balancing, and jumping: each gesture implied a different way of measuring space, of understanding its limits, distances, and resistances. The child's body thus became the primary instrument for reading the environment, and the playground a small laboratory in which balance, perception, rhythm, and orientation could be refined. Experiencing space through movement meant not only playing, but learning to establish a direct, immediate, and trusting relationship with the surrounding city.

Evidence of the Amsterdam municipality's attention to the physical well-being and playful activity of its youngest citizens can be found in the establishment, in 1954, of a specific task force known as the *Commission for Sports and Recreational Facilities*, whose role was to support the creation of a network of playgrounds and spaces for play and sport. The Commission had an advisory function and sought to influence municipal council decisions regarding leisure time. Every project concerning public play spaces had to receive the Commission's approval before being realized. Its members included representatives from all departments of Amsterdam's Public Works, occasionally joined by police officers or other public officials[51].

> «The opportunity for the child to discover its own movement is an integral part of the city; the city is also a playground. The child uses everything there, everything built, everything it can crawl through and climb over. Things children are not actually allowed to play with, but with which they can play very well. I would not like to remove this opportunity altogether, nor is it possible to do so. [...] It is my opinion that the play apparatus should be elementary in form in the sense that they satisfy movements that the child discovers anyway. Contrived ideas may be fun at a fair, which is after all temporary, but in a city we have to create the opportunity for what the child already does: tumbling, climbing, jumping. The child likes leapfrogging, so we make short pillars for that purpose. We cannot outstrip the child, we just imitate it. Fifteen years ago we still thought we had to create complicated things for play. Now we set up a simple tumbling frame, and we see the children somersaulting round it like flywheels while talking at the same time! It's a fine thing a human flywheel right there on the street. The tumbling child belongs in the city scene, just like herring carts»[52].

51 Lianne Verstrate, Lia Karsten, *The Creation of Play Spaces in Twentieth-Century Amsterdam: From an Intervention of Civil Actors to a Public Policy*, in Landscape Research 36 (1), pp-87-88, doi:10.1080/01426397.2010.536205.

52 Aldo van Eyck, *On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds*, in V. Ligtelijn F. Strauven (eds.) *Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles*...cit., p. 112-119.

For Aldo van Eyck, the street is the space where children first explore the outside world, where they learn and experiment with wider distances, different surfaces, and new sounds. It is an environment dense with ordinary activities that, precisely because of their ordinariness, become a school for the child: «here children learn for the first time of the world outside the dwelling»[53].

To the child, the city, and the artist's ability to read reality, van Eyck devoted a complex and rich reflection on architecture, written in 1962 but published posthumously only in 2008: *The Child, the City and the Artist*[54]. The book originated from a Rockefeller Foundation grant, following a period of teaching at the University of Pennsylvania—possibly prompted by an invitation from Louis Kahn, whom van Eyck met in Otterlo during the last CIAM, in 1959. As the editors explain in the introductory notes, while in Philadelphia van Eyck proposed and was allowed to direct a project studying the interaction between the city and children, also based on the design experience of the Amsterdam playgrounds. The results of this project were so significant that the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania awarded the Dutch architect a fellowship from the prestigious American foundation to make his reflections public. No publisher, however, was willing to publish the text, and many of the writings appeared instead in "Forum", the Dutch architecture magazine, whose editorial board van Eyck was part of between 1959 and 1963[55].

Atlas, pp. 53-55.

The text does not claim to develop a complete theory or a defined design method; rather, it presents itself as a series of fragments, reflections, and new perspectives on post-war reality: «essays conceived as an appeal to the imagination»[56], as van Eyck writes in the opening lines. A large part of the essay *The Child, the City and the Artist* derives from a text van Eyck wrote in 1950 for a planned but never published UNESCO[57] journal, conceived by S. Giedion, Van Eesteren, and Herbert Read; the project was abandoned the following year.

«That whatever obstructs new and vital ways of education obstructs spiritual integration»[58]: with this statement, van Eyck distances himself from forms of education based on fear and punishment, instead praising educational methods that foster the development of the child's imaginative faculties, in order to cultivate critical thinking and what he calls "spiritual integration"—the capacity to relate creatively to everyday life. Reflecting on the value of education, he writes:

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53 Aldo van Eyck, *The story of another idea*, in "Forum" n 7 1959, p. 221.

54 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, the City and the Artist*, written in 1962, edited by Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven, SUN, 2008.

55 For an analysis of Forum, see: Maristella Casciato, *"Forum": Architecture and Culture in the Early 1960s*, in Casabella, no. 606, 1993.

56 Aldo van Eyck, The child, …, cit., p. 18.

57 Ibid., note 5, Chapter 1.

58 ibid. p. 20.

> «generally speaking I use the word education in a special connotation: the realization of ourselves—that which is required to effect this realization: the personal annihilation of the impersonal»[59].

According to the architect, this «personal annihilation of the impersonal» occurs through awareness and understanding, since creative capacity develops by going beyond mere spontaneity. What van Eyck finds most significant is precisely the process: a process that does not prepare the child for adult life, but rather «stimulates children to be children».

The child and their needs are not only fully acknowledged by van Eyck; childhood forces are considered «indispensable and spiritually stimulating».

A foundational moment for effective educational action is aesthetic confrontation: an education grounded in artistic experience. Van Eyck knew and cited Herbert Read's *Education through Art*[60], a book published in 1943, «which UNESCO would do well to offer to every UNO-member for Christmas!»[61]On the educational value of art, in a letter to Giedion, van Eyck writes:

> «Thus art today no longer represents culture, but human existence as such. Art is not one thing but next to nature everything. [...] The development of this creative sensibility is a prerogative not only in the pedagogic sense advocated by Herbert Read in Education through Art but because it is the only instrument we have left with which to detect the spiritual structure of a new era - a new outlook- prior to its universal acknowledgement. There is only one guide left to us, call it imagination, call it creative sensibility. Without this third eye, everything remains dark. The object of education is to develop this third eye for with it we can discern what is constant in all things and what is constantly changing, with it we can reject what is neither constant nor constantly changing, i.e. what is culturally irrelevant and spiritually bankrupt»[62].

In the introduction to the Italian edition of Herbert Read's *Education through Art*, published by Edizioni di Comunità[63] in 1969, Giulio Carlo Argan writes that

> «since art is the typical expression of a creative principle, aesthetic activity presides over all human development, both individual and collective. Since education is nothing other than development within and with society, it follows that art is the active principle of all possible education. [...] Play must be considered at once an aesthetic and a social activity, the first

59 ibid., note 6, Chapter 1.

60 Herbert Read, *Education through Art,* Faber & Faber, London, 1943. Van Eyck owned a copy of this book inscribed by the author on 18 December 1945.

61 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child,* … cit., p. 23.

62 Aldo van Eyck, *On the Function of a UNESCO Art Review*, letter to Sigfried Giedion, undated manuscript, presumably written in September 1950, in F. Strauven, V. Ligtelijn (eds.), *Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles* ... cit., p. 48.

63 Edizioni di Comunità is the publishing house founded by Adriano Olivetti.

impulse to do something together, that is, to build groups according to a specific 'productive' function».[64]

There is no need to think of evolution solely in terms of technological innovation, because however important material progress may be, it will remain derivative unless a *"full awareness of existence"*[65] is achieved. The child, van Eyck argues, possesses boundless energy with which they are capable of reading the characteristics of a place and transforming it into a space for play, even when the urban space has not been specifically designed for playful activities.

« What the child needs is something more permanent - if less abun-dant- than snow: something quite unlike snow, incidentally, but which the city can also absorb without losing what remains of its identity - something intended for the child and discovered by him as his own, though it is not entirely different from the incidental places, things and materials that serve totally different purposes; something which child adapts in its own way to its imaginative life; something elementary, which is placed where there is still room for it, to attract the child from darkness and danger into light and greater safety. The child cannot discover the city unless the city rediscovers its children: the discovery must be reciprocal or it is no discovery at all»[66].

## 2.3.4 Playgrounds on Display

The first real occasion for confrontation and communication of what van Eyck had already realized in Amsterdam was the 10th CIAM, held in Dubrovnik in 1956. Almost ten years had passed since the construction of the first playground. The presentation was addressed to a specialist audience of professionals, and the displayed panels did not yet constitute a proper exhibition, but rather an initial moment of sharing design contents and intentions.

Atlas, pp. 58-59.

### *Lost Identity Grid*, 10th CIAM, Dubrovnik, 1956

By 1956, Aldo van Eyck, a young member of the Dutch group *De 8*, had already designed and built more than 120 playgrounds in the city of Amsterdam, in addition to the Nagele school, and was working on the design of the new orphanage in the Dutch capital. At the 10th CIAM in Dubrovnik he presented two grids: the *Nagele Grid* and the *Lost Identity Grid*. Each board consisted of a sequence of four panels, responding to the new guidelines proposed by the younger generation within CIAM and overcoming the verbose diagrammatic analyses of the older guard.

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64 Giulio Carlo Argan, *Prefazione,* in Herbert Read, *Educare con l'arte* (1943), Edizioni di Comunità, Milan 1962, pp.11-13.

65 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child,* … cit., p. 20.

66 Aldo van Eyck, *The Child and the City*, in A. Ledermann, A. Trachsel, *Spielplatz und*… cit., p. 35.

In the *Lost Identity Grid*, each panel corresponds to a specific moment: definition of the problem, a symbolic and temporary solution, a possible design solution, and a poetic appeal to the authorities. In the first moment, photographs by Emmy Andriesse and Cas Oorthuys illustrate the problem: the lack of qualified spaces for play and the consequent use by children of residual and unqualified urban spaces for play activities.

The temporary solution to this deficiency, proposed in the second panel, shows the sudden appropriation of urban spaces by children following a snowfall. Snow suspends the ordinary rules of the city and activates a shared imaginary, «hand in hand with whatever represents imagination». In Cas Oorthuys's well-known photograph, a long Amsterdam canal is transformed into a white backdrop upon which dark figures slide, run, and reclaim the city.

> «Look, it's snowing! A miraculous prank of the sky—a fleeting correction. Suddenly, the child is the Lord of the city. The child is everywhere, rediscovering the city while the city in turn rediscovers its children, even if only for a while. Yet what is needed is something more permanent than snow»[67].

The third panel corresponds to the decisive design proposal: rethinking the residual spaces of the city as places for play through objects with elementary forms and simple materials, which do not alter the urban character of these spaces while at the same time allowing for the child's multiple interpretations. «The playground as core and extension of the doorstep», the architect writes next to photographs of four Amsterdam playgrounds.

In the final panel, the photographic viewpoint moves closer in order to convey the essentiality of the forms—reinforced concrete cylinders, metal bars, a sandpit—through which van Eyck rethought the in-between spaces of post-war Amsterdam. These forms and compositions are borrowed from the artists of the avant-garde movements that promoted a profound aesthetic renewal: *The Great Riot*. «The artist, the child's essential ally, is there to soften the conflict»[68].

Three years earlier, in Aix-en-Provence, during the 9th CIAM of 1953, the Smithsons had presented their *Urban Re-Identification Grid* (1953). In both grids—the Smithsons' of 1953 and van Eyck's of 1956—the child and their playful experience in urban space become the paradigm of a new idea of the city and an opportunity for a renewed education to space.

Henderson's photographs were used by the Smithsons to openly oppose the positions of the previous congress, held in Hoddesdon in 1951 and focused on the city *Core*[69], and to portray the social vitality of the

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67 Aldo van Eyck, Het kind en de stad, in "Goed Wonen", October 1957.

68 ibidem.

69 Dirk van den Heuvel, *Urban Re-Identification Grid, 1953. Alison and Peter Smithson*, in D. van den Heuvel M. Risselada (eds.) *TEAM 10. 1953-81. In search of a Utopia od the present*, NAI Publisher, Rotterdam 2005, p. 30.

streets of London's outskirts, as had already been highlighted by the studies of anthropologist Judith Stephen Henderson, the photographer's wife.

The Dutch photographs, by contrast, denounce the lack of attention paid to play within planning practices. Consequently, the tone of the photographs in the two grids differs: pop in the English case, documentary and denunciatory in the Dutch one.

The different character of the two boards is already explicit in their titles. The prefix *Re-Identification* presupposes a new possibility, a reconnection with the real life of the streets, a renewed gaze at what already functions socially. Van Eyck's register is more critical, though not necessarily pessimistic: *Lost Identity* does not merely denounce an absence, but suggests the possibility of conferring a new identity. It is a mournful title, yet one charged with design tension and therefore with hope.

Thus, the photographs by Nigel Henderson—who, together with the Smithsons, was part of the *Independent Group*—construct an urban narrative through dynamic framings and mobile viewpoints, decidedly pop and vibrant. These images adopt close-up cuts and sudden perspectival escapes. The camera descends in height, often to the child's level: the gaze reaches the pavement, skimming the ground. This choice overturns the zenithal verticality of modernist planning and conceives the city as a field of bodily experience.

By contrast, the Dutch photographers Emmy Andriesse and Cas Oorthuys were affiliated with the GKf (*Vereniging van Beoefenaars der Gebonden Kunsten*). The group emerged in the context of post-war reconstruction to promote a committed documentary approach to photography, attentive to everyday reality and urban conditions. The photographs by Andriesse and Oorthuys, featured in the first panels of van Eyck's grid, adopt wider and more frontal framings, capable of showing the absence of equipment, the barrenness of urban voids, and the poverty of residual spaces in the immediate post-war period. Children appear at the margins, confined to interstices that planning does not recognize as places. The balanced compositions and medium shooting distance make a lack visible: there is not yet space for play, only incoherent fragments of an unfinished city.

This gaze resonates with the cultural climate of the COBRA group, which in those years claimed childlike spontaneity as an original creative principle, expressed through the freedom of the pictorial gesture. What Andriesse's and Oorthuys's photographs reveal as absence, COBRA celebrated as generative potential, drawing on Johan Huizinga's theories: play is not escapism, but a primary cultural condition.

Within this cultural framework, the photographs used by van Eyck document the child not merely as a social figure, as in Henderson's and the Smithsons' work, but as an opportunity through which to rethink the city, architecture, and the role of the architect. The child is not only a figure to be studied, but an epistemological metaphor. The city is read through the child's gaze, and the architect is called upon to reconsider their role as a facilitator of experiences.

At the CIAM in Dubrovnik, members of Team 10 openly expressed great appreciation for the Amsterdam playgrounds. Peter Smithson, for example, was particularly struck by their generative capacity, comparing them to grains of sand introduced into an oyster shell (the urban environment), causing irritation and thus provoking the growth of pearls (renewal in urban life) [70]. Similarly, Voelcker saw them as "active agents of urban reintegration," as extensions of existing "urban associations" [71].

George Candilis, in an interview with Francis Strauven on 27 October 1981, stated about the Amsterdam playgrounds: « The first things of Van Eycks that I visited were some of the children's playgrounds he built on waste lots in the centre of Amsterdam. They impressed me immensely. It was an extremely simple architecture, but made with much love. It did not consist solely of materials such as concrete and stone, but of immaterial materials too. At that moment, on seeing those things, I felt that, due to his profound sensibility, he had succeeded much better than any of us» [72].

### *Design for Children. Playgrounds by Aldo van Eyck and Presentation of Furniture and Toys*

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 14 June – 8 September 2002

Three years after Aldo van Eyck's death, and in the same museum that had hosted in 1949 the celebrated exhibition on the COBRA group—whose exhibition design was curated by van Eyck himself (the first of a series of projects at the Stedelijk)—the exhibition *Design for Children: Playgrounds by Aldo van Eyck and Presentation of Furniture and Toys* opened at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (14 June–8 September 2002). The exhibition marked a renewed interest in the playgrounds, many of which had been abandoned, vandalised, or altered during the 1980s and 1990s.

Curated by Liliane Lefebvre, architectural historian and at the time researcher at the Department of Architecture at TU Delft, and by Ingeborg de Roode, design historian and newly appointed curator at the Dutch museum, the exhibition took place in a wing of the museum that no longer exists today: a two-level building illuminated by large glazed façades. The exhibition design by Kossmann de Jong was conceived to limit the amount of incoming light and to allow for the proper viewing of drawings, plans, and archival material. Large photographic panels covered the expansive windows, depicting children in action in the playgrounds of an Amsterdam that has since disappeared, evoking the physicality and scale of lived experience. At the same time, several metal climbing structures were installed in such a way that visitors could directly interact with them, creating a dialogue between historical photographs and real objects.

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70 Peter Smithson, *Final Report of the Cluster Committee* (11 August 1956), in the *Provisional Report of CIAM 10,* Dubrovnik 1956, pp. 83–84.

71 John Voelcker, *Polder and Playground*, in "Architects Yeux Book" n. 6, London 1955, pp. 89-94.

72 F. Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The shape of...,* cit., note 357, p. 268.

Atlas, pp. 62-63

On the lower level, toys from the museum's permanent collection were displayed, many of which had been acquired on the occasion of the exhibition *Kinderspel* (20 March–3 May 1965). That earlier exhibition had already sought to classify nearly 160 toys according to their capacity to induce in children «sensations, movement, construction, and interaction». Fully in line with van Eyck's design principles, the small 1965 catalogue states that

> «it is extremely important to give free rein to a child's imagination. A young child creates its own world with simple building blocks, often inaccessible to adults. Whoever respects this world will not give a child, for example, blocks with coloured windows and doors, ready-made roofs, or decorated façades. These hinder the child's freedom of design. In handling objects, a sense of wonder grows at what is already possible and achievable; imagination evokes a new world around the child, in which the strangest things become possible. [...] By exploring and experimenting, the child encounters the world in which it will live, a world it must learn to master and within which it will increasingly fulfil its role—its human role. Play is a vital necessity for the young child, an important source of nourishment for its development into an active and conscious human being, just as essential as food is for the body. [...] Through play, the child discovers what human beings already discovered in antiquity: that earth is malleable, that fire illuminates and consumes, that water has its joys and dangers and is indispensable to life; that space is transformed into a distance that can be bridged by walking, climbing, falling, jumping, throwing, estimating, and measuring. Play is always creation, a discovery of the possibilities given to humankind»[73].

The 2002 exhibition sought to emphasise the attention that Dutch public institutions devoted to children's play and its educational dimensions: on the one hand, the Municipality of Amsterdam, which between 1947 and 1978 commissioned van Eyck to design approximately 730 playgrounds; on the other, the Stedelijk Museum itself, a state museum that, since the post-war period, had been attentive to and actively collecting design objects intended for children.

In the following years, other exhibitions continued to study and present van Eyck's playgrounds: from 7 October 2011 to 31 January 2012, the Van Eesteren Museum in Amsterdam hosted the exhibition *De Speelse Stad van Aldo van Eyck*, while from 5 May to 25 August 2013 the Nagele Museum presented an exhibition dedicated to the playgrounds of Amsterdam.

73 *Kinderspel, Een keuze uit hedendaags speelgoed* (A Children's Game. A Selection of Contemporary Toys), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 20 March–3 May 1965, pp. 3–7.

## 2.3.5 Five Playgrounds

Since 1978, the year in which the last playground was realised, much has changed to date: fewer than twenty playgrounds still exist, and none is preserved in its original state. Most of the metal structures have been replaced with new ones, which are still in production according to Aldo van Eyck's designs[74]. What is most striking concerns the replacement of the original ground surfaces in favour of rubber flooring (in correspondence with the climbing structures): it should be emphasised that, despite the choice of extremely economical materials, Aldo van Eyck's designs were carefully detailed. The choice of paving, finishes, colours, and the laying patterns of the clinker bricks contributed substantially to the final composition of the playground. Everything was designed so that the individual parts resonated with the whole and with one another: the play elements, the ground surface, the greenery, the benches. The entire playground then responded to its context.

The choice—highly questionable—to replace the original materials in favour of an alleged safety completely undermines the perception of these spaces and the experience of them. Even more serious than the replacement of the paving surfaces is, unfortunately, the introduction of elements entirely alien to van Eyck's original idea: plastic play equipment, swings, slides, colourful monsters and fences are among the substantial modifications made to the play spaces conceived by van Eyck.

It is therefore unclear according to which criteria the Municipality operates. We asked Tess van Eyck, the architect's daughter, to account for this: «It is not a decision: they let things happen, without any real plan or programme. It is precisely the absence of any kind of idea that allows this to happen. Together with my husband and some people from the Foundation, we have had many meetings with the municipality, but it was always too late! At the beginning of the 2000s they removed the largest playgrounds, and the objects contained in them no longer exist. They were destroyed. Always too late!»[75].

As early as 1982, Jacoba Mulder told Francis Strauven:

> «Here, in this small garden (near Rubensstraat), for some time now there have been those new play apparatuses, terrible things, all in bright colours. Van Eyck would never have done this. Now they order them, I believe, from some company. Van Eyck, on the other hand, managed, with truly simple means, to create pleasant places that integrated very well into their context. Sometimes they were spaces that represented a real "breathing space" for the neighbourhood. (She shows a photograph of the now-disappeared playground in Dijkstraat next to a photograph of the same place before its realisation.)

74 The Dutch company BOERplay, specialised in the production of playground equipment, manufactures for the "Classic Play" line the metal structures designed by van Eyck; see https://issuu.com/boerspeeltoestellen/docs/brochure_classic_play-v1-en-issuu, accessed November 2025.

75 Interview with Tess van Eyck, 15 July 2025, Loenen aan de Vecht, Appendix. p. 243.

If you see that space, if you see the result he achieved with such essential means, I find him incredibly skilful »[76].

In 2001, the master's thesis by Charlotte Vermeulen and Ann Wildro of Ghent University showed that around twenty-five years earlier there were still 92 playgrounds in existence, many of them altered. Professor Strauven, supervisor of the thesis, recounts: « the two students visited all of the 700 sites I had recorded and made a detailed report of the state of the playgrounds at that moment: those that had disappeared, those that remained and their condition. Here is their thesis, and look, on page 193 they included a diagram that shows the condition of the playgrounds at that time. You see that already then, we are talking about 25 years ago, only 92 playgrounds remained intact. The remaining ones were either completely gone (216), or altered or modified in design and elements (237), or replaced with new play equipment (154), or never realized (32) »[77].

It is precisely in light of this fragmented picture of the transformations that have affected the playgrounds over the decades that it becomes necessary to focus on a number of cases: five playgrounds selected as a representative—though not exhaustive—sample, through which it is possible to observe more directly how van Eyck's design choices evolved and how these places continue to generate experiences of play within urban space.

A sample of five playgrounds representative of Aldo van Eyck's production at different moments and in different urban contexts was therefore selected, in order to observe the evolution of the design approach and the relationship between architecture, materials, colours and the use of space by children. The selection includes three playgrounds that still exist, where it is possible to directly observe use and play dynamics, and two that have been demolished, which are significant for understanding the design choices and compositional experimentation in relation to colour, form and urban insertion.

The first playground, Beertelmanplein in Amsterdam Zuid (1947), marks the beginning of the playground network project: it still exists and bears witness to van Eyck's initial approach, based on the insertion of elementary objects—in form and materials—into urban space.

Zeedijk (1955), located in the centre of Amsterdam, was a virtuous example of the interaction between pictorial and architectural research. Unfortunately demolished several years ago, it was the only one of the playgrounds for which Aldo van Eyck proposed the realisation of a mural, and therefore the only one to envisage the use of colour.

One of the remaining playgrounds in the Vondelpark (1961), a large public park in the capital, is among those that are today best preserved and still usable. It testifies to van Eyck's ability to integrate play elements within existing green spaces.

The playgrounds at Arent Janzsin Ernststraat I–II–III–IV (1963–

76 Francis Strauven, *Interview with J.H. Mulder* – 30 March 1982,

77 Itinerant interview, between the living room and the archive of Prof. Francis Strauven Leuven, September 12, 2025, around 2:30 p.m., Appendix p.

65), located in the southern periphery of Amsterdam, illustrate experimentation in recently built residential contexts, with particular attention to the use of greenery in order to obtain more intimate spaces for play.

Finally, the playground of Korte Koningsdwarsstraat (1977), no longer in existence, is one of the last interventions of the network designed by van Eyck, where it is possible to observe a design language that is no longer clear and effective.

The choice of these five case studies considers the playgrounds that still exist, aims to read the modifications they have undergone, and seeks to grasp the main lines of development of van Eyck's design thinking, from the birth of the playground network through its evolution to its final phase, highlighting the importance of context, materials and urban greenery in the definition of play space.

Atlas, pp. 64-67.

# Beginning of the series: Bertelmanplein, 1947

## Location and context

The first playground designed by Aldo van Eyck, built in 1947 and still extant today, is located at the intersection of Bertelmanstraat and Bernard Kochstraat, in the Amsterdam Zuid district, within the expansion plan drawn up by Hendrik Petrus Berlage in 1915. The site, regular and quadrangular in shape, measures approximately 25 × 30 metres. It is bounded on the north-east and north-west sides by a continuous building frontage constructed according to the characteristics of the Amsterdam School of the early decades of the twentieth century; to the east it opens onto Bertelmanstraat, a single-lane street with lighter traffic compared to Bernard Kochstraat, which instead has two-way traffic and a double cycle lane. Nearly seventy years after its construction, the urban context has remained largely unchanged, and the playground continues to maintain a stable and clearly recognisable relationship with the neighbourhood.

## Composition

By observing original photographs and drawings, it can be noted that the project is organised into three concentric areas, each characterised by a different laying pattern of the same paving material: terracotta clinker bricks. The first, outermost and most public area, approximately 2 metres deep, defines the space for the placement of five benches and eight tall trees. A second, more internal and less public area defines the space for three metal spinning elements, located in the southern corner of the playground and arranged at a distance of approximately 1.8 metres from one another. The last area, the most intimate and internal one, also identified by a different laying pattern of the clinker bricks, is the space dedicated to sand play. This is the first sandpit designed by van Eyck, intended to inaugurate a long series. Rectangular in shape with chamfered corners, it measures 9.9 by 7.2 metres and is defined by a border approximately 40 cm thick. It is accessible through two openings (north-east and north-west) and features, along one of its longer sides, four cylindrical concrete elements (radius 32 cm, emerging approximately 25 cm above the sand). Inside the sandpit there was also a metal element for somersaults, with a "C"-shaped section, 1.4 metres deep and approximately 70–80 cm high, which no longer exists today, as do the four cylinders.

The overall composition is not symmetrical: the sandpit is the focal point but does not coincide with the geometric centre of the plot. Its displacement towards the north is counterbalanced by the metal elements positioned to the south. As noted by Francis Strauven, the composition follows a centrifugal, dynamic movement, analogous to that of the later playgrounds.

## Alterations and current condition

In 1974 the playground underwent a first transformation: along the south-west front, seven cylindrical elements for jumping, of varying heights and still present today, were added. A climbing structure composed of hexagonal modules was also introduced. The playground has reached the present day with further updates—entirely inconsistent with its original spirit. The clinker paving has been replaced: in the areas dedicated to climbing, rubber tiles have been introduced. The metal structures are no longer the original ones, although they have been replaced with analogous structures produced according to van Eyck's designs. The cylindrical elements and the small somersault structure within the sandpit have also been removed. A fence has been added, contradicting the idea of openness towards the city. A blue climbing play element, entirely alien to van Eyck's design logic, has also been introduced.

Despite these transformations, Beertelmanplein continues to be used on a daily basis. Children play in the sand, jump on the cylindrical elements added in the 1970s, and climb on the more recent metal structures. This persistence of use, even within a modified and partially distorted context, confirms the robustness of the original spatial framework: a configuration capable of remaining operative over time, absorbing later and incongruent interventions without losing its urban role or functional effectiveness.

Atlas, pp. 68-73.

# Playground and colour: Zeedijk, 1955

## Location and context

The Zeedijk playground was designed by Aldo van Eyck in 1955 and built the following year. Although he had no longer been working for the Municipality of Amsterdam since 1951, the architect continued to design playgrounds for the municipality until 1978. Between 1947 and 1955 he had by then consolidated a personal language, recognisable and fully mature: the playgrounds built between the 1950s and 1960s are probably among the most successful. This playground was located in the historic centre of Amsterdam, in the Jodenbuurt, the Jewish quarter, on an irregular plot left vacant by the demolition of a series of dwellings belonging to Jewish families deported to concentration camps during the Second World War[78]. The area was enclosed by an imposing wall approximately 4 metres high.

## Composition

Van Eyck demolished the high enclosure along the eastern, vehicular frontage, opening the view from and towards the street. He nevertheless preserved the memory of that boundary by tracing a low wall, 60 cm high, which separated the pedestrian area from the playground without extending along the entire frontage. This device allowed him to create a buffer space, a sort of more relaxed access zone. A second wall, 30 cm high and set back from the first, further contributed to the creation of a sheltered entrance. The alignments of the two walls, together with two transverse axes, defined four areas, each characterised by a different paving surface: a first access area with three pairs of metal somersault elements and a turnstile; a central area; and two lateral areas paved with clinker bricks. The central area, surfaced with light-coloured clinker, was ideally divided into two parts by a row of concrete jumping elements. This main zone intersected, in plan, two circular elements: to the north, the sandpit; to the south-west, the somersault structure. A long and narrow bench along the western, internal side balanced the line of the wall separating the playground from the street. The sandpit, circular in shape, featured two access points and five internal concrete seats. The entire playground was illuminated by a lamppost which, in plan, coincided with the centre of the second circular element, the somersault structure, slender and fragmented. As in all of van Eyck's playgrounds, the composition was not symmetrical: the main visual weight was assigned to the sandpit, around which the composition constructed a dynamic balance. Everything originated from pre-existing traces, which van Eyck reinterpreted in order to create internal micro-spaces, more intimate places.

78 Harm Stevens, *The Tumbling Child Belongs in the City Scene, Like Herring Carts. Playgrounds and equipment by Aldo van Eyck*, in "the Rijks Museum Bulletin", vol 16, n.4 2013, p. 365.

The playground opened to the public in 1956 and, two years later, the artist Joost van Roojen — friend and brother-in-law of van Eyck — created a large mural on the internal frontage. This was the only playground in which van Eyck allowed the use of colour: he generally preferred to leave the nature of materials legible. Van Roojen, responding to the chaotic character of the wall surface, composed an abstract design made of lines, circles and squares, using flat colours and sharp chromatic contrasts. The result was a sort of scenic backdrop to the play activity, perfectly in dialogue with the surrounding façades and the play elements. This collaboration between architect and artist earned them, in 1961, the *Sikkens Prize*[79] — an award inaugurated with Gerrit Rietveld and dedicated to the use of colour by artists, designers and architects in civil society. The recognition celebrated their ability to integrate colour into the built space. It was a fully successful example of collaboration between architecture and the visual arts, in line with the "synthesis of the arts" promoted in the Netherlands by the *Liga Nieuwe Beelden* from 1955 onwards, a collective of which van Eyck was a member.

## Alterations and demolition

Photographs preserved in the Archive of the Municipality of Amsterdam document the transformations undergone by the playground during the 1970s: the mural, heavily vandalised, was replaced by a figurative design featuring exotic animals — a safari scene with ostriches, lions, a hippopotamus, a zebra and a life-size elephant that appeared to lean into the sandpit from the northern wall. With the exception of the sandpit, what remained of the original project were only the rotating bars arranged around the lamppost. The low dividing wall was partially demolished and various new play elements were added, including a plastic elephant-shaped swing[80]. The history of Amsterdam's playgrounds has, as Vincent Ligtelijn writes, a sad side:

> « What was thought to be 'more permanent than snow' has since proved not to be permanent enough. It has at any rate become clear that an urban ingredient, as vulnerable as the playground fabric is, cannot survive without permanent attention and special care. The mood has changed since the '50s. As the playgrounds receded from the forefront of municipal attention the care they constantly require slackened. What was once an homogenous fabric all too soon began to fall apart »[81].

The plot is today occupied by a complex of oriental shops and a Buddhist temple.

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79 See Sikkens Prize website: https://www.sikkensprize.org/winnaar/aldo-van-eyck-joost-van-roojen/?utm (accessed November 2025).

80 H. Stevens, *The Tumbling Child Belongs…* cit., p. 378.

81 V. Ligtelijn, *Aldo van Eyck works…*, cit., p. 69.

Atlas, pp. 74-75.

# Playground in the park: Vondelpark, 1961

## Location and context

The Vondelpark is the best-known and most frequented park in Amsterdam, a long green strip within Amsterdam Zuid: it was inaugurated in 1865 and declared a national monument in 1996. It is here that, between 1958 and 1962, Aldo van Eyck designed four playgrounds, all still present. The one under analysis is the third, dating to 1961, and also the best-preserved. The project was presented on September 12, 1961, and the playground would be opened to the public a few years later. During this same period, van Eyck was often in the United States as a guest professor at Washington University in St. Louis and was working on *The Child, the City and the Artist*. This 1961 playground is chronologically positioned between the two from 1958 and the last from 1962. Unlike the others, however, it is located in a more marginal and protected position within the park—a detail that probably contributed to its better preservation.

## Compositional analysis

The playground is situated within a kind of natural indentation of greenery. To adapt to this configuration, van Eyck chose an elliptical plan, with main axes of 36 and 21 meters. Access does not occur directly from the main pedestrian path that runs throughout the park but is set back about 3.5 meters. Entry is through a 7-meter-wide "opening" in the greenery, deliberately positioned asymmetrically: not aligned with the minor axis, but shifted about 3 meters to the west. In the original drawings, van Eyck clearly distinguishes the pavings: clinker laid in regular rows for the entrance area, herringbone clinker for the interior elliptical area of the playground. Despite the elliptical plan, the two focal points are not marked in the plan—an omission reflecting van Eyck's tendency to use geometries as latent structures, not as rigid compositional schemes. The main element of the playground is the large circular sandbox, with three entrance openings and three cement elements inside. To balance the visual centrality of the sandbox, the playground contains three other elements, all different in shape and material.

The hexagonal mountain – a set of hexagonal cement modules of different heights, intended for jumping, climbing, and traversing.

The metal dome – a lightweight hemispherical structure for climbing and performing somersaults.

The segmented metal ring – a circle of metal bars of different heights, also intended for gymnastic feats and somersaults.

Additionally, there are five small cement elements following the perimeter of the ellipse and marking the edge of the playground area. Finally, the area is defined by seven benches arranged asymmetrically: on the side facing the main avenue, forming a more public front, while toward the opposite greenery, the atmosphere becomes enclosed, almost introverted.

The greenery serves to create a micro-space within the larger park, a closed but outdoor space, a small natural enclosure that hosts play.

### Current condition

Among all the playgrounds still present in the Vondelpark, this is the one that has undergone the fewest alterations. Although van Eyck opposed fences and closures, today access occurs through a small gate. The clinker pavement, both the regular and herringbone-laid, is surprisingly intact. The only invasive interventions concern the areas around the elements for jumping and somersaults, where the original clinker has been replaced with impact-absorbing rubber: three circular rubber areas that alter the plan.

Atlas, pp. 76-79.

# Playground and urban expansion: Arent Janszoon Ernststraat I–IV, 1964

## Location and Context

These playgrounds are located in the Buitenveldert neighborhood, developed at the end of the 1950s as part of the AUP, the General Expansion Plan drafted in 1935 by Cornelis van Eesteren. The plan responded to the city's growing housing demand by progressively expanding: first westward, with the Westelijke Tuinsteden, and then, from 1958, southward with Buitenveldert.

According to modernist urban principles, Buitenveldert follows a regular and strict layout: wide straight streets, spaced building blocks to guarantee light, air, and green spaces, and a clear separation of functions. It was precisely against this type of abstract and functionalist urbanism that Aldo van Eyck would strongly oppose in the same years. In this neighborhood, the architect designed numerous playgrounds. Below is the analysis of four playgrounds, located close to each other and arranged in mirrored pairs: a system of spaces that visually and spatially interact. The playgrounds are situated in the courtyards along Arent Janszoon Ernststraat, in the stretch between Buitenveldertselaan to the west and Willem van Weldammelaan to the east.

The Arent Janszoon Ernststraat playgrounds (I–II–III–IV) are set within large green courtyards created by the layout of residential blocks: simple parallelepipeds oriented along the north–south axis, with main facades facing east and west. Within these expansive spaces, van Eyck created micro-places, skillfully using vegetation to structure and tame the courtyard's breadth.

## Compositional Analysis

The residential complex is organized through a sequence repeated four times according to a regular rhythm: building – green courtyard – building – parking. The four green courtyards, rectangular and largely identical, measure approximately 40 × 70 meters. The short sides face north toward a canal and south onto the main street, Arent Janszoon Ernststraat; the long sides correspond to the main facades of the residential buildings. Each courtyard has a street-facing edge marked by a hedge, with an opening of about 4.5 m in the first two courtyards and 3 m in the last two. Through these four entrances, a pedestrian path leads into the respective playgrounds. Within the large green courtyards, van Eyck carved out each playground's area using vegetation: rectangles of 19 × 12 m for the first two, 19 × 17 m for the last two. In this way, he created four micro-places, mirrored in pairs, but never identical.

## First Pair

The first two playgrounds are rectangular, enclosed by a hedge about 1.5 m thick. The dominant feature in both is the sandbox: a rectangle of approximately 7 × 5 m, positioned at one-third of the length of the playground. It is built with prefabricated concrete elements forming a border with regularly spaced semicircular concavities. On the east side, parallel to the sandbox, there are also two wooden benches. To balance the sandbox visually, van Eyck placed the play equipment area on the opposite side: four metal bars for somersaults and an igloo. The second playground replicates the first layout exactly but mirrors it along the north–south axis: a mirrored composition that introduces a subtle variation. Instead of a single igloo, there are two conical metal elements intended for climbing. The flooring differentiates the zones: square tiles for the entrance path, herringbone clay clinker for the playground, while under the somersault and climbing elements, van Eyck included rubber sections, the design of which has been lost due to subsequent alterations.

## Second Pair

In a space defined by a hedge 19 m long and 17 m deep, the next two playgrounds are placed: rectangular (15.11 × 13.88 m) and rotated approximately 30° relative to the street frontage. The main feature remains the circular sandbox, made with prefabricated concrete elements defining a hexagonal perimeter inside.
The north side has two benches, while the south side contains two areas for somersaults, with five metal elements arranged in two groups (2 and 3 elements) at varying distances. In the remaining corner, van Eyck placed a barrel-shaped metal climbing object, which children could traverse.
At first glance, the fourth playground appears mirrored and identical to the previous one, but it introduces some variations: the sandbox remains circular with a hexagonal inner edge, but the climbing igloo replaces the metal tunnel, positioned in the opposite corner.
The flooring clearly distinguishes the zones: herringbone clay clinker for the access path, square concrete tiles for the playground area, and rubber patches under the somersault and climbing elements.

In these four playgrounds, van Eyck's intention to create micro-spaces—true "play rooms" within the expansive courtyards—is clearly evident. Greenery, hedges, and trees function to articulate space and provide protection and intimacy within an otherwise vast and open environment. At the same time, van Eyck demonstrates a desire to break the uniformity and rigidity typical of modernist spaces: while maintaining a certain regularity and symmetry, he introduces rotations, mirroring, and small variations, creating subtle differences that break monotony and make each playground unique in its dialogue with the context.

These four playgrounds still exist today and largely retain their original appearance. However, maintenance is lacking: vegetation grows between the tiles, and the placement of rubber tiles has altered van Eyck's original design. Despite van Eyck's strong aversion to fences and closure of these play areas, here too—as in other remaining playgrounds—access is provided through fences and gates, which delimit the space without preventing free use.

## Towards the conclusion of the series: Korte Koningsdwarsstraat, 1977

Atlas, p. 80.

Korte Koningsdwarsstraat is a short street in the traditional central fabric of Amsterdam, not far from the Nieuwmarkt metro station.

In 1969, architects Aldo van Eyck and Theo Bosch won the invited competition for the redesign of the Nieuwmarkt area in Amsterdam. The new zoning plan sparked strong tensions between the municipal administration and local residents. On one side, the authorities pushed for large offices, shops, a highway, parking, and the metro; on the other, residents sought to preserve the neighborhood's small-scale, residential character. The uncompromising stance of the van Eyck–Bosch office led to a revision of the city council's plans: while accepting the construction of the metro, the two architects argued that any demolition should be minimized. Building lines and the structure of narrow streets were to be preserved and reconnected. In the public space design, they introduced gates and courtyards, creating secondary paths capable of revitalizing this part of the city.

Within this area was one of the last playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck. Few details and limited photographic documentation survive of these late interventions—not due to lesser design relevance, but because of the declining media and cultural interest in these spaces and their role in collective life. The analysis that follows is based solely on the plans that have been recovered. The Korte Koningsdwarsstraat playground was located within the courtyard of a historic block: enclosed on two sides by residential buildings and on the third by a school, it was one of the few playgrounds accessible through an opening in an existing wall. According to the author, attribution to van Eyck—like other playgrounds from the same period—is problematic: there is no clear compositional relationship among the parts, and the elements present do not match the usual set of components employed in his works. The 1977 plan, preserved in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, is not signed by van Eyck. However, the preliminary plan—showing the labels of individual elements—can be compared with the final execution plan.

The lot has an irregular shape: on the side adjoining the school wall, four benches were placed; the opposite side is defined by existing trees, against which a hedge was added.

The remaining space is occupied by several elements: a Kaarthuis (game table?), a pool—circular in the preliminary plan, irregular in the execution plan—a climbing wall, a sandbox composed of two smaller square bins with a cover, a slide, and a picnic table.

Comparing this plan with those of contemporary playgrounds shows the introduction of elements not part of the original set from the 1950s and 1960s, such as the slide. It is plausible that other hands intervened during this design phase: likely the contribution of a municipal technician or someone with whom van Eyck had to negotiate the overall layout, adapting it to practical requirements, budgets, and municipal protocols of the time. Therefore, even if this playground cannot be attributed to Aldo van Eyck with certainty, it remains important for illustrating the shift in sensitivity toward this type of intervention.

## 2.4 Some closing considerations

More than thirty years separate the first playground at Beertelmanplein (1947) from the last interventions of the 1970s. Yet, despite this long interval and the inevitable updating of materials, certain morphological and compositional constants run through Aldo van Eyck's entire body of work. His guiding idea was precise: «the play apparatus have to be arranged very meticulously with regard to each other and their immediate surroundings»[82]. The design process arose from continuous observation: « One must observe well the place where one wants to make a playground; where are the windows, which way do people walk, where are the front doors. [...] After a few years one has gained some experience in this»[83].

Every element in the playgrounds was placed with care, in its formal and material essence, in relation to the surrounding environment and the perception of those who inhabit it. His practice translated into form a critique of modernist planning, its rigidity, and alienating scale: playful micro-architectures and collective spaces that restore centrality to the body and perception, creating places that children feel as their own. Following Paul Klee's principle of the mobile viewpoint, van Eyck articulated spaces according to a centripetal scheme, never symmetrical, building balance through relations, calibrated shifts, and sequences of intermediate positions, where space is perceived through continuous micro-movements rather than from a single center. These are designed micro-events, following his principle of "labyrinthine clarity": a space offering multiple paths and directions without becoming chaotic. An articulated structure of thresholds, sequences, and micro-places invites exploration while remaining legible.

Each element of this space is reduced to its formal and material essence: just as Brancusi's sculptures were tested and felt with closed eyes to move beyond mere visual representation and restore dignity to the material, the elements that van Eyck designed and built in Amsterdam remain in the collective memory of generations, also through the tactile and physical sensations they provide: «the funnel and dome structures were metal, the rest was concrete that felt a bit rough»[84]. The playground experience goes beyond simple play: arrangement, form, and material generate a sensory environment in which children can perceive space as a recognizable place.

Van Eyck skillfully used greenery to create urban rooms where mod-

82 Aldo van Eyck, *On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds*, in V. Ligtelijn F. Strauven (a cura di) Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles…, cit., p. 113.

83 ibid.

84 Statement by Ronald Aker, in Interview with a group of Amsterdam residents who played in Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds between the 1950s and 1970s, 5–7 November 2025, Appendix, p. 245.

ernist urbanism had left excessive voids: « I am a vehement opponent of current urban planning, which very much hinders spatial boundaries. Everything is made open, planners suffer from a mania for open- ness. Space has become so continuous that no spaces can be formed. There is one large continuous outside. In this big space there are blocks, arranged well or not, and it is in this emptiness that we move around and seek the seclusion we remember from the old city. [...] It is difficult to create an enclosed urban space in this emptiness, not only a place where things stand, but one where a child feels at home, which it recognizes as a small world amidst the big one. That is why it is so important to bring in a good designer who helps create the right environment. The atmosphere is decisive to the success of a play-garden. The designer cannot create this atmosphere only by himself, the leaders in the playground must also help to do so»[85].

However, the gradual exhaustion of linguistic and compositional clarity toward the late 1970s signals the limits of a project that required specific institutional and cultural conditions to remain intact. From that period onward, attention to these "play rooms" diminished, fueled by rising real estate value and resulting speculation, especially on sites already occupied by playgrounds in the city center. Alongside this progressive disappearance, lack of maintenance and little interest in preserving the remaining playgrounds led to the introduction of elements alien to van Eyck's language: colorful, figurative, plastic objects that distort the composition and compromise the original experience. Today, all remaining playgrounds are fenced, despite van Eyck's belief that «a fence has the effect of keeping people away. Plants or walls are more suitable for making the playground a space of one's own»[86]. The final contradiction is clear: van Eyck invented a powerful language to restore humanity to the city, but its preservation depends on technical care, resources, and public will, which are often lacking.

Within this context, what stands out most strongly is the incidental dimension of the experience these playgrounds continue to produce. Generations of children have passed through these spaces without instructions, appropriating them through the body: climbing, sliding, jumping, touching cold and rough surfaces, running among solids and voids, pausing in the micro-rooms designed by van Eyck. Through these minimal, repeated, and spontaneous actions, the playgrounds have become—and continue to be—tools for spatial awareness: places where children learn about the world by experiencing space before understanding it intellectually. Even today, in the surviving playgrounds, this capacity remains intact. Children continue to do what they have always done: seek the sand, test the resilience of materials, invent trajectories, measure distances with their bodies. Daily use demonstrates that van Eyck's designed play landscapes maintain their relevance not so much for their formal integrity, now often compromised, but for their ability to generate bodily and tactile experiences that allow space to be expressed in its most essential dimension.

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85 Aldo van Eyck, On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds, in V. Ligtelijn F. Strauven (eds.) Aldo van Eyck. Collected Articles…, cit., p. 118.

86 ibid.

As Richard Sennett writes in *The Craftsman*,

> «planned ambiguity acquires more value if the designer intends that others learn something from momentary disorientation, become skilled in dealing with ambiguity. Amsterdam offers a graphic instance of such instructive ambiguity made by design, in a particular kind of live edge. In the years immediately after the Second World War, the architect Aldo van Eyck began filling up Amsterdam's empty spaces with playgrounds—in trash-filled backyards, at traffic circles, on forlorn corners and the edges of streets. [...] The designer's aim for these small parks was to teach children how to anticipate and manage ambiguous transitions in urban space. [...] Children, adolescents, and adults learned to use it together. [...] Whereas Corbusier relegated streets to traffic functions, the ground plane represented to van Eyck the realm in which people "learn'' cities. The placement of benches and bollards, the height of stepping-stones, the ill-defined separations of sand, grass, and water are all tools in that learning, an education in ambiguity»[87].

We can assert that van Eyck's goal was to transform the citizen from passive spectator to active participant, autonomous and responsible for their own learning process in the city, and through the city to develop a more complex and complete spatial sensitivity and awareness. It is there, in direct contact with material and in perceptual discovery of place, that the first and fundamental education in space is formed.

87 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, Penguin Books, 2008, pp. 232-234.



Osdorp playground, Amsterdam, c. 1956. © Cas Oorthuys, Nederlands Fotomuseum.



Francis Alÿs, *Children's Game #23: Step on a Crack*, Hong Kong, 2020, 5',
in collaboration with Félix Blume, Julien Devaux and Rafael Ortega. Video still.

# 3. Spontaneous Spatial Experience: *Children's Games* by Francis Alÿs

Francis Alÿs (Antwerp, 1959), pseudonym of Francis de Smedt, trained as an architect, is an artist whose research unfolds at the intersection of politics, ethnography, and sociology, employing a variety of media ranging from performance and film to photography, drawing, and painting.

When Alÿs arrived in Mexico City in 1986, where he still lives and works today, he began to study not only the city and its urban form, but above all its inhabitants and their everyday activities. Since the early 1990s, Alÿs has shown a growing interest in the ways people use the city, as demonstrated by series such as *Ambulantes* (1992–2006), *Sleepers* (1992–2006), and *Beggar* (2002–2004).

Alÿs addresses social and geopolitical issues with what has been described as «an unusual lightness of language»[1]: narratives of migratory diasporas and religious or political conflicts are conveyed through metaphors and rhetorical figures that deliberately avoid redundancy. The video camera, the photographic camera, and the notebook function as tools for observation and documentation; seriality and cataloguing become analytical instruments of anthropological investigation; walking and the exploration of urban space characterize many of his actions.

The body of work examined in this research concerns play. *Children's Games* is a series that the artist began in 1999 in order to observe and film children in different urban contexts, within the public spaces of their cities. It is in the streets that Alÿs' attentive gaze records children's playful activities: games that often reflect the rituals and customs of each society, filmed without nostalgia and without any attempt to idealize childhood or play itself.

This project constitutes an interdisciplinary practice situated between art, architecture, and social inquiry. It investigates play not only as a way of revealing the social and economic inequalities of contemporary societies, but also as an opportunity to experience and understand reality.

The videos produced by Alÿs document play as a form of incidental learning. Through play, children develop social, motor, and cognitive skills while simultaneously acquiring spatial knowledge. Learning through the body and playing within the urban environment directly engage physical, sensory, and relational experience. It is a process that unfolds outside the classroom: along sidewalks, in courtyards, in parks, and in squares—wherever situations of interaction, discovery, movement, and play emerge.

1 Teresa Macrì, *Fallimento*, Postmedia, Milano 2017, p. 110.

## 3.1 Education with Nani Valle at IUAV:
## *Progetto Palmanova – Il Ritorno degli Animali*

Atlas, pp. 83-84.

Francis Alÿs was born in Belgium, in Antwerp, in 1959. Between 1978 and 1983 he studied at the Institut d'Architecture de Tournai, later completing his architectural education at the IUAV University of Venice under the supervision of Professor Fernanda "Nani" Valle.

Nani Valle (1927–1987), daughter of Provino and younger sister of Gino Valle, was an architect and, from 1981, full professor of Architectural Composition at the IUAV in Venice, as well as assistant to Ignazio Gardella since 1957. A student of Carlo Scarpa—who recognized in her what he called a "sense of the grave"[2]—and deeply interested in art and sculpture, she graduated from the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia in 1951 under Luigi Piccinato and Giuseppe Samonà. Already during her student years she distinguished herself through an approach attentive to social contexts: she collected testimonies, conducted interviews, and explored places with what might be described as an almost ethnographic gaze, always attentive to the everyday life of their inhabitants[3].

It is therefore plausible to assume that Alÿs' later attention to urban space and its informal uses—as well as his subsequent transition into the field of art, undertaken without a specifically artistic training—was influenced by this charismatic figure. Far removed from a closed and inward-looking conception of architectural discipline, Valle combined architectural design with incursions into design, fashion, exhibition design, and art, promoting a distinctly interdisciplinary vision. It was perhaps within this intellectual environment that Alÿs developed his particular capacity to observe urban space, integrating visual research, social awareness, and a poetic reflection on the city.

Three celebrated exhibition designs by Nani Valle are particularly worth recalling, as they demonstrate the interaction between art, public space, and architectural design: *Friuli – memoria – partecipazione – ricostruzione* (Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, 1976), a sculptural metal structure installed in Piazza San Marco in Venice to visually document the damage caused by the earthquake; and the two exhibitions organized in Venice in 1979—*Venezia '79. La fotografia* and *Venezia e la peste*—curated within the Exhibition Committee of the Municipality alongside Vittorio Gregotti, Franca Semi, and Daniela Ferretti. In all these cases, Valle's attention to the visitor's experience and to the political and social dimension of exhibition space clearly emerges.

Alongside her professional practice, Nani Valle combined teaching

2 Joseph Rykwert, *Tact and Skill*, in Serena Maffioletti (ed.) *La concretezza sperimentale. L'opera di Nani Valle*, Il poligrafo, Padova 2016, p. 9.

3 Anna Bellavitis, «Il senso del grave», in S. Maffioletti (ed.) *La concretezza sperimentale*... cit., p. 12.

with research on themes such as urban utopias and the transformations of the nineteenth-century city[4]. These research topics also involved Alÿs: his graduation project, developed under Valle's supervision, would later become—by his own admission[5]—an important point of departure for his future artistic practice.

In *Progetto Palmanova. Il ritorno degli animali*[6] (*The Palmanova Project – The Return of the Animals*), Alÿs reflects on the Italian Renaissance city and on the progressive disappearance of animals from urban space, interpreting this phenomenon as a metaphor for the suppression of minorities and of «excess» forms of life within the process of Western modernization. His visit to Palmanova in 1985 represented a revealing moment: confronted with a geometric and «dysfunctional» utopia, the artist realized that the only possible intervention was not architectural but imaginative. He thus invented a fable that symbolically reintroduces animals into the city, choosing narrative as a means to reactivate the sense of place. As he writes in the opening pages of his dissertation: «I would like to take advantage of the failure of Palmanova in order to stage a brief allegory in which the main actors will be animals».

Years later he would recall:

> «I could not think of any urbanistic, architectural, nor artistic answer to shake off the apathy of the place. I could not convince myself that adding matter (an object, a sound, or an architecture) to that site could in any sense alter its own inhabitants' perception or the putsiders's. So my reaction was to try to affect its memory: I invented a fake episode that would have taken place at the heart of the place, hidden in the remote corner of its memory [...] The format of the fable unfolded naturally as the only possible method of intervention»[7].

A few months after graduating in Architecture from the IUAV in Venice in the summer of 1985, Francis De Smedt was called to complete his military service. The only alternative available was to join a non-governmental organization and depart for southern Mexico, which had been struck that same year by a devastating earthquake. In February 1986, De Smedt thus took part in a relief mission in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, with the aim of assisting several Mixtec towns. The Mexican experience confirmed his skepticism toward top-down urban policies and their ambition to transform local ways of life according to Western parameters.

Once the mission ended, Alÿs was forced, for legal and personal reasons, to remain in Mexico City (much like other artists who found them-

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4 Anna Bellavitis, «Il senso del grave», in S. Maffioletti (ed.) *La concretezza sperimentale... cit.*, p. 26.

5 As curator and friend of Francis Alÿs, Cuauhtémoc Medina recounts: «although he has lost this dissertation, Alÿs has consistently referred to it as the origin of his way of thinking in many areas». See note 4 in Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Fable Power*, in C. Medina, R. Ferguson, J. Fisher (eds.), *Francis Alÿs*, Phaidon, London 2007, p. 61.

6 Title of Francis De Smedt's graduation thesis at IUAV, see Archivio Tesi, Biblioteca IUAV, Venice, consultation of 1 August 2025.

7 Francis Alÿs, handwritten notes from 1990 in C. Medina, *Fable Power...* cit., p. 61.

selves living there, among them Melanie Smith, Thomas Glassford, José Bedia, and Jimmie Durham). Still formally in military service and wishing to avoid conflict with the Belgian authorities, he chose to adopt a pseudonym in order to remain in Mexico: on this occasion, Francis De Smedt became Francis Alÿs. The change of name would soon coincide with a change of profession. In Mexico City he began his artistic practice, to which he would devote himself entirely, gradually abandoning architecture after an initial period of experimentation lasting a few years.

> «I decided to give a chance to something that had always interested me from an outsider's point of view: art practice. Although by then I had been in Mexico for over three years, I had never really considered living here, and I found it quite difficult to accept the move. The first works - I wouldn't call them works - my first images or interventions were very much a reaction to Mexico City itself, a means to situate myself in this colossal urban entity»[8.]

Alÿs soon became fascinated by Mexico City and its contradictions. For the Belgian artist, the Mexican capital came to represent an allegory of the failure of modernity. The year before, on 19 September 1985, at 7:19 a.m., a magnitude 8.1 earthquake lasting three minutes had struck the city, leaving a permanent mark on both the urban landscape and the collective memory of the nation.

8 Russell Ferguson in conversation with Francis Alÿs, in C. Medina, R. Ferguson, J. Fisher (eds.) *Francis…* cit., p. 8.

## 3.2 Reading *Children's Games*: Key Themes

Alÿs' training as an architect and his ability to read the city and its social phenomena would have a lasting influence on his artistic practice. The intuition he developed in Venice—to adopt the fable as a tool of urban intervention—would become a recurring motif in his performative actions. «While the highly rational societies of the Renaissance felt the need to create utopias, we in our modern times must create fables»[9] is, for example, the subtitle of one of Alÿs' works from 1995, *Fairy Tales*.

Urban intervention conceived as a fable-like act, documentation and cataloguing, collective rituals as both political and poetic actions, repetition and failure, and the direct experience of urban space through walking: these are the central themes that run through Alÿs' work from the 1990s to the more recent series dedicated to street games.

Atlas, pp. 85-88.

### 3.2.1 Observation of the city and the documentary attempt in Mexico City

In the initial phase of his practice, Alÿs' work was primarily documentary: he observed and recorded, through the medium of photography, scenes and events that took place daily within urban space. What first attracted him was the unfinished process of Mexico's modernization: a country that simultaneously encouraged and resisted modernity; a country that, in 1992, the sociologist Roger Bartra described[10] as immobilized by an authoritarian and backward political system, struggling in uncertainty to keep afloat an impoverished and inefficient economy[11].

> «I think the first stage was a period of observation, to see how other people managed to function within this urban chaos. I was living in the old Centro Histórico, where there were all these characters [...]. I saw how they felt the need to make up an identity, to invent a role for themselves, a ritual that would justify their presence on the urban chessboard [...] The city turned into an open laboratory for testing and playing and experimenting in all kinds of contradictory directions [...] to build a language, an attitude, away from a world and culture that I saw as saturated with information. I think Europe has an extraordinarily rich culture, but I see it more as a place of consumption - of arts, food, architecture and so on. Here there were things to do, things to say, and urgently»[12].

Alÿs' attention initially turned to particular forms of "urban still life":

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9 Francis Alÿs, subtitle of the work *Fairy Tales* (1995).

10 Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character,* Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1992.

11 See Mark Godfrey, *Politique/poétique: le travail de Francis Alÿs*, in M. Godfrey, K. Biesenbach, K. Greenberg, D. Snauwaert (eds.), *Francis Alÿs. A Story of Deception*, Lannoo, Tielt 2010, p. 17.

12 Russell Ferguson in conversation with Francis Alÿs, in C. Medina, R. Ferguson, J. Fisher (eds.) Francis… cit., pp. 8-11.

spontaneous sculptures, temporary installations, graphic signs, and small details. *Milky Way* (1995) documents a series of bottle caps embedded in the asphalt; *Untitled (Zicte/Chewing Gum)* (1994–97) consists of a series of eighty photographs capturing spontaneous compositions of chewing gum under tables and chairs; *Semáforos* (1995) is a photographic catalogue—later developed into a video—of the different pedestrian green-light icons found in traffic lights across various cities.

Continuing to use photography and seriality for their documentary value, Alÿs also recorded specific situations and ways in which inhabitants experienced Mexico City, often turning the street into a temporary refuge. The series *Sleepers* (1997–2006) portrays hundreds of homeless people and stray dogs sleeping in the streets of Mexico City. *Ambulantes* (1992–2010) catalogues street vendors wandering through the city carrying goods, shopping carts, balloon stands, and mobile stalls: informal uses of public space and alternative sites of commerce outside the official economy. *Beggars* (2000–present), by contrast, depicts beggars displaying their poverty on the steps of Mexico City's subway stations.

In each series, the photographic viewpoint remains consistent and reveals the specific urban action being documented. In *Sleepers*, the camera adopts a low angle, at the level of the sidewalk or street where the sleepers rest; in *Ambulantes*, the viewpoint is at eye level, parallel to the action and positioned about two meters from the vendor, thus including a fragment of urban life within the frame; in *Beggars*, by contrast, the viewpoint remains constantly elevated, observing from above the horizontal plane on which the beggars display their few coins. Through these strategies, Alÿs attempts to adopt as neutral a register as possible, allowing the work to acquire, over time, an archival value.

> «To have witnessed those kinds of drastic evolutions in the life of a city makes you want to document more systematically the manifestations of these parallel, informal economies that are the obligatory components of the Latin American megalopolis»[13].

13 ivi p. 21.

### 3.2.2 The First Interventions in the City: Working in Residual Spaces, *In-Between* Spaces

Following this initial documentary phase, a second phase emerges in which the artist begins to undertake personal actions, fairy-tale narratives, and alternative readings of the city. In *Placing Pillows. While walking around the centre of Mexico City I placed pillows in the frame of broken windows* (1990), Alÿs intervenes in several buildings in Mexico City that had been abandoned after the earthquake by inserting pillows into the frames of broken windows. «This simple action was his first physical attempt to introduce a narrative dimension into the city fabric [...] *Placing Pillows* taught Alÿs how to turn his walks into sculptural operations»[14].

In 1994 Alÿs offered his skills as a tourist for hire alongside electricians and plumbers who gathered in the Zócalo square in Mexico City offering their labour. *Turista* is an action intended to question the claim of Western art—and more generally of the foreign artist—to accurately interpret the functioning of distant realities and societies.

In the same year, and again adopting a provocative and critical approach, *Housing for All (Vivienda para Todos)* was an action in which Alÿs constructed a temporary shelter made from electoral posters. Tied together and fixed to the ventilation grates of the subway in the Zócalo square in Mexico City, the posters formed a temporary and inhabitable shelter thanks to the pressure of the air pushing them upward: a direct denunciation of the unfulfilled promises of Mexican politics regarding the right to housing.

It is interesting to observe how both his actions and his recordings reveal a particular interest in urban in-between spaces, an interest comparable to that of Aldo van Eyck, who first articulated the concept of the space between things. As Alÿs explains:

> «When I stepped out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city, but to absorb what was already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces in between. Because of the immense amount of material produced on a daily basis by a huge city like Mexico City, it is very difficult to justify the act of adding another piece of matter to that already saturated environment. My reaction was to insert a story into the city rather than an object. It was my way of affecting a place at a very precise moment of its history, even just for an instant. If the story is right, if it hits a nerve, it can propagate like a rumour. Stories can pass through a place without the need to settle»[15].

Alÿs' stories are ephemeral urban fables that often feature a walker as their protagonist. For the artist, the practice of walking quickly be-

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14 Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Fable Power*, in C. Medina, R. Ferguson, J. Fisher (eds.) *Francis… cit.*, pp. 64-67.

15 ivi p. 25.

came a primary tool for acting within the city, following a lineage that can be traced first to the avant-gardes and later to the Situationists. *The Collector* (1990–1992) is an action in which the artist drags behind him a fictitious animal—a metallic and magnetic dog capable of attracting nails, wires, scrap metal, and other residual metallic elements scattered throughout the streets of Mexico City. Similarly, *Zapatos Magnéticos* (1994) consists of a walk performed with large magnetic shoes designed to attract metallic waste from the city.

Particularly in *The Collector*, the reference to Alÿs' graduation thesis at IUAV becomes evident in the celebration of the animal as a figure capable of resisting the uncertain process of Western modernization. It is a playful action—like many of his later actions—that promotes urban space as a field of relations and events rather than merely a space of circulation. The work also recalls a game Alÿs used to play as a child, as he recounts to a group of London schoolchildren:

> «I grew up in the countryside, in a place that was very isolated. The opposite from where you live. So I didn't have that many friends around, and a lot of the games I played were actually more on my own. One game was simply to have a rope with an old magnet on the end, and you'd pull it for hours and collect little scraps of metal. That was the game. It was just a way of tracing a route, grabbing little bits and scraps of metal, and then with all these little bits, maybe trying to do something back at home»[16].

## 3.2.3 Walking, Repetition, and Failure

The practice of walking characterizes the majority of the Belgian artist's actions. *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), a reflection on the value of minimalist sculpture, is an action in which the artist invests considerable physical effort pushing a large block of ice through the streets for hours, until it completely melts.

In *Fairy Tales* (1995), Alÿs walks through the streets of Stockholm unraveling his sweater and leaving behind him a thread that becomes both a trace and an urban drawing: *Fairy Tales* is a fable about loss. The simplicity of the action goes beyond the principle of collecting that characterized many of Alÿs' early works, transforming wandering itself into a method of urban intervention.

In *The Leak* (1995), he carries a pierced can of paint along the street, allowing yellow paint to drip and mark the trace of his passage. The same action is revisited in *The Green Line (Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic)*. The performance unfolds as a two-day walk marking the fragile boundary that divided the city of Jerusalem according to the ceasefire agreement signed on 30 November 1948 between Moshe Dayan,

16 Francis Alÿs, Rafael Ortega, *A Conversation with Children*, in Florence Ostende (ed.) Francis Alÿs. *Ricochets*, Prestel Verlag, Monaco, 2024, pp. 230-231.

commander of the Israeli forces in the Jerusalem region, and Abdullah al-Tal, representative of the Arab League. Here, in Jerusalem, the act of wandering through the city clearly assumes a political meaning.

> «Walking, in particular drifting, or strolling, is already - within the speed culture of our time - a kind of resistance. Paradoxically it's also the last private space, safe from the phone or e-mail. But it also happens to be a very immediate method for unfolding stories. It's an easy, cheap act to perform or to invite others to perform. The walk is simultaneously the material out of which to produce art and the modus operandi of the artistic transaction. And the city always offers the perfect setting for accidents to happen»[17].

Walking in circles, through constantly repeated movements, also characterizes *Cantos Patrióticos*, a reinterpretation of an event from 1968 during which a group of public officials—forced to take to the streets and demonstrate their support for the government—began bleating in protest. Alÿs' work criticizes the repetitive and unproductive cycles of Mexican history from the 1960s to the 1990s, staging a pathetic round dance in which a group of sheep freely follows the single sheep led on a leash by the artist.

The repetition and apparent unproductiveness of the action become a means to reflect on the economic and political desires of Latin American citizens—contradictory desires that often result in the futile cyclical nature of political actions: actions that begin with promises, continue with the establishment of disproportionate bureaucratic structures, and ultimately demonstrate how large investments frequently produce minimal, and often unsuccessful, results; before beginning again with new promises, new efforts, and once again minimal outcomes, in a continuous cycle.

This is the underlying meaning of many of Alÿs' repetitive and seemingly failed actions. One example is *El ensayo (The Rehearsal)* (1999), an action in which an old red Volkswagen Beetle repeatedly attempts to climb a steep hill in Tijuana, accompanied by the sound of a mariachi band. The crashing of the vehicle—whether red or green—reappears in later actions such as *VW Beetle* (2003), *Game Over* (2011), and *Lada Kopeika Project* (2014) in Saint Petersburg.

Paradoxical gestures, often bordering on the absurd—such as moving a mountain—characterize many of Alÿs' actions. *Cuando la fe mueve montañas (When Faith Moves Mountains)* is a work from 2002 that required the immense voluntary effort of 500 people in order to produce an evanescent and apparently negligible result. It is a work that comes alive through the oral accounts of those who experienced it: only through its transmission does the work become actualized and continue to exist beyond the performative moment.

Just as *Paradox of Praxis* reintroduces the minimalist sculptural object in an ironic key within urban space—and therefore outside

17 Francis Alÿs, *Russell Ferguson in conversation with Francis Alÿs*, in C. Medina, R. Ferguson, J. Fisher (eds.) *Francis… cit.*, p.31

the conventional space of the gallery—*When Faith Moves Mountains* reinterprets the muscular interventions of land art in the landscape, minimizing and subtly mocking them. It is an action that produces nothing except a story entrusted to oral transmission: five hundred students, equipped with shovels and aligned along the ridge of a sand dune, attempt to move a Peruvian mountain by a few centimetres on the outskirts of Lima.

Alÿs' works are all paradoxical fables—stories whose protagonists seem to exist on the threshold between reality and imagination: the magnetic dog, the giant metal shoes, the burning ball, the block of ice pushed through the streets, the solitary fox in the museum, the red Volkswagen that keeps trying, the green one that crashes, the sheep moving in circles, the mountain that shifts. These are only some of the characters and fables invented by Alÿs, much like the return of animals to Palmanova.

# *3.3 Children's Games: An Urban Fable*

The series devoted to play, begun in 2007, can also be understood as a collection of fables—small urban allegories. These are minimal scenes that, despite their apparent simplicity, condense and render visible the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of contemporary space.

They are moments that verge on the magical, despite their elementary nature. In *Children's Games*, all the themes that Alÿs has explored throughout the years converge, and the series is realized through tools and languages that by then had become well established in his practice: video, painted notes, and notebooks.

The *Children's Games* series can be understood as a visual and poetic atlas of children's street games around the world; it is therefore also a catalogue of actions performed within urban space. It reveals how spatial knowledge can emerge—often accidentally—within the flow of everyday life, in an incidental manner and beyond any pedagogical intention.

The series demonstrates how urban space, even when not specifically designed for learning, can become a place for the acquisition of spatial awareness and for the relationship between body and space. Through the repetition of gestures, contact with the urban environment, interaction with others, and the establishment of shared rules, children develop forms of spatial understanding that arise directly from experience.

## 3.3.1 Genealogy of the Project

The relationship between Alÿs and childhood is deep and can be traced back to the earliest stages of his artistic practice. The artist adopts a fairy-tale aesthetic populated by paradoxical and poetic figures that evoke the world of childhood imagination. In his videos, children initially appear as incidental presences—curious witnesses to his urban actions—before gradually assuming a more central role, eventually becoming their protagonists. With the *Children's Games* series, initiated in 1999 but consciously structured only from 2007 onward, Alÿs recognizes play as the universal language of childhood and places it at the centre of his investigations.

Tracing the connection between Alÿs and the world of childhood, it is possible to observe that children already appear in the video *Zapatos Magnéticos* (1994): the camera captures a group of boys watching with astonishment the "magic" of the enormous magnetic shoes worn by the artist. In *If You Are a Typical Spectator, What You Are Really Doing Is Waiting for the Accident* (1996), the presence of children is even more spontaneous: the camera accidentally records the improvised game of a child chasing a bottle pushed by the wind across the Zócalo square in Mexico City.

In *Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*, one of the two films produced in 2008 on the Strait of Gibraltar, children instead become the protagonists. Two ordered lines of children, departing from both shores of the strait, enter the sea to express a desire for tension and connection between the two continents—an imaginary construction of bridges that do not exist. «The two lines will meet on the horizon», states Alÿs[18] in the subtitle of the film: «a return to the way children's fantasies relate to contemporary history».

It was precisely while working on the films about the Strait of Gibraltar that Alÿs conceived the idea of initiating a series composed of videos, notes, drawings, and paintings documenting spontaneous playful actions in urban space. On the beach, the artist was struck by a group of children amusing themselves by skipping a flat stone across the surface of the water. On the one hand, this playful gesture—a stone projected toward the opposite shore of the Mediterranean—seemed to echo the theme on which he was working; on the other, what impressed the artist was the universality of that game: the same game he himself had played years earlier in Belgium.

With *Ricochets* (2007), Alÿs begins the series dedicated to children's play. The video was filmed in Tangier, Morocco, with his long-time collaborators Rafael Ortega and Julien Devaux. The sea is calm, the colours are violet, and the European coast appears on the horizon. Three children stand in the water, each assuming a distinct role, following unwritten tasks as often happens in children's games: the eldest demonstrates his skill in making an indeterminate number of stones skip across the surface of the water; the second passes him the stones he has carefully selected for their flattened shape and holds in his T-shirt; the third watches, amused. Everything unfolds with disarming spontaneity. The camera, not always steady, records a refined play of hands and a bodily skill that reveals the physical intelligence of the gesture. *Ricochets* is catalogued as the second work in the series, which is numbered chronologically.

The number one is assigned retrospectively by Alÿs to *Caracoles*, a video filmed in the 1990s, when the series dedicated to games had not yet been conceived. The work originally belonged to his research on the repetition of movements and the apparent uselessness of actions and is contemporaneous with *El Ensayo*. *Caracoles* was filmed in 1999 in Mexico City and depicts a game frequently played by children in the street: kicking an object of urban waste along the road—in this case a bottle. In the frame, a car first appears, then a bottle rolling down a sloping street, and finally a child begins to play: repeatedly kicking the bottle up the road, waiting for it to roll back down the slope, and then starting again. And so on, without haste.

In the video, while the child plays, life in Mexico City continues to flow around him—amid sounds, passers-by, and stray dogs. In this way, the self-contained action, the indirect reading of the city, and the repetition of gestures all converge in the series dedicated to street games.

18 See the artist's website: https://francisalys.com/dont-cross-the-bridge-before-you-get-to-the-river/, last accessed May 2025.

«What is the idea behind *Children's Games*?» asks Mihiret, a pupil from St Luke's Church of England Primary School in London, addressing the artist.

> «I have very young kids - younger than you guys - so I play with them a lot. When I was a child, I played on the streets, in parks, in wastelands - anywhere - and when I see my own kids, they don't play on the street anymore. They don't play in what you call public space [...] because parents don't let their kids outside anymore, for all kinds of reasons. That's why I'm filming the Children's Games, because I think it's important to remember those games. It's your first moment and space of interacting with other children outside of school»[19].

## 3.3.2 The Value of the Series

From 2007 to the present, the series has grown to nearly fifty videos. Each is numbered chronologically, takes its title from the game it documents, and can be freely viewed and downloaded from the artist's website, which functions as an archive. Opposed to the notion of the artwork as an exclusive object, Alÿs considers these works a shared heritage. «Putting them into the domain of the Creative Commons is a direct, clear statement. Also, before I start filming, I always tell all the people involved that they will be able to download and watch the films, that the films will not be commercialized, and that nobody is making money out of this. This makes the relation much healthier»[20].

For many years, Francis Alÿs has been committed to disseminating his work beyond the conventional circuits of museums and galleries, using the web as a constantly evolving archive intended to collect and make accessible the playful actions recorded in different parts of the world—consistent with his evident inclination toward cataloguing.

Since his earliest years in Mexico City, Alÿs has adopted a mode of documentation that is systematic and almost ethnographic, aimed at observing and recording informal ways of inhabiting urban space: street vendors, sleepers, beggars, passers-by. As in an ethnographic inquiry, the artist assumes the position of an attentive observer of everyday practices, documenting gestures, behaviours, and urban rituals without directly intervening in the scene, while gradually constructing a visual archive of spontaneous forms of life in public space.

The *Children's Games* series also belongs to this genealogy of visual archiving, presenting itself as a genuine anthropological repertoire of street games around the world.

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19 Francis Alÿs, Rafael Ortega, *A Conversation with Children*, in Florence Ostende (a cura di) *Francis Alÿs. Ricochets*, Prestel Verlag, Monaco 2024, p 229.

20 Gerard-Jan Claes, Stéphane Symons, *Interview with Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega*, Nov. 9, 2022, in G. Claes, S. Symons, (eds.), *Francis Alÿs. The Nature of the Game*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2023, p. 52.

The series reflects a broader impulse toward accumulation that runs throughout Alÿs' work, as can also be seen in other projects—*Fabiola*, *The Collector*, *Les Temps du Sommeil*—constructed as catalogues of gestures, faces, and objects. In *Children's Games*, this tendency combines with a documentary urgency that acquires aesthetic, social, and political significance. The collection of games does not appear merely as an artistic operation, but as a form of resistance: against the disappearance of childhood play from public space, against the erosion of children's bodily experience, and against the inevitable reduction of spatial knowledge.

Through a patient and respectful practice, Francis Alÿs restores poetic dignity and visibility to those everyday gestures that often escape attention: jumping, chasing, counting, hiding, touching, rolling. Simple gestures, yet fundamental for exploring and understanding the world—fundamental for exploring and understanding space through the actions of the body.

The *Children's Games* series possesses a strong documentary value. As Gerard-Jan Claes and Stéphane Symons observe, the games are recorded with «a certain directness, without linguistic intervention, commentary voice, or informative captioning. [...] The videos are not manuals to instruct the viewer how the game is played. Yet they aim for a distinct transparency and readability»[21]. Unlike his earlier works, here the artist no longer assumes the role of protagonist; rather, he disappears behind the camera and allows the observer to become fully present within the scene.

If the first videos emerged almost accidentally—as in the case of *Children's Games #1: Caracoles* or *Children's Games #2: Ricochets*—later works reveal a careful study of the game itself, of its rules and its participants, also through drawing, which the artist uses as a tool for investigation and prefiguration. Alongside the videos, notebooks and small paintings become moments of research and inquiry. As Alÿs explains:

> «Before filming, we need to fully understand the mechanics of each game. What is the role of each player? What rules are there to organize the interaction? [...] Through this preparation, we know which information we will need to capture in order to build a clear narrative during the editing process, one that will allow the viewer to understand the game without the help of written information»[22]

The filmmaker disappears within the playful action as if he were part of it, while the children—absorbed in the game—become uninhibited and forget the presence of the camera. The filming tolerates possible imperfections in favour of clarity and the legibility of the game.

To the visual dimension is added the auditory one: environmental sounds, the noise of the city, spontaneous dialogues, laughter, and the children's calls to one another become essential narrative elements, helping to convey the complexity of the context. As the American anthropol-

21 Gerard-Jan Claes, Stéphane Symons (eds.), *Francis Alÿs* …, cit., p. 13.

22 Gerard-Jan Claes, Stéphane Symons, *Interview with Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega*…, cit., p. 44.

ogist and documentary filmmaker David MacDougall observes, video is not merely a visual medium:

> «sounds can be as important as images. Often the two are welded together in a way that produces a subjective experience going well beyond simply addition one to the other. Furthermore, films are more about the invisible than the visible, for they provide a channel to the full gamut of human experience: to people's thoughts, emotions, values, and beliefs»[23].

Video thus becomes an instrument of knowledge, capable of grasping not only what is visible but also what remains invisible, narrating human experience in its perceptual, emotional, and value-laden dimensions—beyond the limits of verbal language.

## 3.3.3 The Child's Experience in the City

As Cuauhtémoc Medina observes[24], several reasons led Francis Alÿs, beginning in 2007, to devote himself to the creation of a video archive of children's games. The enthusiasm and spontaneity of children certainly contrast with the scepticism and resistance of the adult world with which Alÿs often had to negotiate in order to realize his projects. It is also for this reason that, from the mid-2000s onward, children increasingly become the protagonists of his films—even in works that do not explicitly belong to the *Children's Games* series—marking a gradual withdrawal of the artist as the actor of his own urban actions.

At the same time, Alÿs develops a growing awareness of a radical transformation in the use of public space, particularly in more industrialized countries. The excessive presence of cars, the lack of spaces dedicated to play, the increasing perception of the street as unsafe among adults, together with the pervasive spread of digital technologies, increasingly confine children in front of screens, depriving them of the free and physical experience of the city.

For this reason, Alÿs' attention shifts toward poorer and more peripheral contexts, where children can still explore space freely. It is in the streets—rather than in spaces specifically designed for play—that the attentive and respectful gaze of the artist documents the playful practices of childhood. These are games that often reflect rituals, symbols, and gestures specific to each culture, without any idealization or nostalgia. His narrative is disenchanted and far from sentimental: what emerges is the deep relationship between play, urban space, and the geopolitical context, offering a poetic yet lucid reading of the contradictions of our time.

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23 David MacDougall, F*rancis Alÿs and the Games of Childhood,* in Hilde Teerlinck (ed.), *The Nature of the Game. Francis Alÿs*, DCV, Berlin 2022, pp. 170–171.

24 Cuauhtémoc Medina, A *Collection of "innumerable Little Allegories". Francis Alÿs Children's Games*, in Francis Alÿs. *Juegos de niñxs,* 1999–2022, Città del Messico, MUAC – Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, 2023, p. 33.

*Children's Games #29: La Roue*, for instance, filmed in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2021, shows a child struggling to push a tyre to the top of a hill, against the black background of a massive mound of cobalt waste. The red, green, and yellow of the child's clothes stand out sharply against the dark landscape. The game consists in rolling down the slope inside the tyre at full speed.

In Hong Kong, in 2020, Alÿs filmed *Step on a Crack*, number 23 in the series. Under the amused gaze of passers-by and among the countless signs that mark the urban surface, a little girl jumps across yellow lines and carefully avoids the cracks in the pavement. The game becomes an occasion to narrate the functioning of the city during the pandemic, while the filmic narrative is distinguished by the beauty of its frames, colours, and photographic compositions.

*Children's Games #20: Leapfrog*, filmed in Nerkzlia, Iraq, in 2018, shows how leapfrog remains a game that has endured through time and is shared by children across the world. On the dry Middle Eastern hills, a group of boys take turns jumping over each other's backs. From a distance, a group of girls first watch with amusement and then begin to imitate the boys. It is an ancient and universal game, through which children test their physical abilities in space.

Many of these games—including leapfrog itself—also appear in the 1560 painting *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a work that, by Alÿs' own admission, had a profound impact on him when he first encountered it as a child. The Flemish painter depicts a vast repertoire of games in a setting that can easily be recognized as the city of Antwerp, thus representing them within urban space. Like Bruegel's painting, Alÿs' work also constitutes a catalogue of games, movements, and spatial experiences performed by children in different contexts.

Irene Baldriga recalls that a close relationship exists between Bruegel's painting and Erasmus of Rotterdam's essay *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530), widely known as the etiquette of children. In her study, «Erasmus attributes great importance to the practice of play, with its rules and its unwritten codes of fairness and respect, assigning it a decisive role in the education of the young»[25]. Play is indeed a social form, a shared activity, and is therefore governed by precise norms and rules. Johan Huizinga argues that rules

> « determine what "holds" in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. [...] as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire's whistle breaks the spell and sets "real" life going again»[26].

What is important to emphasize in the playful activities recorded in

25 Irene Baldriga, *Estetica della cittadinanza. Per una nuova educazione civica*, Le Monnier Università, Florence 2020, p. 22.

26 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1949, p. 11.

Alÿs' series is not so much their normative or ethical dimension as their experiential one. Through play, children come to know places, the city, and spaces of relation: they measure them, delimit them, and learn to recognize them. Play thus becomes a tool for acquiring spatial knowledge through the body.

In *Children's Games #22: Jump Rope*, filmed in Hong Kong in 2020, three girls meet on the rooftop of a building during the pandemic. In the background, the anonymous façades of high-rise buildings frame the scene. After exchanging greetings and laughter, they begin performing tricks with the skipping rope, almost as if challenging one another; soon their movements become synchronized and increasingly rapid, the jump repeated again and again. In play, rhythmic repetition is almost constant. In Alÿs' series, repeated gestures include kicking the bottle, jumping over companions in leapfrog, or rolling down the slope of a waste mound inside a tyre. Repetition is inherent to play, and through repetition space is gradually understood and appropriated. Rhythm and harmony are two distinctive features of playful action, situating play within the realm of aesthetics[27]. Like music and dance, play is made of refrains and recurring movements.

Repetition takes place within a clearly defined time and space. The child delineates the space of play, and this delimitation allows them to distance themselves from everyday routine and ordinariness. The delimitation of space is, in fact, a properly architectural action: through a line traced on the ground, an imaginary perimeter, or the choice of a specific point in the street, the child temporarily establishes a place that is distinct from the ordinary flow of the city.

As in architecture, the definition of a boundary—even a minimal or provisional one—transforms an undifferentiated space into a meaningful one, making action, orientation, and the sharing of rules possible. In this sense, play produces a spatial device that organizes the movement of bodies and generates a temporary condition of concentration and attention. The boundary may be real or imaginary, intentional or accidental, but it is nonetheless established before the game begins.

The games recorded by Alÿs never take place in playgrounds or in urban spaces deliberately designed by adults for children's play. Instead, it is the children themselves who define the spatial framework of their play according to different geographical and social contexts. This capacity reveals how children are able not only to appreciate but also to reinterpret and transform everyday space through experience.

The careful analysis of the *Children's Games* series conducted by the architect Rodrigo Pérez de Arce Antoncic shows that

> « Children never regard a place as a tab-ula rasa, one devoid of qualities, however precarious these qualities may be. In their minds, places are as bountiful and subtle as the fissures in the pavements, turned into a motif for a rhythmic and evanescent urban dance in ***Children's Game #23: Step on a Crack*** (2020). [...] As if wresting the secrets of the ***genius***

27 ivi p. 10.

> *loci*, players bring to the fore some of the site's innate qualities such as sonority, scale, texture, to-pography, visual range, materiality, and so on. [...] Theirs is definitely a high-intensity interaction with architecture, and one that had not even been anticipated within the imaginary scripts of the architectural project. These impromptu choices contradict common assumptions. Neither the street, nor the slag heap or the concrete shells of the abandoned houses conform to the expectations of softness, friendliness, colorfulness, cuteness, or smallness so often associated with childhood»[28].

Play is a practice of incidental learning, an informal and pre-reflective mode through which spatial, perceptual, and relational competencies are acquired. While jumping, running, climbing, or tracing an imaginary boundary, children learn—almost unconsciously—to read the city, to interpret its structures, and to orient themselves within its solids and voids. The city is not merely the setting of play: it is a living material to be explored and understood, and play constitutes its first and most profound act of cognitive appropriation.

*Children's Games* asserts the primacy of physical experience and tactility. Indeed, Alÿs' entire body of work affirms the primacy of the hand, from his pictorial practice to his performative actions, as well as through his engagement with artisanal traditions and with the Mexican *rotulistas*. In this sense, the actions of the hands recur as a true grammar of his artistic language. From the iconography of Fra Angelico's *Mocking of Christ*—where the hand, even without a face, embodies action, intention, and offense—to the industrious hands of the children in the *Children's Games* series, the hand becomes a symbol of physical presence in space, of the gesture that acts, transforms, and resists. As Inês Geraldes Cardoso observes in her essay in the catalogue *Ricochets*, the centrality of hands in the children's games documented by Alÿs marks an epistemological shift from the domain of the eye to that of touch, from observation to manipulation, from detached knowledge to an immersive and haptic experience[29].

"Playing is doing," affirms the child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott[30], and within this dimension of doing the hand becomes the absolute protagonist. It is the hand that holds the rope in *Jump Rope*, that digs holes, builds castles, tears the legs off grasshoppers, flies a kite, pushes a wheel, or throws a stone. Through the hand, the child explores the world, testing its limits and possibilities in a dynamic in which the body becomes an instrument of incidental learning. In *Children's Games*, play thus becomes a form of manual thinking, a knowledge of space that emerges through gesture and manipulation rather than through vision and abstraction.

This shift from the visual to the tactile, from the optical to the haptic, recognizes the hand as having a fundamental cognitive role, as Juhani

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28 Rodrigo Pérez de Arce Antoncic, *Not a Playground*, in G. Claes, S. Symons (eds.), *Francis Alÿs* … cit., pp. 89-90.

29 Inês Geraldes Cardoso, *Hand Games*, in Hilde Teerlinck (ed.), *Francis Alÿs: Ricochets*, Barbican Centre, London 2024, p. 198.

30 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, London 1971.

Pallasmaa has observed[31]: the hand is a true organ of knowledge, through which the body establishes a direct relationship with space and with matter. The act of touching, manipulating, and physically intervening in matter becomes a fully-fledged process of knowing. In this way, Alÿs constructs a silent yet powerful pedagogy in which the hand—childlike, adult, painterly, playful—becomes the element that holds together art, play, and learning.

Atlas, pp. 104-107.

## 3.3.4 *Children's Games* on Display

In recent years, the *Children's Games* series has been presented in numerous exhibitions across different parts of the world, offering diverse modes of viewing and interpretation. As early as December 2019–March 2020, the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam hosted a selection of videos from the series. However, it was at the 59th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2022 that the project received its most extensive and articulated presentation. Curated by Hilde Teerlinck, the installation *The Nature of the Game* represented Belgium through a labyrinthine display in which large screens simultaneously projected children's actions collected by Alÿs—from Mexico to Afghanistan, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Switzerland. Sounds and images echoed through the space: war games, chases in the snow, kite dances, and snail races formed a collective narrative about children's adaptability and creativity when confronted with complex and often hostile environmental and political conditions.

The strength of this archive was further emphasized in the exhibition *Juegos de niñxs, 1999–2022*, held at the MUAC (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo) in Mexico City from February to September 2023. Here, around twenty screens suspended from the ceiling of a darkened gallery projected the videos of the games, while the audio tracks blended into a single playful and chaotic soundtrack, evoking the collective and universal energy of play.

From 27 June to 1 September 2024, *Francis Alÿs: Ricochets* was presented at the Barbican Centre in London, marking the artist's largest institutional exhibition in the United Kingdom in the past fifteen years. The installation transformed the gallery into a "cinematic playground," with video installations allowing visitors to immerse themselves in a visual and sonic symphony of children's games from around the world.

In Germany, at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, *Francis Alÿs: Kids Take Over* opened on 12 April 2025. This monographic retrospective placed the video works in dialogue with a selection of preparatory drawings and paintings, revealing the continuity between documentary observation and the painterly origins of the artist's research.

The exhibition design of shows dedicated to *Children's Games* tends to remain largely consistent, reflecting the methodological and formal coherence of the project. The videos are projected in darkened rooms,

31 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2009.

sometimes sequentially and sometimes simultaneously, on large screens or through projectors distributed across the exhibition space. Stools placed throughout the galleries invite a prolonged and contemplative viewing, emphasizing the immersive and reflective nature of the work. This display strategy aligns with Alÿs' poetics, which understands children's play as an activity requiring attentive observation, openness to listening, and a slowing down of perception.

Alongside the videos, one often encounters drawings, notebooks, small paintings, and annotations—materials belonging to the preparatory stages of the artist's research. These materials, produced on tracing paper, small sheets, or foldable pages, are not secondary to the video work but constitute an integral part of Alÿs' method. They function as visual notes, observations, and diagrams of thought that the artist accumulates over time during his stays in the places where the games are recorded. This parallel visual archive reveals the process of study and immersion that precedes each film, highlighting the cumulative, analytical, and intuitive nature of his practice. Through these images—at once simple and evocative—the layered structure of the work becomes visible: a slow and respectful observation that intertwines anthropological attention with architectural sensibility, painterly vision with documentary rigor.

## 3.3.5 Five *Children's Games*

From 2007 to the present, over the course of nearly twenty years, Alÿs has recorded around fifty games. Five of these are selected here for analysis, as they are particularly representative of the ways in which children explore and come to understand both urban and non-urban space: through urban markings, the morphology of the terrain, the use of enclosures, proxemic relations, and imagination.

Since 2007, Francis Alÿs has collected these fifty games across highly diverse geographical, social, and cultural contexts, constructing a veritable atlas of children's spontaneity. Within this catalogue of games, places, and inventions, examining five videos makes it possible to focus on how children read, traverse, and reinterpret space—urban and otherwise—through the body.

Each game highlights a different mode of spatial exploration: urban markings that become traces to follow or avoid in *Step on a Crack*; the uneven terrain that can only be understood through effort in *La Roue*; the enclosure as a mobile spatial device within which active forces interact in *A Corda*; proxemic relations emerging through minimal movements between bodies in *Appelsindans*; and imagination reshaping places and objects in *Haram Football*.

The selection therefore does not follow a geographical or chronological criterion, but rather a situational logic. These five games reveal how children's perception is never passive and how any environment—a street intersection, a mound of industrial waste, a grassy area marked by a rope—can become a temporary laboratory of learning. In Alÿs' games, the children's bodies, through jumps, pushes, rolling movements, pulling actions, or simple ritual repetitions, construct a form of knowledge that is always situated, incidental, and deeply rooted in direct experience. The five selected games demonstrate how childhood, in a spontaneous way, makes visible qualities of space that often escape the adult gaze, and how playful gestures can be understood as a critical practice—a micro-pedagogy of space that emerges from doing, moving, and continually negotiating with what the environment offers.

## Playing with Urban Signs.

## *Children's Game #23: Step on a Crack*

Atlas, p. 108.

October 2020, Hong Kong, 4:57 min
In collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, and Félix Blume

It is 25 October 2020, and Hong Kong is in the midst of the pandemic. The protagonist of the game is a young girl wearing a violet dress, blue sneakers, and a face mask.

The four minutes and fifty-seven seconds of the video unfold as a kind of urban dance, and the filmic narrative stands out for the beauty of its colours and its carefully composed frames.

The opening shot is distant: an intersection, a pedestrian crossing, a traffic light; the sounds of the city, the horns of cars. The game begins precisely with a sound—the acoustic signal of the pedestrian crossing. From the left, the girl enters the frame. Reaching the intersection, she begins hopping along the yellow pedestrian lines while reciting a rhyme:

> «Step on a line, break the devil's spine,
> Step on a crack, break the devil's back,
> Step in a ditch, your mother's nose will itch,
> But if you step in between, everything will be keen!»

The contrast of colours—the blue of the dress and shoes against the yellow of the road markings—immediately creates a striking visual tension. The game consists of jumping across the stripes, manholes, joints in the pavement, and markings on the asphalt: the foot must land only on the continuous, unmarked surfaces. The rhyme continues like a sonic thread that holds the entire route together.

The camera frames the traffic light and the green pedestrian signal, a direct reference to the work *Semáforos*, in which Alÿs has for thirty years been recording the icons of pedestrian lights in cities around the world. The cinematic gaze then lowers to the level of the pavement and follows the girl's feet and jumps. One is reminded of the series *Sleepers*, when the photographer's eye remained close to the ground in order to document people sleeping on the streets of Mexico City.

The girl proceeds alone, yet around her the expressions of passers-by soften—amused and touched. The camera records them, because the reactions of the inhabitants also become part of the urban choreography. Meanwhile, the signs of the city emerge: textures, colours, surfaces, shop signs. The movements of trucks and trams are registered as well. And above all, sounds—a kind of urban symphony that does not drown out the girl's words or the rhythm of her movement.

The route also reveals the urban form and the child's experience of the complexity of public space: stairs to overcome a change in level; a footbridge crossing above a busy road; then a pedestrian street leading into a

market, where the pace slows, vehicles are small and pulled by hand, and the sounds merge with the voices of vendors and the selling of goods. On the ground appear white markings in Chinese characters, and these too must be avoided: the rhyme continues as the game adapts to the complexity of the surface.

The yellow stripes return, now crossed beside the carts of the market. When the traffic light turns red, the dance stops. A moment later, it resumes. It is striking that while the girl and the city seem to move endlessly forward, the camera chooses to linger on those who remain still: elderly people watching the city—and at the same time the small dancer who continues to jump, again and again.

Until, at the final pedestrian crossing, the girl's foot lands on the yellow line. The game ends. She smiles. And everything simply returns to ordinary life.

Atlas, p. 109.

## Learning from Urban Signs

*Step on a Crack* shows how urban space can simultaneously become a field of play and a terrain of learning. Moving among pedestrian crossings, cracks, manholes, and Chinese characters painted on the ground, the girl transforms an everyday setting into a playful landscape. The city becomes an experiential field: its graphic and symbolic features are read by the child and actively used. Joints in the pavement and yellow lines are no longer merely functional signs regulating traffic, but patterns upon which a path can be constructed.

The child's movement is not random. Her "two-step" and "snaking" gestures reveal a high degree of spatial awareness, an acute sensitivity to lines and voids. She carefully calibrates her steps in order to avoid certain markings—cracks and lines—which requires both motor and cognitive attention: a form of bodily control within space.

This game stimulates a particular form of spatial learning. The girl learns to visually perceive the geometry of the ground, to orient herself in relation to its signs, and to move her body accordingly.

The game recorded by Alÿs reflects children's capacity to generate their own meanings and rules within otherwise predetermined environments, appropriating urban space and transforming it into something temporarily different. The city, although organized according to conventional functional and commercial logics, becomes a terrain of creative freedom and experimentation, where the body acts as an instrument of exploration and knowledge. The act of reciting the rhyme while moving underscores the relationship between body, language, and space: even if unconsciously, the game carries a critical dimension.

The rhythm of vehicles, the sounds of the market, and the constant flow of the city also contribute to constructing an environment in which the body learns, experiments, and interacts in an incidental and creative manner.

The recording of the interaction between child and sign is not an isolated episode in Alÿs' series on play, but a recurring theme. In *Children's*

*Games #47: Chalk*, several children draw on the ground with white chalk, shifting from the limited scale of a sheet of paper to the potentially infinite surface of the street. Here too the child independently reads, manages, and marks space.

In *Children's Games #50: Schattenfangen*, children chase and try to catch the shadows projected on the ground—temporary signs that constantly change with the light and the position of the bodies, introducing further variables into the perception of urban space.

In *Children's Games #2: Ricochets*, a group of children demonstrates their skill in controlling the force of their arms to make a stone bounce across the surface of the water—once again producing an ephemeral trace that requires spatial perception, coordination, and a careful modulation of action in relation to the environment. Each trace becomes an opportunity for learning, exploration, and the construction of shared rules. The city, the ground, and the water all become materials through which the body experiments with attention, movement, and imagination.

In summary, *Step on a Crack* demonstrates how spontaneous play in urban contexts can function as a powerful means of bodily and spatial learning, enabling a temporary appropriation of public space and the generation of meaning through situated actions.

Atlas, p. 110.

## Playing with the Slope of the Terrain.
## *Children's Game #29: La Roue*

21 August 2021, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, 8:43 min
In collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, and Félix Blume

A whistle signals the beginning. *La Roue* takes place in Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the foot of the "Mampala," a mountain of cobalt waste: an enormous black mass against which vivid colours stand out sharply—such as the bright yellow dress of a woman passing by, and immediately afterwards the figure of the child protagonist: yellow and green T-shirt, red shorts, barefoot.

At the end of August, beneath the constant noise of the nearby industrial complex, the boy pushes a tyre toward the top of the mound. He does so with absolute determination, bent forward, arms stretched out, his bare feet searching for footholds in the uneven ground. For a short stretch, three other children help him, also dressed in red Adidas tracksuits—a detail that stands out in that context and feels almost dissonant, like a visual short circuit between globalization, poverty, and playful vitality. For a moment they form a small improvised team that organizes itself and then disappears, leaving him to continue alone. The camera pulls back, and the relationship between the mass of the Mampala and the tiny silhouette of the child becomes striking: a small, brightly coloured figure against an immense anthracite background, framed within a scene that is both magnificent and unsettling.

The child's short breath marks the ascent: the effort is audible, the rhythm of the body on the slope, the fatigue of arms and feet searching for balance. Then, suddenly, he stops. He steadies the tyre, tilts it toward himself, and slips inside it, crouching as if to occupy all the available space. With a quick movement of his arm, he sets the game in motion: he lets himself roll downhill along the same path he has just climbed with such effort, this time surrendering to gravity, speed, and the circular motion of the wheel. A small camera mounted inside the tyre records his face: concentrated, serious, completely absorbed in the descent. Meanwhile, the three companions suddenly reappear and run after him, laughing, chasing the rolling tyre. The colours continue to vibrate: the red and yellow of the children cut sharply across the black of the rubber and the mountain.

Once they reach the starting point again, the game changes scale: it becomes collective. The four children begin pushing the tyre together, chanting a kind of ritual refrain, a rhyme that sounds like a form of paradoxical and playful resistance:

«The Mampala Star mine
has been defeated
but Mampala, Mampala
our great black mountain
we are pushing, pushing
pushing to find the solution»

At that point, the scene takes on another tension: together, they disappear behind the mountain of waste, continuing to sing and push the tyre.

And the game begins again, and once again it begins in solitude. Again the ascent, again the effort: this time we know what will happen, we already know the reward of the descent. The boy pushes the tyre up a slope that is almost vertical, with an inclination of forty to fifty degrees: the effort is entirely visible, almost physically perceptible. Then he slips inside the tyre again and rolls down until the wheel overturns and comes to a stop. He gets up, runs, retrieves the tyre, and climbs the steep slope for a third time.

In the final shot, the dimensional relationship between the child and the mountain is shown once more. But this time something changes: once he reaches the top, the boy no longer climbs inside the tyre. Instead, with a sharp gesture, he pushes it down the embankment, letting it plunge downhill. The game ends there, like a cycle coming to a close.

## Learning from the Slope of the Terrain

Atlas, p. 111.

In *La roue*, the child does not only play: he learns the mountain through his body, exploring its shape, its slope, and the material consistency of the granules that compose it. The Mampala, an artificial mountain of waste, is difficult terrain—far from child-friendly. Yet it becomes his testing ground, where the perception of space is constructed through friction, fatigue, effort, and the rhythm of breathing.

Pushing the tyre uphill means measuring the mountain: searching for footholds, adjusting the weight of the body, sensing the consistency of the ground, the degree of inclination, and the strength required to move forward. It is a situated form of learning, not an abstract one: the child comes to know the mountain because he climbs it. The body becomes the first instrument of spatial reading, and play becomes the means through which a hostile environment is translated into something interpretable.

The descent, by contrast, reveals another face of the slope: no longer the resistance of the terrain, but its capacity to accelerate, to provide momentum, to activate gravity. Entering the tyre and letting himself roll downhill means surrendering to the logic of the terrain. It is an immersive experience, a form of pure kinaesthetic learning: the child feels the slope in his own axis, in his balance, in the rotation of the world around him.

In the cyclical alternation between ascent and descent lies the formative quality of the game: the child experiences the same space under opposite conditions, constructing a knowledge of topography, risk, direction,

and the force of his own body in relation to the environment. Space is not a fixed datum, but an interlocutor that changes according to posture and circumstance.

In the alternation between individual effort and collective pushing, another dimension of learning also emerges: a choral, shared learning.

*La roue* shares with other games recorded by Alÿs the use of a sloping terrain as the central element of play. If in the Congolese game the protagonist uses a pre-existing object—the tyre—as a playful device, in the fortieth game of the series, *Chivichanas*, filmed in Havana in 2023, a large group of children manually build small carts with which they race and launch themselves down the slopes of the city. In the Cuban game there is therefore also a moment of design: choosing, assembling, and constructing the toy. Manual and technical skills become an integral part of the playful practice.

In games that involve self-made tools, the competence is double: one learns both to make (to build the device) and to make it work—on the slope. The experience generates tacit technical knowledge: which wood to choose, how to assemble it, how to fix the wheels. *La roue*, by contrast, emphasizes adaptation: the child learns to assign a new function to an object that already exists, engaging his body with the characteristics of the object—balance, grip, inertia—without having to fabricate it.

In Havana, sliding also becomes a collective action and a competition: the entire community participates and encourages the players. The agonistic dimension teaches social rules (turn-taking, fair play) and collaborative skills (pushing, supporting those who fall). In *La roue*, the shift from individual gesture to collective ritual also occurs—the children sing and push together—but it remains part of a practice more centred on the experience of a single body confronting the slope. The Cuban celebration tends to institutionalize play as a social event; in Lubumbashi the value lies in accompaniment and in the sharing of risk and fatigue.

In the Swiss game *Schneespiele*, by contrast, children are seen descending on snowy terrain. Unlike a sled or a built cart, on snow one relies almost entirely on the body. Snow is more forgiving, but also more deceptive. The child learns to anticipate drifts, to recognize the moment to let go and the moment to restrain himself.

The snowy slope amplifies movement: very little is needed to lose control during the descent. The game thus becomes a training ground for learning how to modulate speed, to brake, and to use hands, feet, and posture as regulating devices.

In all these cases, the slope becomes a spatial condition that teaches how to read, interpret, and reinvent the environment through the body. Spatial learning emerges through the repetition of gestures that structure space and make it intelligible. The mountain reveals itself in the gait of the body, in the laborious ascent, in the free descent, in the bare feet that explore it granule by granule. A spontaneous pedagogy, entirely built upon the direct relationship between body and context.

## Playing with Enclosures.
## *Children's Game #48: A Corda*

Atlas, p. 112.

Avintes, Portugal, 2024; 6 min; in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, Félix Blume, Fundação de Serralves, and the children of the Escola Básica Adriano Correia de Oliveira.

The overhead shot frames a green lawn on which a quadrangular figure stands out, traced by a taut rope held at each corner by a child. Near the vertices of the figure, four red boxes of chocolates appear as points of attraction on the green carpet. The aim of the game is to seize the box closest to one's own corner, overcoming the resistance of the other three participants. It is a challenge of strength, agility, and strategy: victory does not necessarily belong to the strongest, but to the one who can move with quickness, seize the right moment, and anticipate the others' moves.

Unlike the other games in the series, the camera remains fixed, framing the playing field and the arrangement of the boxes, while what changes are the participants and the shape of the quadrangular figure. Each time the square hosts a new group: four boys, four girls, or a mixed group. The dynamic remains the same, but the interactions vary: attention focuses on movements, pauses, and moments of hesitation or fatigue, which can immediately be exploited by a companion to advance toward the corner and seize the prize.

The rope, which activates and enables the game, is never static: it tightens, stretches, and takes on different shapes—regular or distorted rhombuses—following the movements of the participants, a mobile enclosure that continually defines the shifting space of the game. Each pull alters the geometry of the square, making forces and tensions visible.

### Learning from the Enclosure

Atlas, p. 113.

The rope, therefore, defines an enclosure: one of the oldest devices for shaping space, for surrounding and closing it, for marking control, belonging, and separation.

The quadrangular figure, a closed form, requires the collaboration of the four participants in order to exist: four vectors whose intensity and direction affect the form and position of the enclosure. The quadrangular shape—the enclosure—is therefore a negotiated form, a field that is constructed collectively and that changes as the tensions among the participants vary.

By contrast, in *Wolf and Lamb* (*Children's Games #11*, filmed in Afghanistan), the enclosure is not a fixed object but the children's bodies themselves: a human circle formed by the participants holding hands. The children define the spatial boundary with their own bodies. The enclosure is human: it exists thanks to the active presence of the participants and

their movement. This bodily enclosure has both a protective and symbolic function: the circle is not merely a geometric form but becomes a place of safety for the lamb, a zone of inclusion established by the bodies of the others. When the wolf manages to enter, the lamb can dart out and escape. The game therefore develops dynamics of cooperation, as the children forming the enclosure must resist together.

In *A corda*, the participants compete to obtain a prize—the box of chocolates. The enclosure becomes part of the strategy: it must be deformed, manipulated, and used to one's advantage.

*A corda* is thus a game of attention, speed, and tactics: children learn to calculate space, to measure their own strength, and to grasp the rhythm of others. It is a game that trains control of one's own body and the anticipation of the movements of other bodies. *A corda* teaches how to handle space as an elastic field of forces, within a boundary that bends, stretches, and transforms under the pressure of its inhabitants.

## Playing with Proximity.
## Children's Game #34: Appelsindans

Atlas, p. 114.

Copenhagen, Denmark, 2022; 4:06 min, in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, Julien Devaux, and Copenhagen Contemporary

Two children pick up an orange from the ground and place it on their foreheads, pressing against each other so that the fruit does not fall. The camera then shifts to another pair: two girls laughing as they try to press their faces together to keep the orange in place. The camera then pulls back and reveals that they are not the only ones playing: the entire lawn is animated by pairs engaged in the same delicate exercise. It is not simple at all. The orange slips over their eyes, along the cheek, and then falls. They pick it up and begin again. And so do all the other pairs, in a sequence of attempts, laughter, concentration, and small disappointments that discourage no one.

The principle is very clear: keep the orange in place solely through the pressure of the other person's face, moving together and seeking a shared balance without breaking it. It is a game in which distances disappear; there is no comfort zone. Intimate space becomes a shared space, necessary for success.

Children embrace each other so as not to lose contact, they support one another, and there is much laughter—but always with careful attention to the other. Social conventions disappear: here, extreme proximity is the very condition of the game. At a certain point, still embracing, they begin to sing, with unexpected gentleness. The orange falls again. In the end only one pair of girls remains: embracing, they dance slowly with the orange pressed between their foreheads. But eventually the orange falls for them as well.

### Proxemics

In *Appelsindans*, children implicitly learn to modulate distance, to "sense" the other through micro-movements, light pressures, and a balance constructed by two bodies together. It is a proxemic exercise: one learns to continuously negotiate shared space, to recognize one's own vulnerability and that of the other, and to move as a single organism while remaining two individuals.

In this way, the game reveals a fundamental quality of children's spatial experience: the ability to transform proximity into collaboration. A small choreography that makes visible the affective and social dimension of space.

This tendency toward the suspension—or even the disappearance—of distance frequently appears in children's games. In *Kluddermor*, also recorded in Copenhagen in 2022, the game begins with the formation of a circle: everyone holds hands and, hopping lightly, moves toward the

center until their bodies become entangled. The circle tightens and turns into a compact mass of arms and legs passing over and under one another. The objective is never to let go. The circle is no longer an orderly enclosure but a pulsating organism, a single social body in which the rules of distance are completely suspended. Only the intervention of one child—the "liberator"—can untangle the knot. It is a complex task, almost choreographic: through twists, acrobatic passages, and micro-negotiations, the group slowly loosens and unfolds. Once freed, the children run toward the sea, as if they had passed through a collective physical trial that momentarily erased every distance.

In *Children's Game #28: Nzango*, recorded in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the dynamics are different yet equally revealing. Here the game begins by marking an enclosure on the ground: a physical threshold, a declared boundary that defines the space of action. Inside this perimeter, children dance in pairs according to a precise rhythm; when the sequence ends, the space passes to the next participant. The alternating choreography, the drawn boundary, the movements of entering and leaving reveal how the space of play becomes a place of identity, a territory in which relationships—and distances—are continuously reconfigured.

In children's games, the four spatial domains identified by Edward Hall[32]—intimate, personal, social, and public—expand, contract, and sometimes disappear altogether. Children learn that sharing such close space requires coordination, control of one's own energy, and the ability to be present without being invasive. They learn that balance is never guaranteed: it must be built and rebuilt each time, just like the orange that falls and is picked up again.

Through these micro-choreographies, children experience directly the relational value of space: they discover that every movement alters distance, and that every distance alters the relationship. It is precisely this bodily awareness—so simple, yet so profound—that remains with them: space is never neutral, but is shaped by the people who inhabit it, by the gestures they exchange, and by the ways in which they approach one another or let go.

32 See Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Doubleday, New York 1966, especially Chapter X, "Distances in Man".

## Playing with Imagination.
## *Children's Game #19: Haram Football*

Mosul, Iraq, 2017; 9:11 min, in collaboration with Julien Devaux and Félix Blume

We are in Mosul, Iraq, on 15 August 2017. The eastern side of the city has been liberated from the rule of the Islamic State only a few days earlier: this means that football is no longer *haram*, no longer forbidden.

Yet, in the afternoon light slowly fading toward sunset, what Francis Alÿs records is a way of playing that was born precisely under the dictatorship—a way that had become necessary.

The scene unfolds on a neighborhood street, lined with bombed buildings, torn walls, and debris. Cars lie as twisted metal carcasses, yet the light is golden, almost suspended. About a dozen boys between the ages of eight and sixteen gather, greet one another, let a military vehicle pass that cuts across the street, and then begin to prepare the field. Three stones mark the goal. From one corner someone "throws" the ball into play. The match begins. Only, the ball is not there.

The boys, accustomed to imagining it in order to keep playing despite the prohibition, see it perfectly well: they throw it, pass it to a teammate, block it, save it. The others follow it with their eyes, without the slightest doubt about where the ball is rolling. It becomes a precise choreography, made of codified gestures, athletic movements, feints, and headers into the empty air that are nevertheless not empty at all. On the edge of a sidewalk, other friends follow the game attentively, fully engaged.

During the rule of the Islamic State, even this was forbidden. Football, like other sports, was considered incompatible with Islamic law. And so imagination filled the absence: the prohibited object became invisible, but no less real. The non-existent ball is kicked, deflected, saved—goal! The boys celebrate, embrace, rejoice. A truck passes, they step aside, and then the game resumes. At one point the imaginary ball falls into a crater: everyone approaches to retrieve it, places it back into play, and the match continues. In the background one hears the muezzin's call to prayer, passing cars, metallic noises. Someone adjusts the goal made of stones. Then, suddenly, the crack of an explosion. A gunshot. The game is over.

One by one, the players introduce themselves to the camera.

As Alÿs recalls in the video: «In January 2015 an Islamic State jihadist firing squad publicly executed thirteen boys in Mosul for having watched on television a football match between Iraq and Jordan».

### Learning from Imagination

Atlas, p. 117.

In *Haram Football*, Francis Alÿs thus records children's capacity to construct an alternative reality to the one given—a reality that is both limited and limiting. What he captures, in other words, is their ability to redraw

the space of the game and even the means through which the game is played.

What is striking is not so much the use of the street as an alternative to a football field, but rather the collective dimension of the imaginative act: the ability of an entire group of children to see an invisible football and to follow, in perfect synchrony, the unfolding of the game.

Even in *Children's Game #17: Chunggi*, the ball is not a real ball. In Nepal, a group of schoolgirls in uniform juggle a bundle of leaves tied together with a string. With great dexterity they bounce it on the inside or outside of their feet, transforming an improvised object into a codified game.

What children learn, whether in Iraq or in Nepal, is that play does not depend on objects but on shared rules, on the agreement to imagine together. Imagination can replace what is missing—the space of the game as well as the instrument of play. In this sense, imagination becomes an act of resistance, and collective intelligence can temporarily compensate for the shortcomings of reality.

The formative value of this game lies in its capacity to activate a double level of perception: to the reading of the place—with its surfaces, edges, and presences—is superimposed a fictional landscape that amplifies its possibilities. In this way, children train a fundamental cognitive competence: the ability to read reality and to rewrite it by inventing alternative scenarios. This practice produces a form of critical spatial awareness, because it allows children to experience a place not as a fixed datum but as a field open to transformation.

This imaginative force also turns play into a social device: imagination is shared, constructed collectively, and instinctively negotiated. The narrative entanglement—who chases whom, who escapes, who changes role—becomes a way to test relationships and hierarchies, to experiment with different positions within a group. Imagination is never an isolated act but a collective exercise in constructing the possible. For this reason, play also becomes a laboratory of informal citizenship: children learn to coordinate themselves, to persuade one another, and to invite others into their own vision of the world. Imagination, therefore, is not an escape from reality; it is a tool for inhabiting the world in a more sensitive and critical way.

The camera records not so much a game as a process: the continuous shifting between what is and what could be. And it is perhaps here that the *Children's Games* series reaches its highest point: in showing that urban space—like any everyday environment—does not end with its physical structures. It is always also a potential terrain, ready to welcome narratives, projections, and desires—and therefore new spatial values.

In this sense, *Haram Football* reveals itself as a form of spatial learning: it is necessary to read and understand the place in order to imagine a possible spatial transformation and alternative.

## 3.4 Concluding Remarks

The five games analysed demonstrate that, despite the diversity of contexts—from the streets of Hong Kong to the waste mountains of the Congo, from Portuguese meadows to the bombed streets of Mosul—common modes emerge through which children inhabit and transform space.

Play first appears as a temporary departure from reality: it subverts everyday life, suspends ordinary rules, and has the capacity to transform even inhospitable places into spaces for play. Neither the streets of Hong Kong, nor the African waste mountain, nor the bombed Iraqi streets are designed playgrounds; it is the children's adaptive and imaginative capacity that makes possible an immediate reading of the morphological characteristics of a place and their use for playful purposes. Every surface, slope, obstacle, or boundary can trigger the game. The reading of space—pedestrian crossings, slopes, enclosures, or imaginary boundaries—is always carefully negotiated and adapted to playful action: children learn to recognize and transform them, thereby acquiring a concrete and situated spatial awareness.

As Huizinga observed[33], play is structured by refrains and repetitions that place it within an aesthetic dimension: physical actions, often repeated endlessly, are accompanied by rhymes, songs, clapping, or vocal calls that give rhythm to the experience. These elements help to modulate movement, synchronize bodies, and define the timing and pauses of the game. Likewise, tools and limits—ropes, improvised goals, circles, enclosures, or boundaries traced on the ground—establish a space of play, allowing exploration and experimentation within shared rules.

Play is often a collective ritual: together, children learn more effectively, developing motor coordination, cooperation, and the negotiation of rules.

The proxemic dimension—the management of distances, contacts, and reciprocal movements—becomes central. Through play, children learn to read the bodily signals of others, to synchronize with them, to build shared balances, and to respect the space of others while pursuing common goals. Collective action stimulates not only social competences but also strategic and adaptive capacities, as children learn to react to the unexpected, to manage conflicts and opportunities, and to negotiate roles that are constantly evolving.

What emerges from the games documented by Alÿs is the power of imagination: tyres, discarded materials, non-existent balls, leaves, or stones become instruments of play through collective agreement and shared fantasy. Imagination enables children to rewrite reality, transforming spaces devoid of stimuli into environments rich with possibilities and creating scenarios that expand the perception of the real world. This mental exercise develops a form of spatial and imaginative intelligence: children learn

33 J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens ...cit., p. 14.

to read what exists and to anticipate what might be, cultivating capacities for foresight and adaptation. Imagination thus becomes a tool of resistance and transformation.

Through these games, children develop complex competences that intertwine cognitive, bodily, social, and imaginative dimensions. They learn to perceive and modulate their own bodies, to orient themselves within both real and symbolic space, to negotiate relationships and hierarchies, and to experiment with cooperation and competition. Every gesture, every jump, every throw or chase becomes an opportunity to learn rhythm, balance, and distance; every social interaction becomes a laboratory of empathy, coordination, and non-verbal communication. Shared imagination fosters creativity, collaboration, and the construction of common meanings, transforming space into an environment of discovery and continuous learning.

In this sense, play becomes a laboratory of spatial awareness, a fundamental instrument for shaping perception, the body, and the mind. Playful activity in urban space teaches children to see the world as a field of possibilities, to construct meaning and narrative, and to turn every place into a terrain for experimentation, relationships, and invention. The playful practices documented by Francis Alÿs show how, even in difficult or hostile contexts, children do not merely react to existing spaces but reinvent them, exercising a critical, creative, and collective capacity that constitutes a profound and integral form of learning.

# PART 2. LEARNING SPACE
## From Unaware to Aware Learning

*Dylaby*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1962. Environment 3, Daniel Spoerri. Ph. by Ed van der Elsken. Nederlands Fotomuseum.

# 4. Learning Space: The Contribution of Art

*We are the primitives of a new sensibility, completely transformed*

Futurist Painting. Technical Manifesto
Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini

«I confront the city with my body: my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; [...] my body the weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void beyond. [...] The city and my body supplement»[1], writes Juhani Pallasmaa in *The Eyes of the Skin*. The Finnish architect, who since the late 1960s has been concerned with sensory and bodily thinking, addresses in his writings the problem of overcoming the ocularcentrism of contemporary society. Western culture has long considered vision the primary sense through which to know the world, from ancient Greece to the Renaissance—during which the invention of perspective established retinal perception as the dominant way of interpreting reality—up to the present day. In contemporary civilisation, sight appears to be the only sense capable of responding to the continuous and increasingly intense flow of images to which society subjects us.

Pallasmaa proposes to «place the body at the centre», calling for a «sensory architecture in opposition to the prevailing visual understanding of the art of building»[2]. To know architecture, he writes,

> «means first of all to inhabit it in order to grasp the unfolding of its spatial textures as they expand or contract, to appreciate the visual/tactile qualities of its materials, and to perceive how light constructs it»[3].

Knowledge of space thus appears as an inevitably bodily form of knowledge, involving the entire system of the senses. Educating to space therefore means making individuals aware of the haptic, sonic and olfactory qualities of the environment—alongside its visual ones—in order to develop a multisensory spatial awareness that is imprecise, peripheral and closely tied to the body.

Within this physical and haptic understanding of space, certain artistic movements, already in the early decades of the twentieth century, anticipated themes that architecture would only later address.

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1 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. architecture and the Sense*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Chichester 2005, p.40.

2 Ivi 39.

3 Franco Purini, *Comporre l'architettura*, Laterza, Bari 2000, p. 33.

Even before architectural debate began to question the primacy of vision and subsequently the abstraction of functionalism, art had already shifted the focus from the artwork as object to the artwork as experience, directly involving the body, touch, movement and the viewer's multisensory perception: «the artwork expresses an irresistible tendency to no longer identify itself with an object but with an experience, a relationship that binds artist and observer»[4].

This chapter argues that artistic research anticipated architectural reflection in the development of a critical understanding of the physical and haptic experience of space, elaborating tools, devices and practices capable of activating a bodily, incidental and not exclusively visual form of knowledge.

If the first theoretical conceptualisation of the notion of space is attributed to August Schmarsow, an art historian, expressed through the notion of *Raumgestaltung*, since «before that date, the term space did not exist in the architectural vocabulary»[5], it is within the practices of the avant-garde that the knowledge of space as a bodily experience develops in an operational and empirical way. From Futurist experiments to the performative and site-specific practices of the 1960s, art constructs a knowledge of space that precedes and informs many of the later architectural reflections on dwelling, perception, and the active role of the subject.

The chapter therefore opens with an analysis of Futurist Tactilism as the first systematic attempt to establish an aesthetic knowledge based on physical contact and the education of the senses, establishing a dialogue with Montessori pedagogy and with the educational experiments of the Bauhaus, where the body and matter become fundamental tools of learning. It then continues with the work of Bruno Munari, who translates the legacy of the avant-garde into a concrete educational practice capable of transforming the museum into a laboratory of direct and multisensory experience.

Later, attention shifts to the performative and environmental research of the 1960s, in which space itself becomes the artwork and the viewer is called upon to traverse it, activate it, and put it into play. The installations of Spoerri, the structures of Robert Morris, and the actions of Bruce Nauman show how the body, movement, physical effort, and perceptual disorientation become crucial devices of knowledge.

Without claiming to exhaust such a vast field of inquiry, the chapter aims to demonstrate how, through tactilism, certain pedagogical strategies, and several performative practices, artistic research has constructed a vocabulary and a set of devices for spatial experience that precede and inform many of the later architectural elaborations on spatial education. Art thus emerges not only as a field of formal experimentation but as a true laboratory for a conception of space grounded in embodied experience, play, interaction, and the sensory dimension of dwelling.

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4 Silvia Bordini (ed), *Arte Contemporanea e tecniche. Materiali, procedimenti, sperimentazioni,* Carocci, Roma 2015, p. 12.

5 Alessandro Castagnaro, *August Schmarsow dalla critica d'arte contemporanea alla Raumgestaltung*, Progedit, Bari 2017, p. 34.

## *4.1 Tactilism*

The term *touch* derives from the Latin *tactus*, the past participle of *tangĕre*, meaning to touch, to come into contact with the external world. It is through touch—through the skin and through our body—that we come to know and experience the physical qualities of matter and of the space we inhabit every day.

Through epidermal and bodily sensitivity we perceive and identify properties such as hardness, softness, roughness, and smoothness. For this reason, developing spatial awareness first requires the cultivation of tactile sensitivity. Knowledge, as Pallasmaa argues, is bodily.

> «our consciousness is a bodily consciousness: the world is structured around a sensory and bodily centre. [...] The senses are not merely passive receivers of stimuli, and the body is not a mere vantage point from which to observe the world through a central perspective. [...] The body is not the locus of cognitive thought; rather, the senses and our very being as flesh structure, produce, and store a silent knowledge»[6].

Among the five senses, touch is the most extensive because it is distributed across the entire body, a characteristic that distinguishes it from the other senses, which are instead located within or near the skull.

> «The largest and heaviest sensory organ is devoted to touch: the skin, which covers an approximate area of 1.8 $m^2$ and weighs about 5 kilograms. Indeed, whereas the visual system includes only two optic nerves and the auditory system only two acoustic nerves, the sense of touch involves numerous somatosensory nerves that originate in the hands, arms, feet, legs, and other areas of the skin. These nerves must carry messages over considerably longer distances than those associated with the other senses»[7].

This complex and extensive sensory organ therefore allows us to perceive the properties of materials as well: texture, density, temperature, thickness, weight, and geometric characteristics. «Touch is the father of the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is the sense from which the others differentiated, an event that explains the ancient definition of touch as the "father of all senses"» [8]. From this perspective, touch is not a minor sense in relation to sight; rather, it constitutes its original matrix. It is the primary mediator between perception, action, and knowledge.

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6 Juhani Pallasmaa, in Mauro Fratta, Matteo Zambelli eds., *Lampi di pensiero. Fenomenologia della percezione in architettura*, Pendragon, Bologna 2011, p. 40.

7 Dionigi Mattia Gagliardi, Giulia Torromino, *La percezione tattile nell'esperienza estetica. verso una sistematizzazione del tema della tattilità in ambito artistico,* in Numero Cromatico (ed.), *L'arte del tatto. Il ruolo della percezione tattile nell'esperienza estetica,* Numero Cromatico, Rome 2023, pp. 9-10.

8 Ashley Montagu, *Touching: Human Significance of the Skin,* Columbia University Press, New York 1971, p. 8.

Throughout the twentieth century, these ideas found concrete application in artistic, pedagogical, and design contexts. Beginning with the historical avant-gardes—and particularly with Futurist Tactilism—touch was progressively emancipated from the subordinate role assigned to it by Western tradition, becoming an object of aesthetic experimentation, an educational tool, and the foundation of new pedagogical practices. Montessori pedagogy, the Bauhaus teaching experiments of Johannes Itten and László Moholy-Nagy, and Bruno Munari's research on tactile workshops and perceptual education together form a continuous theoretical and operative thread in which the body, the hand, and direct experience become central devices of knowledge. Within this framework, touch emerges as a key element for an active, processual, and participatory conception of learning and aesthetic experience.

## 4.1.1 The Manifesto of Tactilism by Marinetti

Atlas, pp. 123-125.

Among the historical avant-gardes, the Futurist movement is perhaps the one that, more than any other, developed a synesthetic investigation aimed at achieving a more complete and complex sensory involvement. The numerous manifestos through which the movement declared its positions on painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and photography demonstrate how touch, sight, hearing, and movement were conceived as working together to construct a total experience. This tension anticipated by several decades the artistic research of the second half of the twentieth century, from programmed and kinetic art to immersive and performative practices.

«We want: 1. To destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with antiquity, pedantry and academic formalism; 2. To deeply despise every form of imitation», declared Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, and Severini in the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* of February 1911.

> «The new plastic art will therefore be the translation into plaster, bronze, glass, wood, and any other material of the atmospheric planes that bind and intersect things. [...] Sculpture must therefore make objects live by rendering sensitive, systematic, and plastic their extension into space, since no one can any longer doubt that an object ends where another begins and that nothing surrounds our body»[9], Boccioni wrote in 1912.

Within this progressive extension of aesthetic experience beyond the traditional limits of vision, the Futurist aspiration toward a fully bodily and multisensory form of perception reached its most radical outcome in the *Manifesto of Tactilism*. On 14 January 1921 Filippo Marinetti presented it at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris, marking one of the final attempts of Futurism to establish an aesthetic knowledge based on contact, the

9 Umberto Boccioni, *La scultura futurista*, 11 April 1912.

body, and the education of the senses. In Marinetti's words, it was therefore time for «a new beginning».

Marinetti opens the text by claiming the historical role of Futurism, which, he argues, had already revolutionised art by giving the world «hatred of the Museum, the Academy and Sentimentalism, [...] the artistic sensibility of mechanicism and speed, [...] words-in-freedom, plastic dynamism, the *intonarumori*, and synthetic theatre. Futurism now redoubles its creative effort»[10].

The Great War had only recently ended, and Tactilism emerged as a response to what Marinetti interpreted as a crisis of modernity: a loss of vital energy, of will, and of the capacity to enjoy experience. Within this framework, the education of the senses—and especially of touch—assumed not only an aesthetic but also an educational, almost therapeutic value.

> «In my observations [...] I have understood that human beings speak to one another with their mouths and their eyes, but never reach true sincerity, due to the insensitivity of the skin, which is still a mediocre conductor of thought»[11].

From this observation arises the need to reform the way human beings communicate. The skin, in other words, is not yet an effective conductor of meaning. From this premise derives the central idea of Tactilism: to transform touch into a true instrument of knowledge.

Marinetti claims to have subjected his own sense of touch to a genuine process of sensory education, locating on the body—especially in the hands—the phenomena of will and thought. This education is slow but accessible to all bodies and allows precise results to be achieved.

«I have created a first educational scale of touch»[12]: he thus elaborates a scale of tactile values organised into different categories, ranging from cold and abstract touch to warm, sensual, and affectionate touch, associating each sensation with specific materials such as sandpaper, silk, velvet, wool, sponge, metal, and animal and human hair.

On this basis, Marinetti designed a series of tactile instruments and environments. The first were the simple tactile tables, which combined different tactile values and which, as Marinetti wrote, «I will present to the public in our *contattilazioni* or lectures on the Art of Touch»[13].

These were followed by abstract or suggestive tactile tables, «journeys of the hands», which guide touch along predetermined paths, producing rhythmic sequences of sensations.

An example is the table *Sudan–Paris* (1922), which places in sequence extremely rough, slippery, and finally soft sensations. The upper part of the table, representing the African desert, is rendered tactilely through rough

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10 Tommaso Marinetti, *Il Tattilismo*, in F.T. Marinetti, *Tattilismo* e *Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico,* ed. Valentina Ferri, fve, Milan 2021, p. 13.

11 ivi p. 16.

12 ivi p. 17.

13 ivi p. 18.

and prickly materials (sandpaper, wool, brush): materials that, when experienced, suggest «coarse tactile values». In the central part of the table, the coolness of the Mediterranean Sea is conveyed through the use of silver paper; in the lower part, Parisian elegance is narrated through the tactile use of soft and delicate materials (silk, velvet, down). The crucial aspect of the table is that, for the first time, materials are used to transmit tactile sensations, and even without physically experiencing them, these sensations can be perceived visually, according to that tactile derivation described by Pallasmaa: the eyes of the skin.

Alongside the tactile tables designed for different sexes—intended for the simultaneous exploration by a man and a woman in a kind of sensory dialogue—Marinetti also conceived a series of environmental devices: tactile cushions, sofas, beds, tactile garments, tactile rooms with sensitive floors and walls, tactile streets, and tactile theatres. In tactile theatres, spectators place their hands on moving belts that produce rhythmic tactile sensations accompanied by music and lights. Tactilism also includes *parolibere* improvisations: the tactilist, often blindfolded, freely expresses aloud the sensations experienced during tactile exploration.

Marinetti devotes the final part of the manifesto to the education of touch, proposing specific exercises: keeping the hands gloved for days in order to increase the desire for tactile sensations, swimming underwater to distinguish currents and temperatures, and recognising objects in complete darkness.

He recounts that his first tactile experiments were conducted during the war, in the trenches.

The education of touch is therefore conceived as an incidental exercise: the practices proposed by Marinetti show that learning, within Tactilism, occurs through exposure, immersion, and daily practice. It is a form of knowledge built through experience rather than explanation. This educational model is essentially incidental: there is no precise moment in which one "learns touch", but rather a series of situations in which the body, almost without realising it, refines its perceptual capacity. The episode of the trenches at Gorizia is emblematic: in an extreme context not designed for education, an exercise in perception emerges that becomes foundational for the entire tactilist theory. Learning, therefore, is not confined to protected or institutional spaces, but also takes place in unforeseen contexts.

The dimension of play is implicit throughout the entire tactilist system. The tactile tables, the journeys of the hands, the competitions between two sensitivities, and the *parolibere* improvisations activated through contact construct a model of knowledge based on exploration, surprise, and trial and error. There is no immediate utilitarian goal, but rather a freedom of movement and interpretation that directly recalls the structure of play. Tactilism thus proposes a form of education that is non-disciplinary and non-normative, grounded instead in direct experience and in the pleasure of discovery.

*The hand is the expressive instrument of human intelligence: it is the organ of the mind*
Maria Montessori

Marinetti acknowledges that Tactilism has literary and sculptural precedents: «I never claimed to have invented tactile sensibility, which had already manifested itself in brilliant forms in the *Jonglense* and in the *Horsnature* of Rachilde. Other writers and artists had a premonition of Tactilism. There has long existed an art of plastic touch. My great friend Boccioni, the Futurist painter and sculptor, felt tactilely when, in 1911, he created his plastic ensemble *Fusion of a Head and a Window*, using materials that were absolutely opposed in weight and tactile value: iron, porcelain, and a woman's hair»[14].

However, he specifies that Tactilism is an autonomous art, distinct from painting and sculpture, and that it must avoid the interference of colour and vision. Painters and sculptors are considered poorly suited to creating true tactile tables because they tend to subordinate touch to sight.

The art historian Claudia Salaris, who has extensively studied Futurism, suggests that Marinetti may have conceived the tactile tables also through the influence of his wife Benedetta Cappa. The latter, trained as a kindergarten teacher, had worked in a school in the San Lorenzo district of Rome and was most likely familiar with the Montessori Method. It was in fact Maria Montessori who devised tactile tables as part of the broader system of didactic materials intended for children's development within a multisensory educational framework[15].

Maria Montessori (1870–1952), an Italian physician and scientist, devoted her life to the study of child learning, developing specific tools and methods that still bear her name today. She obtained her first results in the *Casa dei Bambini*, founded in the San Lorenzo district of Rome in 1907. Five years later, in 1912, Montessori published *The Montessori Method*[16]. In Montessori pedagogy, the hands assume a central role, functioning as privileged instruments for cognitive development and for the learning processes of children.

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14 ivi. p. 22.

15 ivi. p. 10.

16 Daniela Novara, *Con Maria Montessori per un nuovo inizio*, in D. Novara, L. Beltrami (eds.) Maria Montessori. *L'intelligenza delle mani. La crescita del bambino attraverso i sensi e il movimento*, BUR, Milan 2023, p. 6.

Montessori elaborated this perspective within a historical context in which most infants were tightly swaddled in their cradles, despite earlier critical observations by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The practice of swaddling severely limited the use of the hands, which were perceived as a potential source of danger and as a burden for those responsible for the child's care. Recognising the hands as a primary site of learning, Montessori promoted their full freedom of movement. For the scientist, learning is essentially motor-based: it does not consist in a purely mental or abstract process, but is realised through concrete actions, movements, contacts, and material experiences that allow the child to construct knowledge through direct engagement with the environment[17].

Within a cultural and pedagogical context dominated by the idealist framework of Giovanni Gentile—which privileged the theoretical dimension of learning and relegated manual work to a secondary role—Montessori introduced a radical shift, placing the focus of education on the hands, on action, and on the child's movement in space as fundamental devices of knowledge and of the construction of understanding. In the *Case dei Bambini*, the exploratory hand of the child—moving incessantly among objects in a spontaneous attempt to construct knowledge independently—is progressively educated to decipher the physical world through direct contact, supported by specially designed didactic materials.

The Montessori tactile boards, to which Marinetti may have referred according to Claudia Salaris, are educational tools intended to refine the child's sense of touch through the active exercise of haptic perception and the discrimination of the sensory qualities of surfaces: smooth/rough, warm/cold, fine/coarse. They are often organised in pairs or series of surfaces to be compared while blindfolded, and their use is active, exploratory, and comparative. The child receives no theoretical explanations: learning occurs through touching.

The Italian physician wrote that «nature shows that the child cannot think without the hands, and that he must walk continuously, like the peripatetic philosophers of ancient Greece. Movement and the mind accompany one another»[18].

In Montessori, as later in Marinetti, the education of the senses represents the indispensable foundation of every cognitive process. Learning, even in its most abstract expressions, is structured upon a sensory and operative basis: knowledge emerges through doing, through perceptual exercise, and through direct engagement with reality. From this perspective, one can recognise a profound consonance between Montessori pedagogy and the tactile principles of Futurism: both identify the body and sensory awareness as the primary threshold through which knowledge and meaning are constructed.

17 ibidem.

18 Maria Montessori, *Educazione per un mondo nuovo*, Garzanti, Milan 1970, p. 114.

Atlas, pp. 127-129.

## 4.1.2 The Bauhaus: the Vorkurs of Itten and Moholy-Nagy

Johannes Itten (1888–1967) was one of the central figures in the educational landscape of the Bauhaus in Weimar during his teaching period there from 1919 to 1923. His pedagogy represents one of the most innovative and radical moments in the history of European art education in the twentieth century. Although relatively brief, his teaching defined a set of foundational ideas that transformed the criteria of training in design and the visual arts: the liberation of creative faculties, the centrality of perceptual experience, attention to materials, the role of the body in artistic practice, and tactile sensitivity as a mode of knowledge. His experience as a teacher—beginning in the elementary school of a village near Bern and continuing through artistic studies in Geneva and Stuttgart—led him to develop a deeply individualised conception of art education. His pedagogy did not limit itself to the transmission of techniques or knowledge, but aimed instead to awaken the students' ideational and perceptual capacities while respecting the differences of each individual.

In *Design and Form*, Itten writes:

> «I owe my first educational ideas to the young, forwardlooking head of my teachers training college. He opened my eyes to the fact that children in their natural lack of inhibition are capable of composing astonishingly original drawings, essays, and songs. When I began my career as a primary school teacher in a Bernese village in 1908, I tried to avoid anything that could disturb the naïve unselfconsciousness of the children»[19].

A student of Adolf Hölzel in Stuttgart, Itten moved to Vienna in 1916, where he continued to teach art. In the summer of 1919 Alma Mahler-Gropius, deeply impressed by his artistic and pedagogical activity, invited the painter to meet her husband Walter Gropius, director of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar. «After seeing my work and that of my students, he suggested that I go to Weimar to teach at the Bauhaus»[20].

Sixteen of Itten's Viennese students followed him to Weimar and, in the autumn of 1919, formed the first group of the Bauhaus's initial course.

> «In my Viennese students I had found that it is possible to inspire those interested in art but whose talents were still dormant, and to enhance their originality. I therefore suggested to Walter Gropius that all students who showed an interest in art should be provisionally accepted

19 Johannes Itten, *Design and Form. The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, Thames and Hudson, London 1975, p. 6.

20 ivi p. 7.

> for a term. We called this trial term the Basic Course. Originally this title indicated neither a special syllabus nor a new teaching method. I took personal charge of this preparatory course in the autumn of 1919. Generously, Walter Gropius left me a completely free hand in its arrangement and content»[21].

The *Vorkurs*, the Basic Course, was structured by Itten as a laboratory of sensory awakening, perceptual education, and inner exploration. Itten's pedagogy arose from the intuition that every student possesses a latent creative core that must be liberated before any technical instruction can begin. According to Itten, the first task of the educator is to «liberate the creative forces» of the students and to «free them from conventions» that prevent them from recognising their own authenticity. Artistic education therefore does not begin with content but with the person: the student must first regain confidence in their senses, imagination, and gesture in order to discover the materials and forms most suited to their temperament.

From this premise derive two fundamental directions of his method: the centrality of the body and the centrality of tactile experience.

## Body and perception: the tactile exercises of Johannes Itten

For Itten, the body is the essential instrument: every creative activity, in order to be expressed, must find a balance between body, senses, and movement.

Itten's lessons begin with a ritual sequence of bodily practices inspired by Eastern philosophy: exercises of deep breathing, joint relaxation, muscular loosening, and vocal vibrations. These preparatory moments serve to unify body and mind, bringing the student to a state of presence and receptivity necessary for creative activity to emerge. Itten asks: «How can a hand express a characteristic feeling in a line, when the hand and arm are cramped? The fingers, the hand, the arm, the whole body can be prepared for the task by exercises of relaxation, strengthening, and sensitisation»[22].

Through slow movements of the spine, oscillations of the arms, and stabilisation of the breath, Itten guides students toward a state of readiness that is at once physical and mental. This approach—rooted in Mazda-Zen practices, yoga, and Eastern mysticism—completely overturns the academic tradition that separated technical skill from inner formation. « I was ridiculed at the time because I did breathing and concentration exercises. Today many people consider an interest in Eastern philosophy quite natural»[23].

If the body is the origin of gesture, touch is the origin of knowledge of matter. Within the *Vorkurs* a workshop of tactile exercises was also

21 ibidem.

22 ivi p. 9.

23 ibidem.

conducted: a genuine education of the hand and of haptic sensations. Itten's tactile exercises (*Material and Texture Studies*) aim to construct a tactile gaze—that is, a deep understanding of the character of materials and textures.

In the Basic Course students compile lists of materials; associate specific tactile sensations with each of them; touch series of textures with their eyes closed; reconstruct materials and surfaces from memory on the basis of pure tactile sensation; and create assemblages of contrasting materials (rough/smooth, hard/soft, light/heavy). The objective is to refine a complete sensory perception: not only to see a material but to feel its structure, resistance, temperature, porosity, and density. This leads to what Itten calls "essential knowledge". «I have always placed particular emphasis on understanding, through the senses, the characteristic properties of all objects. [...] At the Bauhaus I had long chromatic series of material samples produced for the tactile evaluation of various textures. Students had to feel these sequences of textures with their fingertips while blindfolded. After a short time their sense of touch improved considerably. I asked them to create assemblages of contrasting material textures. The results were fantastic structures, and their effects were completely new for the time»[24].

These tactile exercises generated enthusiasm and a sense of collective discovery. Itten recounts that students began searching everywhere: cellars, workshops, markets, and their grandmothers' drawers. The school filled with "found" materials: shavings, metals, ropes, glass, feathers, fabrics, steel wool, papers, furs. Students experimented, assembled compositions, and discovered new textures. These tactile activities educated students in the diversity of material languages, helping each of them to discover the materials most suited to their temperament and forming designers sensitive to the physical qualities of objects.

Touch perceives density, consistency, and resistance, transforming them into material and formal choices.

For Itten, art arises from a tension between opposing poles: light/shadow, heavy/light, warm/cold, rough/smooth. The general theory of contrast lies at the heart of his teaching, and body and touch are the means through which these contrasts are experienced, internalised, and ultimately transformed into form.

Itten's pedagogy is therefore experiential, sensory, and profoundly integrated: it does not separate intellect, perception, body, and spirit, but places them in dynamic relation. In a historical context marked by deep crisis—the years immediately following the First World War—Itten saw in art a possibility for regeneration. Hence his insistence on returning to the senses, to the body, and to elementary perception. In order to truly create, the student must "rediscover the sources of the self" and learn to perceive the world in a new way.

24 ivi p. 34.

## From tactile tables to tactile diagrams: the exercises of László Moholy-Nagy

In 1923, László Moholy-Nagy succeeded Itten in directing the Bauhaus Basic Course, strengthening its technical orientation. If for Itten the *Vorkurs* had been a path of physical and spiritual exploration, Moholy-Nagy transformed it into a systematic study of the effects of materials. Inspired by the bio-technical theories of the botanist Raoul Francé—who regarded nature as a repertoire of constructive principles—Moholy-Nagy sought to have students translate the "typical" properties of materials into technical forms applicable to art and industry, within a pedagogical trajectory that moves, as the German title of his book[25] suggests, *from materials to architecture*[26].

In the same spirit as Itten, Moholy-Nagy considered the *Vorkurs* a pedagogical necessity for correcting the shortcomings of pedantic academic instruction and for liberating the creative potential of students. From this perspective, knowledge of materials could not derive from manuals or theoretical lectures, but only from direct experience: through plastic manipulation, the use of tools and machines, and the observation of the physical reactions of materials.

Within this framework, tactile exercises occupy a central place in the initial training. Moholy-Nagy critically distinguishes the complexity of sensory experience, moving beyond the simplification of the "five senses": touch is analysed into a range of specific qualities such as pressure, pricking, friction, temperature, vibration, and pain.

> «In his initial exercises, the student studies materials primarily through the sense of touch. He gathers a wide variety of materials in order to record as many different sensations as possible. These are assembled into tactile tables containing certain haptic sensations that are either related or contrasting. After a period of experimentation, more or less extended, the student is able to assemble these elements so that they correspond to a previously planned expression»[27].

An important aspect of these exercises is that, although based on subjective recordings, tactile reactions are documented through tactile diagrams in order to observe their variations over time. The tactile artefacts produced by students display a high degree of originality[28]. Rudolf Marwitz, for example, a Bauhaus student in the second semester of 1928, created a rotating tactile drum whose rings—turned by a crank—present different surface treatments capable of producing contrasting haptic

25 Matthew Mindrump. *Translations of Material to Technology in Bauhaus Architecture*, in "Cloud-Cuckoo-Land" Vol.19, n.33 2014, p. 163.

26 László Moholy-Nagy, *Van Material zu Architektur*, Albert Langen Verlag, Munich 1929.

27 László Moholy-Nagy, *The new vision and abstract of an artist* (1928), Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., New York 1947, p.23.

28 László Moholy-Nagy, *Van Material zu…* cit., pp. 22-32.

sensations of softness, roughness, bristliness, and so on. Werner Zimmermann, a student in the second semester of 1927, produced a tactile panel composed of screws of different sizes that generate multiple sensations through the pressure of the hand. Hinrich Bredendieck, also in the second semester of 1927, proposed to the class a tactile panel accompanied by a Cartesian diagram measuring the variation of sensations as tactile experience of the material changes. When recorded graphically, tactile values generate an autonomous expressive structure—analogous to that of colour or sound—capable of evoking moods and new sensations of life.

> «Since tactile values are registered in a purely subjective manner, it appeared a desirable to record individual reactions in "touch diagrams." These could be referred to again later on, thus checking any changes that might have occurred in the perception»[29].

Moholy-Nagy also emphasises how tactile training is generally neglected, citing examples of its applications in medical and rehabilitative contexts, as well as experiments with blind individuals, who recognise in these tactile tables a function of spatial orientation.

László Moholy-Nagy was familiar with and cited in his writings Marinetti's *Manifesto of Tactilism*, yet he emphasised the distance of his own position from it. At the Bauhaus, tactile exercises were not intended to establish a new autonomous art, but rather to enrich sensory experience as a foundation for design.

> «F. T. Marinetti, the leader of the Futurists, in 1921 published a manifesto on "tactilism". He was a passionate advocate of a new kind of art, to be based on tactile sensations alone, and proposed tactile ribbons, carpets, beds, rooms, stage-settings, etc. In the Institute, the concern to tactile sensation and emotional expression, and did not have the aim of teaching a new kind of "arte". This does not exclude, however, the possibility that works of art resulting from the deepening of experience and from the inspiration gained (especially in the case of the blind)» [30].

29 László Moholy-Nagy, *The new vision* …cit., p.24.

30 Ibidem.

## 4.1.3 Bruno Munari: tactile workshops and the exhibition *Le mani guardano*, Beaubourg, 1977

Atlas, pp. 130-131.

Bruno Munari (1907–1998) gathers and reworks the legacy of Futurist Tactilism: his attention to perception, multisensoriality, and the active involvement of the observer derives directly from his formation within Futurism. Having arrived in Milan in 1926, he entered the Milanese Futurist group at a very young age thanks to his encounter with Marinetti, in the context of the so-called Second Futurism of the 1930s, where he embraced themes such as dynamism, the machine, synesthesia, art as a total experience, and the participation of the public. It is within this context that the fundamental idea of the artwork as an open process takes shape—one to be completed through the senses of the viewer—according to the principle that Umberto Eco would theorise several years later as the *opera aperta*.

Already in the 1930s, within his Futurist experience, Bruno Munari produced his first tactile tables, anticipating themes that would later become central to his research. The tactile tables of the 1930s were not yet conceived as didactic devices but rather as experimental surfaces for sensory exploration: different materials, juxtaposed through contrast or continuity, invite the hand to a direct experience not mediated by sight.

Munari's work and attention to the world of childhood dates back to the 1940s, when he designed *Scatola di Architettura MC1* (1945), a game composed of bricks of different shapes and with various cut-outs for constructing buildings of diverse morphologies and functions: from the Gothic church to the neoclassical palace, from the hangar to the covered market, from the tower to the chocolate factory. In 1950 he produced the *Libri Illeggibili*—books without words that narrate visual stories through lines, colours, torn pages and transparent sheets, cotton threads and other inserts, conceived either as unique pieces or reproduced in small editions. *Il Gatto Meo Romeo* dates from 1952 and *La Scimmietta Zizì* from 1954: foam toys with an internal metal structure that allow the child to explore with the hand and to experiment with the many possible postures the toy animal can assume.

All these objects are designed to accustom children to exploring the world with their hands, to comparing textures and surfaces, and to observing and experimenting directly with the physical properties of objects. A deep connoisseur of Piaget's pedagogical theories, Munari was convinced that adequate perceptual and sensory stimulation is necessary from early childhood in order to develop a critical sense. Against the design of games and toys based solely on their potential absorption by the market, with no attention to educational value, Munari proposed

> «something that is useful for individual growth [...] A designer can therefore design a game or a toy that communicates to the child, to the human being in formation, the maximum amount of compatible infor-

> mation and at the same time a tool for the formation of a flexible and dynamic mind—not static, repetitive, fossilised. [...] A game or a toy must stimulate imagination; it must not be complete or fake (like certain perfect scale models of real machines), because in that case it does not allow the participation of the user»[31].

The long experience he had gained as an artist, graphic designer, and designer, together with his conviction that critical awareness and imaginative capacity develop through making and playing, led him to conceive didactic tools and educational spaces in which learning becomes a direct experience. On 15 March 1977, at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, Munari inaugurated the first museum workshop for children, with the aim of educating young audiences in how to read works of art. As the designer argued, «in twenty years we may have a different public. A public that will look at works of art not only in terms of "what they mean," but by knowing all their constructive aspects—having memorised them, through play, as children»[32].

The research group, coordinated by Bruno Munari, included Giovanni Belgrano, a pedagogue; Renate Eco, a teacher; Piero Polato, a designer; and Alberto Munari, a psychologist. The project emerged in the aftermath of a series of seminars promoted by Franco Russoli and organised by the Rizzoli Foundation in 1975–76, aimed at promoting a new idea of the museum, no longer linked exclusively to conservation but to the idea of the museum «as a means of mass communication»[33].

Munari proposed teaching children how to look at a work of art rather than merely reading its content or message. Visual art should not be explained in words but experienced: words are forgotten, experience is not. "If I hear, I forget; if I see, I remember; if I do, I understand," the artist would often repeat, quoting an ancient Chinese proverb. In the workshops conceived by Munari, therefore, techniques and rules derived from works of art from every period and place are experimented with and transformed into games: it is through doing that one discovers the different qualities of materials and the characteristics of tools.

Among the various workshops (on signs, colour, divisionism, and others), Munari designed and created a tactile workshop on the occasion of the travelling exhibition *Le mains regardent*, conceived and curated by the educational department of the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

> «Education in vision and visual communication has already begun in several schools, but tactile education has not yet been taken into consideration. If we believe that it is important to preserve the sensory wholeness of individuals, in order to achieve a fuller and more direct understanding of phenomena, we must also concern ourselves with tactile perception [...] DON'T TOUCH! How many times do children hear this prohibition repeated. No one would ever say: don't look, don't lis-

31 Bruno Munari, *Da cosa nasce cosa* (1981), Laterza, Bari, 2021, pp. 240-248.

32 Bruno Munari (ed.), *Il laboratorio per bambini. Progetto e metodo del primo laboratorio per bambini alla Pinacoteca di Brera a Milano 1977*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1981, p. 5.

33 Ivi p. 4.

ten, but it seems that for touch it is different—many think it can be done without»[34].

Through the workshop, Munari applied the principles of *tactilism* in order to educate children to know the world and art through touch, stimulating curiosity and the enjoyment of art through an active and multisensory experience in which making and touching become fundamental tools of learning.

The workshop was organised in two rooms adjacent to the exhibition, accessible through a large doorway transformed into a "tactile threshold": children and adults had to make their way through hanging materials to touch, thus entering an environment entirely devoted to contact and sensory discovery. Inside, young visitors encountered a wide range of materials with different tactile characteristics, explanatory boards illustrating tactile values, and tools for composing their own experiences: pieces of wood, blocks, papers and surfaces with different textures, as well as more unusual materials such as fur, sawdust, rice, mud, or polystyrene.

Children spent about an hour in the workshop, manipulating materials, constructing tactile compositions, and experimenting with contrasting sensations such as rough/smooth, hard/soft, or cold/warm. The rooms of the tactile workshop introduced visitors to *Le mains regardent*, the third travelling educational exhibition organised by the Centre Pompidou in Paris (after *Vive la Couleur* in 1975 and *Du Point à la Ligne* in 1976), conceived with the aim of training the sense of touch in aesthetic perception. The exhibition arrived in Italy in 1977 at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan and three years later at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. «This exhibition is constructed like a mosaic, with contributions from enthusiasts, educators, blind participants, architects, researchers, parents, and doctors, each of whom has contributed their own experience»[35], wrote Danièle Giraudy, head of the *Atelier des Enfants* at the Beaubourg.

The exhibition was structured into ten thematic sections: *The Hand*; *Caressing*; *Burying, Buried*; *Imprint*; *Volume*; *Assemblage*; *The City*; *A tactile path through twentieth-century sculpture*; and *The Serpent* (a sensory pathway).

Alongside tactile educational devices specifically designed for the exhibition, urban-scale models accessible through touch and works of art by contemporary artists were also presented: works by Claes Oldenburg in the section *Imprint*, by Louise Nevelson in *Volume*, and by Alexander Calder in *Assemblage*. The exhibition and Munari's workshop thus contributed to the construction of an exhibition device in which aesthetic experience emancipates itself from the primacy of sight and is grounded in direct bodily and sensory engagement, introducing the idea of an inclusive and active form of museum experience.

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34 Bruno Munari (ed.), *I laboratori tattili. Per il mantenimento e l'educazione di un senso importante quanto la vista e l'udito,* Zanichelli, 1985, P. 3.

35 Danièle Giraudy, *Prefazione*, in Pia Vivarelli (ed.) *Le mani guardano, catalogo della mostra*, De Luca, Rome 1980, p. 9.

The legacy of these experiences finds an important resonance in the exhibition *Toccare la bellezza – Touching Beauty*, held in 2021 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, which brought the theme of tactile perception back to the centre of museographic reflection through artworks, sensory devices, and accessible pathways. Conceived by the Museo Tattile Statale Omero of Ancona, in collaboration with the Fondazione Chiaravalle Montessori and the Associazione Bruno Munari, the exhibition presented works by Munari alongside the didactic devices of Maria Montessori. Thus, alongside Munari's *Macchine inutili*, *Messaggi tattili*, the *Positivo-Negativo* series, *Sculture da Viaggio*, toys (such as *La Scimmietta Zizì*), editorial works, and material experiments, the public could touch the didactic materials of the Montessori educational method: thermal tablets, sandpaper letters, geometric solids, botanical boards, colour tablets—objects designed to educate the hand as an organ of intelligence, according to the pedagogue herself. In this way, the exhibition becomes a place in which the distinction between "work of art," "educational toy," and "didactic instrument" dissolves, giving way to a tactile experience that brings together aesthetics, play, and knowledge.

The artistic and pedagogical experiences analysed—from Futurist Tactilism to Montessori pedagogy, from the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* to the workshops of Bruno Munari—despite the diversity of their historical contexts and objectives, outline a field of research in which touch is recognised as a foundational experience and as a sense capable of activating concrete knowledge. Marinetti identifies in touch a new artistic language, a means of refounding sensory communication and regenerating modern humanity through a total perceptual education. Montessori, in a scientific and educational context, recognises in the hand the organ of intelligence and constructs a didactic system based on action, manipulation, and direct experience. Itten and Moholy-Nagy, at the Bauhaus, transform tactile education into a genuine method for the knowledge of materials, placing haptic perception at the basis of design and form. Munari, finally, gathers this legacy and translates it into educational and museological practices in which touch becomes a tool for play, discovery, and the formation of critical awareness from early childhood.

What unites these experiences is the conviction that knowledge is a process experienced through the body, through doing, and through the sensory exploration of the environment. From this perspective, touch functions as a cognitive device capable of relating subject, matter, and space in a direct, active, and transformative way. From the Futurist tactile table to the Montessori tablets, from the material assemblages of the Bauhaus to Munari's museum workshops, an educational and experiential model emerges based on experimentation and play, in which learning occurs through exposure and practice rather than through verbal transmission. Touch thus becomes not only a tool of perception but a true pedagogical and design medium, capable of redefining the relationship between body, space, and knowledge.

## 4.2 Performative and Site-Specific Research

During the 1960s, a significant strand of international artistic research began to question the separation between artwork, space and spectator, proposing experiences in which the body becomes the true site of learning and knowledge. The artwork is no longer an object to be contemplated, but a device to be crossed, practiced and set in motion; consequently, the site-specific dimension and performance assume a central role in defining the relationship between individual and environment, shifting attention from art as product to art as experience: situated, temporary and relational.

These practices are grounded in a conception of space as an activator of perceptual, motor and psychological stimuli. It is through movement, disorientation, physical effort, and contact with materials and obstacles that the visitor constructs new spatial awareness, reconsiders familiar reference points and questions acquired perceptual habits. Space, in this perspective, does not merely contain experience, but generates it.

Environmental art, walk-in installations, performances and playful dispositifs of the 1960s share the same aspiration—already expressed and manifested by the historical avant-gardes—to overcome the detached and retinal vision of the artwork in order to activate a global form of perception, involving touch, movement, balance, sound, fatigue and disorientation. The body becomes both the measure and the instrument of knowledge. This transformation also concerns the educational dimension: one learns "within" space, through a form of doing that precedes and often exceeds rational awareness.

Within this framework, the visitor's experience comes surprisingly close to that of childhood: exploratory, curious and open to the unexpected. Error and disorientation become generative occasions for knowledge. It is precisely within this logic that many artistic experiments of the period—consciously or not—intercept some fundamental principles of spatial education: the centrality of sensory experience, the formative value of play, the role of the environment as a third educator, and the idea that knowledge arises from action even before representation.

Environmental exhibitions and installation-based dispositifs thus take shape as true temporary laboratories of perception, in which the spectator is continuously called upon to negotiate their position in space and time. The learning that results from this experience is not declared, nor guided by an explicit pedagogical programme, but emerges as a secondary outcome of the experience itself: an incidental, stratified and deeply embodied form of learning.

It is easy to imagine how vast the panorama of artistic research operating in this direction may be. Within this broad field, a number of case studies have been selected for the clarity and strength with which disorientation is sought or spatial qualities are made evident.

One has therefore chosen to analyse the work of Daniel Spoerri pre-

sented in the exhibition *Dylaby*, that of Robert Morris in the solo exhibition *Robert Morris 1971*, as well as the work of Bruce Nauman shown in *Contrapposto Studies*: three artists and three exhibitions which, although through different languages and media, share a common attention to the experiential dimension, to the body in movement, and to the relationship between constructed space and perception.

A common element in the work of these artists is the desire to engage the public by challenging acquired knowledge and the perceptual mechanisms that we often employ, unconsciously, in everyday life. Their works suggest the possibility that another mode of perception might exist, from which different criteria of evaluation may derive: criteria that, above all, can and should be applied to the critical understanding of the environment we experience and inhabit on a daily basis.

Read through the lens of spatial education, these experiences reveal how contemporary art anticipated—and in part formulated—devices capable of activating profound forms of unintentional learning.

Atlas, pp. 132-135.

## 4.2.1 Dylaby 1962

The questioning of perceptual habits and the active participation of the spectator, through an involvement that is not only visual but also sonic, tactile and psychological, are among the aims of the exhibition *Labyrinthe dynamique* (Dylaby). *Dylaby* was held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 30 August to 30 September 1962, curated by Willem Sandberg and Ad Petersen together, and conceived on the initiative of Jean Tinguely. It was a truly environmental project, organically articulated and conceived and realised in close collaboration with the six invited artists: Daniel Spoerri, Niki de Saint Phalle, Martial Raysse, Robert Rauschenberg, Per Olof Ultvedt and Jean Tinguely himself, artists largely associated with Nouveau Réalisme[36].

The exhibition made its intentions explicit in its title, drawing on the experiences of kinetic art[37] and aiming at the perceptual disorientation that a labyrinth can induce in those who traverse it[38].

In the same museum, the year before (1961), the historic exhibition *Bewogen Beweging* (Art in Motion), curated by Pontus Hultén, had taken place, in which the 233 works on display demonstrated how the sensory involvement of the spectator and the investigation of movement had already been central themes since the historical avant-gardes.

The exhibition *Dylaby* formed part of a broader project of museum

36 The Nouveau Réalisme, defined by Pierre Restany and Yves Klein in 1960, brought together artists such as Klein himself, Arman, Tinguely and Rotella, and proposed a «new perception of the real» through the use of objects and materials drawn from consumer society.

37 Silvia Bordini (ed.), *Arte contemporanea e tecniche. Materiali, procedimenti, sperimentazioni*, Carocci, Rome, 2015, p. 107.

38 Paula Burleigh, *Ludic Labyrinths: Strategies of Disruption*, "Stedelijk Studies", no. 7, 2018, https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/ludic-labyrinths-strategies-of-disruption/, accessed December 2025.

renewal promoted by its director, Willem Sandberg, who aimed to open the institution more fully to society[39]. As stated in Dutch on the opening pages of the catalogue:

> «The visitor does not observe the objects from the outside, but constantly finds himself among them, part of the whole. Perhaps he will ask himself whether he is still in a museum – but is not a museum a place where artist and public meet?»[40].

For *Labyrinthe dynamique* (Dylaby), the curators granted the artists complete freedom to define and shape their own environments. The installation as a whole was conceived as a complex playful dispositif, articulated into seven environments—seven consecutive rooms—each designed by a different artist. The entire exhibition was characterised by a deliberate lack of clarity in its layout. Rather than presenting finished works, the curators asked the artists to create site-specific works especially for the museum, within a period of just over two weeks.

The artwork thus came to coincide with the artist's action within space—that is, within the architectural container: space and work overlapped, determining the very modes through which the work could be experienced. The exhibition unfolded through the following complex sequence: a dark labyrinthine room (Spoerri); a narrow environment consisting of a wooden incline (Ultvedt); a traditional museum room turned vertically (Spoerri); several large metal cages containing assemblages of objects and clocks (Rauschenberg); the *Raysse beach*, an environment with a pool and pop seaside objects (Raysse); a *Shooting Gallery* (de Saint Phalle); and finally a large self-propelled machine (Tinguely).

Visitors experienced the exhibition as a playful path and were subjected to a series of estranging effects. In this context, particular attention will be given to Spoerri's rooms, as well as to the significant interventions by Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, where the perception of space and the involvement of the public reach a particularly intense level.

The route opened with the first room designed by Daniel Spoerri: a completely dark labyrinthine space in which spectators moved by feeling their way through the darkness, their perception constantly stimulated by the materials and objects on display. Spoerri's attention to the bodily experience of the viewer probably derived from his interest in dance and from his activity as a choreographer.

In the darkness of the room, the spectator crossed inclined planes and overcame obstacles of various kinds: all the materials used were recycled objects such as bicycle wheels, mattresses, mannequins and roller skates. The space was designed and configured according to the logic of the ready-made, and the *objet trouvé* obstructed the visitor's progress.

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39 Willem Sandberg, during his tenure as director (1945–1962), sought to transform the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam into a space open to experimentation, rather than a container for artworks to be passively contemplated. See Roodenburg-Schadd, Expressie en ordening, NAi, Amsterdam, 2004.

40 *DYLABY. Dynamisch Labyrint*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, September 1962.

The stimuli to which visitors were subjected in this room were multiple, and the movement through darkness was accompanied by noises and creaking sounds of various kinds. The haptic sensations experienced by visitors differed according to the surfaces encountered while searching for the exit: wet sponges and damp walls, warm panels, rotating platforms. All these devices were intended to disorient the visitor in space. The exit—and the transition to the next room—was marked by a red emergency light.

The third room was also conceived by Spoerri. Here the artist translated to an environmental scale the overturning of planes already explored in his *tableaux-pièges*. In these works, Spoerri froze convivial situations—the remains of a meal—fixing them within plexiglass surfaces and overturning the horizontal plane of the dining table onto the vertical surface of the wall.

In the third room of the Stedelijk Museum he operated in a similar way. Visitors entered what appeared to be a traditional museum gallery, but turned vertically. Statues and pedestals supporting busts protruded from the walls, while paintings were "hung" on the floor.

With traditional spatial references missing, the spectator's disorientation became total: objects that are usually placed on horizontal surfaces were arranged on vertical walls.

The room conceived by Niki de Saint Phalle, by contrast, transformed the passive spectator into a co-author of the installation. It was a space set up with statues made of plaster and white plastic: monsters, prehistoric animals, dolls and mannequin heads. Visitors could shoulder air rifles and shoot at bags containing paint which, when bursting, randomly splattered the white statues with coloured stains. The result recalled the gesturality of abstract expressionist painting, but without the intentionality and the aura of the artist's creative genius.

Perhaps more than the other rooms, that of Niki de Saint Phalle evoked the atmosphere of an amusement park, with the typical shooting-range stalls.

The theme of the labyrinth persisted in the artist's research: four years later, in 1966, she designed and realised *HON – en katedral* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, a gigantic reclining female figure whose interior could be entered and explored. *Dylaby* and *HON* shared a labyrinthine structure and a participatory atmosphere.

Even before reaching the seventh and final room of the exhibition, the fifth room already hosted—alongside the playful devices by Niki de Saint Phalle—several machines by the Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely. These were the *Machines pour dessiner*, prototypes of which he had presented in the famous exhibition *Le mouvement*, curated by Pontus Hultén at the Galerie Denise René in Paris.

Before the fascinated eyes of the public, Tinguely's machines randomly painted rolls of canvas that passed through their gears. Others carried coloured pens at their extremities which, pressing against sheets of paper, produced drawings that were always different and entirely accidental.

These were improbable assemblages of mechanical gears, leather belts and wire, in which accidentality or interaction with the spectator played a

decisive role[41]. Referring to Tinguely's machines, Pontus Hultén described them as «a mechanics whose aim is not precision, but anti-precision, the mechanisms of chance»[42].

Spoerri, Niki de Saint Phalle and Tinguely had joined the Nouveaux Réalisme two years earlier, united by the intention to move beyond the use of the traditional pictorial support and to emotionally involve the public: they considered the object in its expressive autonomy, according to the logic of the Duchampian ready-made.

Like Niki de Saint Phalle's project, Tinguely's machines assumed a critical stance toward Informal painting and Abstract Expressionism. The spectator became part of the artistic process: Tinguely's machines aimed to activate the viewer's multisensory perception, yet they produced little more than an apparent work of art, one that called into question the very role of the artist.

The seventh and final room was also animated by Tinguely's machines. The artist's original intention had been to create machines capable of destroying tulips, wooden shoes and various pieces of crockery[43]. Due to the unavailability of tulips in September and the high cost that the cyclical destruction of objects would have entailed, Tinguely changed his plan. He designed a raised wooden floor beneath which fans emitted strong jets of air that, through small openings, set in continuous motion coloured balloons bearing the inscription "DYLABY". Balloons meant to be burst. A photograph by Ed van der Elsken, depicting children running through this room, became the emblematic image of the exhibition.

The photographs collected in the catalogue, in truth, do not simply document the works: on the one hand they focus on the process of constructing the environments; on the other, they narrate the interaction between artworks and visitors and the sense of disorientation they produced. Tinguely, for example, is photographed in the street searching for discarded materials—wire, wheels and metal rods—to assemble his machines.

Also by Ed van der Elsken are the video recordings: a ten-minute documentary in which the photographer conveys the sensations and impressions of visitors—adults and children—while traversing the labyrinth, rather than describing the works in their specificity and individuality. In the film, the photographer follows the visitor along the route and contrasts the adult point of view with that of the child: free from inhibitions, the child understands the installations, enjoys them, activates the environments and interacts with the works. The adult visitor, by contrast, wanders through dark rooms, stumbles over objects along the way and worries about those suspended from the ceiling. The message of the film is

41 Emanuele Quinz, "From Drawing Machines to Machines That Draw: From Tinguely to the Behavioral Objects," in Giorgio Camuffo (ed.), *Macchine per disegnare sulla carta, sul pavimento, sui muri e in un milione di altri luoghi*, Corraini, Mantua, 2011, p. 114.

42 K.G.Pontus Hultén, *Tinguely.'Meta'*, Thames and Hudson, Londra 1975, p.8.

43 Janna Schoenberger, "Ludic Exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum: *Die Welt als Labyrinth, Bewogen Beweging, and Dylaby," Stedelijk Studies*, no. 7, 2018, https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/ludic-exhibitions-at-the-stedelijk-museum-die-welt-as-labyrinth-bewogen-beweging-and-dylaby/, accessed December 2025.

clear: it is possible to benefit from the unconventional structure of Dylaby—which requires active participation rather than the passive viewing of artworks—only by adopting the curious and uninhibited perspective of a child. For the purposes of our argument, this is highly significant.

With regard to children's participation in Dylaby, it is worth recalling the interest and commitment of Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk since 1945, in making the museum accessible to an increasingly broad audience. These intentions led him to expand the museum's educational programme, organising activities aimed also at younger visitors.

Images and the plan of Dylaby appeared in the fourth issue of "The Situationist Times", edited by Jacqueline de Jong[44]. This was a special issue devoted to the labyrinth—anti-didactic in nature—conceived as a dérive intended to stimulate visual resonances rather than follow a linear narrative, according to the principle of the association of ideas.

The exhibition Dylaby also owed much, and above all, to Surrealist research and to the perceptual disorientation activated by artists associated with the movement. One need only recall the famous—and at the time deeply disorienting—*Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in January 1938, in which Duchamp transformed the exhibition space into a thoroughly estranging and unsettling environment[45].

Developing Surrealist research, drawing on the studies of Huizinga as well as on investigations into movement and kinetic art, Dylaby functioned as a gigantic dispositif that used the labyrinth as a tool of disorientation. Visitors were invited to free themselves from their adult inhibitions and loosen their restraints in order to reconsider their spatial awareness—acquired assumptions that had long been taken for granted.

The loss of a fixed visual horizon, the pervasive presence of inclined planes, the noises, the absence of light, and the unfamiliar tactile sensations—far removed from the classical experiences normally associated with a museum—made Dylaby a powerful instrument for questioning adult spatial certainties.

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44 Jacqueline de Jong, "The Situationist Time"s n. 4, Art Print, Copenhagen 1963, pp. 138–139.

45 Francesco Poli, Francesco Bernardelli, *Mettere in scena l'arte contemporanea. Dallo spazio dell'opera allo spazio intorno all'opera,* Johan & Levi, Milan, 2016, p. 25.

## *4.2.2 Robert Morris*

Atlas, pp. 136-138.

Robert Morris (Kansas City 1931–Kingston 2018) was an American sculptor and one of the leading theorists and artists of Minimalism. Throughout his artistic career he showed an interest in the worlds of dance, philosophy and psychology.

Morris's entire artistic and theoretical production investigates the close relationship between object, space and viewer, effectively weakening the status of the artwork as a mere aesthetic object.

After moving to New York with his wife, the dancer and choreographer Simone Forti, he joined the Judson Dance Theatre: a collective founded in Greenwich Village between 1962 and 1964, composed of dancers, musicians and visual artists, which rejected the codes of traditional dance in order to explore everyday movements, "ordinary" gestures, and interactions with objects and stage structures. For the Judson Dance Theatre Morris created several stage sets: minimal objects such as the sets for *Arizona* (1963), *21,3* (1964), *Site* (1964) and *Waterman Switch* (1965).

Initially Morris's objects were pure volumes, essential forms made from industrial materials, whose production reduced the artist's manual intervention to zero degree. These were works that removed every trace of emotion or impulsiveness typical of the painting of American Abstract Expressionism and European Informal art of the 1950s. In the following years Morris expanded the scope of his research: from geometric blocks and site-specific sculptures he moved toward informal and "processual" works (felt, earth, perishable materials), where attention shifted from the finished product to the process, to perceptual experience, and to the unstable becoming of the work itself.

Morris's position represented an explicit rejection of fiction and of the exaltation of the figure of the artist.

His own words clearly convey the value he attributed to making art and to being an artist:

> «I do not wish to participate in staged conversations about art (mine or others', past or present) that are nothing more than laborious disguised performances. [...] Long ago I developed the habit—never abandoned since—of writing instead of speaking. It is possible that I was led to make art because speaking and being in the presence of other people were not obligatory»[46].

46 Robert Morris, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 41, n. 2, Winter 2015, The University of Chicago Press, pp. 289-311.

In the first text Morris wrote, *Notes on Dance*, following his experiences as a stage designer at the Judson Dance Theatre, the artist theorizes the interdependence between body, object, movement and space. Morris is engaged in a practice in which the object is conceived as an extension of the body, while the subject, through action and movement, can assume qualities proper to the object. Indeed, at the beginning we read: «my involvement in theatre has been with the body in motion. However, changed or reduced the motion might have been or however elaborate the means used might have been, the focus was this movement»[47]. The work Morris develops is a work on the movement of the dancer and of the audience in relation to his stage objects and to the passing of time. «The challenge was to find alternative movement»[48]. The challenge, therefore, is to identify and trigger alternative movements of the performers, depending on the stage objects designed.

In the subsequent text, *Notes on Sculpture*[49], Morris addresses the problem of the perception of sculpture in relation to space and time. Sculptural objects, according to Morris, should tend toward the essentiality of form in order to be easily experienced by the viewer, according to the Gestalt principle of figure-ground, which painting more easily addresses on the two-dimensional plane. Even solids with slight irregularities—truncated pyramids, inclined planes—are easier to visualize than complex solids which, Morris writes, become frustrating to perceive. «Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them»[50].

In the second part of the text he addresses the dimensional relationship between the sculptural object and the perceiving body: «In the perception of relative size the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale». Simple solids therefore do not imply experiences reduced in intensity; rather, they establish order in the relationship with the viewer and with their bodily dimension.

Morris then analyses how the relationship of intimacy that a sculptural work establishes with its viewer varies according to its scale: small objects establish more intimate relationships with those who experience them, Morris writes—an exclusive relationship with the work. A large object, on the other hand, requires larger spaces in order to be experienced in its entirety: it becomes totalizing in relation to human scale and allows for a shared vision. Objects that are too large, instead, exert a compressive effect due to their imposing presence. Morris's approach therefore constitutes an accurate phenomenological study, which begins from the dimensions of the works produced and directly influences his sculptural practice and artistic activity.

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47 Robert Morris, *Notes on Dance,* in "Tulane Drama Review", vol. 10, no. 2, Winter 1965, pp. 179-186.

48 ivi p. 179.

49 Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture*, in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A critical Anthology,* E.P. Dutton, New York 1968.

50 ivi p. 228.

The considerations that Morris developed in his writings also found application in the exhibition project *Robert Morris* of 1971 at the Tate Gallery in London (today Tate Britain). It was a site-specific installation that brought together several works from the 1960s with new realizations. The exhibition was intended to remain open to the public from 28 April to 6 June 1971. Things did not unfold that way.

Conceived as a sort of setting for a collective performance that the public could stage freely and without any predetermined programme, the exhibition consisted of a series of dispositifs that visitors could experience and physically engage with. As David Sylvester and David Compton recall in the exhibition catalogue[51], these were structures that in their essentiality resembled Morris's earlier sculptures, yet in fact invited the participation of the public. The catalogue, with its abundant photographic documentation, remains one of the few precious testimonies of an exhibition that was closed only four days after its opening: numerous visitors, while engaging with the structures (climbing, rolling, walking in balance, pulling cables), were injured. The structures were grouped into three sections, each of which established a different relationship with the visitor.

A first section was designed to activate the viewer while leaving the exhibited objects passive and fixed. These included a granite column, sandbags, and triangular-section steel elements—objects that involved the public primarily through visual interaction.

A second section consisted of objects and structures that people could move and displace: sculptures that responded to the movements and actions of the visitors. In this environment there was, in fact, an oscillating platform balanced on a wooden beam; a large sphere to be moved along a spiral path defined by sandbags; and a metal platform with a "V"-shaped section resting on two beams, which the visitor could move by pulling cables.

A final group of objects was stationary but determined and imposed precise limits on the positions and movements of the people interacting with them. These included two beams on which to walk in balance; two wooden ramps above which the practicable space was closed by a kind of covering, also inclined; a tunnel to be crossed on all fours; and a structure to be experienced by climbing.

Between the second and the third sections there was a video area in which recordings of naked human figures running, falling, and looking at themselves in mirrors were shown on two screens, at different speeds—sometimes accelerated, sometimes slowed down. Almost a visual indication of the actions to be undertaken.

51 Michael Compton, David Sylvester (eds.), *Robert Morris*, Tate Gallery, London 1971.

The online documentation of the Tate on the exhibition[52] reports Morris's statements to the BBC presenter Melvyn Bragg, who defined it as « an opportunity for people to involve themselves with the work, to become aware of their own bodies, gravity, effort, fatigue, their bodies under different conditions »[53]. The objects on display had no intrinsic value other than that of stimulating a new sensibility: a (renewed) awareness of space.

Objects that allowed the public to: observe, contemplate, reflect, walk in balance, walk on a slope, move, push, pull, touch, search for balance on a rocking platform, crawl through, climb, fall. The body becomes activated in space.

In 2009 the Tate Modern revisited and re-presented Morris's project under the name *Bodyspacemotionthings*, curated by Catherine Wood and Kathy Noble under Morris's supervision: this time using durable materials, together with a series of precautions to ensure the safety of visitors. The exhibition was a great success, needless to say, just as the 1971 exhibition had been.

In the pages of *Artforum* in 2009, however, Phyllis Tuchman's comment was not among the most lenient—not with regard to the intentions of the original project, but rather those of the 2000s. The journalist considered the 2009 version a sort of "domestication" of the original 1971 exhibition rather than a reinvention of it: once materials and safety devices had been updated, its historicity seemed to be denied.

Regardless of the evaluations of the contemporary edition of *Bodyspacemotionthings*, Morris's intention appears of great interest—and the title itself expresses it clearly: an exhibition-device designed to analyse the relationships between body, movement, space and the artistic object. The object, in its formal and material essentiality, becomes a place of motor experience and bodily awareness. The exhibition confirms how deeply Morris was interested in the perception of the public, not merely visual but rather a global physical experience.

For Morris, the object exists in the unfolding of time and in relation to the body in movement. A way of making art, as stated in the catalogue, that goes beyond the manipulative aspect, beyond selling, collecting and admiring, proposing a new role for the artist in relation to society.

> «They represent an art that goes beyond the making, selling, collecting and looking at kind of art, and proposes a new role for the artist in relation to society»[54].

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52 Jonah Westerman, Robert Morris born 1931 Robert Morris , Tate Gallery 1971; Bodyspacemotionthings , Tate Modern 2009, in "Performance at Tate: Perspectives", Tate Research, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/robert-morris#footnote-3, accessed December 2025.

53 *The Arts This Week*, BBC Radio 3, 29 April 1971.

54 M. Compton, D. Sylvester, *Robert Morris* … cit., back cover.

## 4.2.3 Bruce Nauman

Atlas, pp. 140-142.

Bruce Nauman is a multifaceted artist who, since the 1960s, has employed different media in his artistic research: from video to photography, from performance to installation, from sound to neon, up to his more recent use of holograms and 3D.

Born in 1941 in Indiana, Nauman obtained a Master of Fine Arts at the University of California, Davis, in 1966, specialising in sculpture, before moving to San Francisco and beginning a long and prolific career, in which he immediately raised the fundamental question of the definition of art. For Nauman, art is what an artist does in the studio.

And his body, in space, becomes the principal object of investigation already at the end of the 1960s, with theoretical references ranging from philosophy to theatre, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Samuel Beckett, with a particular interest in language[55].

Nauman's early works are video-performances, black-and-white recordings made in his studio, in which he interrogates his own physicality. The artist himself would later say of his research: «In a sense one becomes aware of one's own being through activity and not only by reflecting on oneself. One does exercises, one trains, one becomes aware of one's own body»[56].

Video was an inexpensive tool: recorded with a fixed camera, his video-performances did not require an audience and led the viewer into the intimacy of the private space of the studio, revealing the complex creative process.

«There was nothing in my studio because I had no money to buy the materials with which to work. So I was forced to examine myself and what I was doing in my studio»[57], as stated in the informational material of the exhibition *Contrapposto Studies*, curated by Carlos Basualdo and Caroline Bourgeois at Punta della Dogana in Venice in 2021. In this exhibition, alongside a corpus of recent video installations, a selection of the American artist's early video-performances was also presented to the public.

In *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1* (1968), the artist films himself while, with his back turned to the wall in a corner, he lets himself fall backwards, tirelessly for the entire duration of the recording. The camera, as always, remains fixed, but the shot—rotated by ninety degrees—excludes the artist's face from the scene.

The action is always repetitive and investigates space through simple gestures, often inspired by Beckettian theatre. As in *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*[58], also from 1968. Nauman, with his hands joined behind

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55 Teresa Macrì, *Slittamenti della performance. Volume 1*. Anni 1960-2000, Postmedia, Milan 2020, p. 209.

56 Bruce Nauman, *Inventa e muori. Interviste 1967–2001*, (ed. Farid Rahimi), a+mbookstore, Milan, 2005, p. 38.

57 Bruce Nauman. *Contrapposto Studies*, exhibition curated by Carlos Basualdo and Caroline Bourgeois, Punta della Dogana, Venice, 23 May 2021–9 September 2022.

58 The reference is to the unusual way in which some Beckettian characters move through space, such as Molly or Watt.

his back, lifts one leg to ninety degrees, turns forty-five degrees on himself, and then lets the raised leg fall noisily. He begins the same movement again with the other leg and slowly advances toward the camera. The approach of the performer corresponds to the gradual disappearance—first partial and then total—of his figure from the video. The spectator presumes the continuation of the exercise only from the continuous and rhythmic sound of his steps and of the foot striking the floor. The execution is methodical, and the tension and estrangement of the spectator remain constant.

Another video-performance from the late 1960s, considered significant for the present analysis, is *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1968). His performances were inspired by the dance research of the 1960s and by choreographers such as Merce Cunningham or Meredith Monk, in their intention to challenge the perceptual capacities of the spectator. In this video, the space of the studio is delimited with strips of adhesive tape in order to allow exploratory exercises. The square marked on the floor corresponds to the span of the performer's legs. Positioned at the midpoint of one side, Nauman opens and closes first one leg and then the other to the rhythm of a metronome.

All the video-performances of these years are characterised by the endless repetition of the same movement: the duration remains constant, sixty minutes corresponding to the maximum recording time of a videotape. Often the camera is rotated or inverted, and the performer, in his movement, frequently disappears from the visual field. Contributing to the sense of estrangement produced by some performances is the absence of the performer's face from the frame.

Space has a sound, and the body in space produces a sound: the rhythm of constantly repeated movements is associated with a sound that is likewise constant, emphasising the exhausting duration, the incessant exercise.

The space of the studio undergoes limitations in the *Corridors*. In *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968) Nauman walks inside a narrow passage imitating the chiastic pose of classical statuary. To realise this video-performance, the artist constructed a corridor in the Southampton studio of the artists Roy Lichtenstein and Paul Waldman, from whom he borrowed the space. Nauman created this structure by placing two plywood walls at a distance of fifty centimetres. With a camera positioned at one end of the corridor, he filmed himself walking along the narrow space for the entire sixty minutes of the recording. His hands are interlaced behind his neck. His movement along the corridor in a straight line occurs by shifting the hips and imitating the contrapposto pose. We see him walk to the end of the corridor, his body receding with each step, before returning toward the spectator. The exercise tests the body's resistance to an ideal—but certainly not natural—pose such as that of Greek sculpture.

In the subsequent *Corridors* Nauman introduced certain devices, mirrors or coloured neon lights, as in the case of *Green Light Corridor* (1970), in which the light conditions the perceived form of the space. This type of device was conceived to be experienced by the spectator.

J. Kraynak writes about these walk-in structures:

> « In these environmental sculptures, sound, light, and video imagery are variously incorporated, yielding mediated spaces in which the viewer is made to perform a range of sensory tasks: moving, viewing, listening, and so on. In so doing, processes of perception—visual, physiological, and physical—are heightened, and the distinction between seeing with the eyes and experiencing with the body is collapsed »[59]: precisely what this dissertation seeks to demonstrate.

In *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1969) the spectator must experience the corridor by walking through it and paying attention to the video from a closed-circuit camera. The corridor is ten metres long and fifty centimetres wide. At the entrance a video camera records the spectator's entry and projects their image, filmed from behind, onto the screen positioned at the end of the passage. As the visitor approaches the exit, their figure on the screen moves further away and progressively becomes smaller. Increasing the visitor's sense of disorientation is a second screen that projects the fixed image of the empty *Corridor*. Thus, to the sense of suffocation induced by the walls and the length of the passage is added a perceptual displacement and the incomprehensibility of the images in the video: are we approaching, moving away, or absent?

This examination of a part of Nauman's research concludes with a series of more recent works, begun in 2015, in which the American artist revisits the theme already explored in *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968). This revisiting is an exception in the artist's career and is due to the possibility of using more advanced technological means to achieve results that Nauman could not obtain in the 1960s. These works are the *Contrapposto Studies*, in which he resumes the walk that imitates the classical pose, without the constraint of the *Corridor*. Beyond the improved filmic rendering and the use of colour, the decomposition of the image into seven identical modules (as in the classical and Renaissance canon), and the use of 3D technology, what appears particularly interesting, in the view of the present author, is the analysis of the human condition subject to time. Fifty years after the first experiments, and dressed in exactly the same way (jeans and a white T-shirt), Nauman attempts to walk in a straight line with his hands clasped behind his head, maintaining a contrapposto pose. The scale of the projections is imposing, and the aged body is filmed from the front, from the side, from the back, in positive and in negative. The artist presents his body following medical problems. In an interview with Carlos Basualdo, Nauman recounts: « after all my surgeries [...] my balance was horrible, because I had no feeling in my feet. And when you don't have any feeling in your feet you can't balance yourself. That slowly came back, but that was something I thought about »[60]. The artist thus

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59 Bruce Nauman, *Pay Attention Pleace: Bruce Nauman's words. Writings and Interview*, Janet Kraynak (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 2.

*60 Carlos Basualdo, Interview with Bruce Nauman, in C. Basualdo, C. Bourgeois (eds.), Bruce Nauman. Contrapposto Studies, Marsilio, Venice 2021, p. 154.*

shows us a tired and ageing body that continues, with effort, to experience the space of his empty studio, in sharp contrast with the perpetually young and unrealistically perfect image of the human body according to the canons of contemporary society. The body is subjected to work, to fatigue, to wear, to the passing of time. The body is in space but is also subject to time.

Nauman's work thus invites us to re-feel, re-experience and come to know again, in a different way, as if we had forgotten all the knowledge we had previously acquired. «It does not simply propose that we admire a work, but rather that we experience the sensation it produces»[61], states Caroline Bourgeois.

Nauman invites us to rid ourselves of habits and acquired certainties. Nauman teaches us to unlearn.

61 Caroline Bourgeois, *Walks In Walks Out: un'esperienza*, in C. Basualdo, C. Bourgeois, *Bruce Nauman*… cit., p. 69.

## To conclude

The three investigations analysed, although operating within different artistic languages, share the same critical intention: the rejection of contemplative reception and the affirmation of the centrality of the body as the primary instrument for knowing space. In all three cases, the spectator is never a detached observer but a body involved in a perceptual process that requires movement, effort, adaptation, balance, orientation and disorientation. The work becomes a device that is activated only through traversal, through use, through the duration of the experience.

In *Dylaby* space assumes a playful and labyrinthine form: a total environment in which the visitor experiences a deliberate loss of traditional perceptual coordinates through darkness, obstacles, noises, inclined planes and playful devices. Here knowledge arises through disorientation, through temporary loss, through a regression to an exploratory condition that directly recalls childhood experience. The museum itself, as a place of codified knowledge, is called into question, transforming into an open laboratory in which learning is the side effect of action, but also its most significant outcome.

In the work of Robert Morris, bodily experience is conducted on a more explicitly phenomenological plane. His essential structures do not aim at spectacular sensory disorientation, but rather at an awareness of the relationships between body, gravity, weight, balance, dimension and the resistance of materials. The minimal object becomes a field of forces that compels the body to measure itself against its physical limits. What emerges is a learning of the body's potential within space, constructed in the time of action and through the very risk of the experience.

Bruce Nauman, finally, directs his reflection toward the body as a place of discipline, fatigue, constraint and resistance. If in Morris the body is called to confront external structures, in Nauman it is the body itself that becomes both measure and device. His repetitive actions in the enclosed space of the studio, the compressed corridors, the systems of video surveillance and perceptual manipulations all produce a quieter yet no less radical experience of disorientation, in which space, time and bodily awareness intertwine in a process of continuous self-verification. The visitor is called to confront their own perceptual condition, their limits, and the instability of the relationship between body and environment.

What unites these three investigations is the idea that space is not a neutral container, but an active agent of perceptual and cognitive transformation. In every case, experience is not guided by explicit knowledge but is constructed through an acting that precedes rational understanding. The knowledge that emerges from it is embodied, non-verbalised knowledge: an incidental learning that arises from traversal, from error, from fatigue, from the exposure of the body to unfamiliar conditions. Read through the lens of spatial education, these artistic dispositifs investigate modes of learning based on direct experience, sensory exploration and unprogrammed discovery. In all three cases, the body becomes an instrument of knowledge and space the true site of learning.



People interacting with ***Bodyspacemotionthings***, by Robert Morris, installation at Tate, 1971.
© Robert Morris / Photo © Tate (Simon Wilson).



Activities conducted by Riccardo Dalisi in the Traiano and Ponticelli districts, Naples. In Riccardo Dalisi, *Traiano e Ponticelli (Napoli): il recupero dell'espressione di sé. Il coinvolgimento della comunità come formazione al progetto*,"Spazio e Società", no. 2, April 1978, pp. 41–70.

# 5. Learning Space: The City as an Educational Environment

In open opposition to a conception of education understood as a merely instructional act, founded on extreme specialization, Giancarlo De Carlo argued in 1972 that

> «education is the result of experience. The wider and more complex the experience, the deeper and more intense the education. The field of experience expands in direct proportion to the frequency of contacts and its complexity grows with the increase of their variety. [...] The rest of education—the richest and most active—takes place elsewhere and does not require buildings: or perhaps it has not yet found the appropriate spaces in which it can fully unfold within a sphere of global experiences»[1].

Starting from this experiential conception of education, this chapter examines a number of experiences and reflections that, between the late nineteenth century and the 1970s, questioned the relationship between education, built space, and everyday experience, proposing a conception of learning grounded in the use of the city and in the active involvement of the body.

Through the figures of Patrick Geddes, Colin Ward, and the initiatives promoted by Global Tools, the chapter reconstructs a set of practices and theories that conceive the city not as a mere backdrop to education, but as a pedagogical device.

What these experiences share is a critique of an educational model based on the separation between theoretical knowledge and practice, between school and life, between design and use. In opposition to the vertical and disciplinary transmission of knowledge, Geddes, Ward, and several protagonists of Italian radical pedagogies emphasize the formative value of observing, traversing, and transforming lived space. Learning thus appears as a situated and incidental process, produced through the interaction between individuals, environments, and everyday practices.

If Patrick Geddes, already at the end of the nineteenth century—at the intersection of urbanism, biology, and sociology—developed a vision of the city as an educational organism capable of forming conscious citizens through the direct experience of the environment, Colin Ward

1 Giancarlo De Carlo, *How/Why to Build School Buildings*, in Livio Schirollo (ed.), *Giancarlo De Carlo. Gli spiriti dell'architettura*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1999, p. 214. Also in Bob Malz, *School House. Selections on the Architecture of Education*, TU Delft, Delft, 1970, p. 3.

radicalized this intuition from a libertarian perspective, assigning to the street, to play, and to the spontaneous use of the city a central role in learning processes, especially those involving children. Building upon these theoretical premises, the experience of Global Tools—and in particular the workshops conducted by Riccardo Dalisi in Naples—translated such ideas into pedagogical and design practices that placed manual making, the body, and the collective dimension of learning at their centre.

The chapter therefore considers these experiences as significant moments within a broader reflection on the educational role of architecture and the city. From this perspective, incidental pedagogy becomes a critical tool for rethinking design not as a specialist act, but as a cultural and social practice, deeply intertwined with the ways in which bodies inhabit, use, and transform urban space.

Atlas, pp. 143-145.

# 5.1 Patrick Geddes: The Value of the Direct Experience of the City in Learning

*Here in Scotland, in Scottish culture, from what I have read and studied, I think you possess a very important educational pillar. It is what you call generalism [...]. Specialization and specialists, I think, are in some sense an accident of our time. We should return to the idea of a general point of view, and in Scotland you have a strong foundation for this approach, not least because of the work of Patrick Geddes.*[2]
Giancarlo De Carlo

Patrick Geddes (1853–1932) was an intellectual not easily classified, given the multiplicity of his fields of study: trained as a biologist and botanist, he later became a sociologist, educator, planner, and urbanist. At the centre of his research he placed the city, understood as a living organism and a complex system of relationships; in doing so, he anticipated by several decades contemporary reflections on the recovery and reuse of the existing built heritage.

The reading of his work proposed here privileges the educational and operational dimension of his practices, highlighting the central role of direct experience, of making, and of the everyday use of the city—and of the street—as sites of incidental learning and of the construction of spatial knowledge.

For a long time Geddes' reputation was largely associated with his 1915 book *Cities in Evolution*, translated and published in Italy only in 1970 at the initiative of Giancarlo De Carlo, who included it in the series *Struttura e forma urbana* that he edited for Il Saggiatore.

Leonardo Ciacci[3] argues that what most interested De Carlo in the work of the Scottish biologist was his generalist approach to reading the city, centred on the relationship between urban space and society, and grounded in the conviction that citizens should be educated to understand urban issues.

> «Geddes never seems to abandon his scientific ground rooted in biology: the observation of organisms in relation to their environment, nor his principal commitment, that of teaching and educating toward autonomy and toward an awareness of the value and power of individual action»[4].

2 Comment by Giancarlo De Carlo reported at the end of Murdo Macdonald's essay, *Patrick Geddes's Sociology and the Democratic Intellect in Scotland*, in Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra. Patrick Geddes: l'educazione alla cittadinanza*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa, 2021, p. 23.

3 Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra...* cit., p. 18.

4 ivi. p. 24.

Although he never obtained a university degree, Geddes maintained a conflictual relationship with the academic world throughout his life, going so far as to define himself as «someone who rings the academic doorbells and runs away». He began his career in London as a research biologist under the guidance of Thomas Henry Huxley, a supporter of Darwinian evolutionary theories. Geddes' positivist training had important repercussions on his educational methods, both as a father and as a teacher, deeply convinced of the importance of making and direct experience for learning.

As a researcher he worked in France, Italy, and Mexico before settling in Edinburgh in 1880. Because of his socialist ideas and his friendships within anarchist circles[5], he lost the competition for the chair of botany at the University of Edinburgh.

Throughout his life the Scottish professor was involved in numerous activities, all aimed at disseminating knowledge and reflections on the city and citizenship to a broad public beyond academic circles, through heuristic methods. Direct experience and active learning were in fact the pedagogical approaches that Geddes pursued in all his educational initiatives. *Vivendo discimus*—we learn by living—was the motto that accompanied him throughout his life, marked by a constant intertwining of knowledge and experiences, both personal and public. Among his many activities, a number of educational experiences will be discussed in the following pages.

## The Summer School of Science

The school was founded in 1887, but it was only in 1890 that the educational programme was entirely designed by Geddes. The teaching activities were concentrated over four weeks in the month of August: the courses were attended by lecturers, university students, and anyone interested in learning about and exploring scientific topics in greater depth. The method adopted was empirical and discovery-based, intended to enable students to develop theoretical knowledge through the direct observation of phenomena. "Education versus Examination" read the informational brochure describing the programme, which was based on laboratory activities and empirical observation.

This form of active knowledge—pursued and adopted by Geddes throughout his life—was grounded in «personal observation and interpretation of facts, which lectures systematize and expand; whenever possible, lectures accompany or follow practical work and excursions in the

5 Geddes was also actively engaged on the social front: he founded the Edinburgh Social Union and established friendships with William Morris and with the Russian anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin. The Edinburgh Social Union, founded in 1884, was an association committed to combating poverty in the Scottish city through building restoration projects, educational initiatives for adults and children, and public lectures open to citizens. It was precisely during one of these cycles of meetings and lectures that Geddes met and formed a friendship with the economist, artist, and writer William Morris.

field, rather than preceding them»[6]. In those same years, other scholars and pedagogues, such as Maria Montessori and John Dewey, also promoted similar active and heuristic methods.

Between 1878 and 1879 Geddes became acquainted with Edmond Demolins, a pedagogue and disciple of Le Play, a representative of the "new schools" movement and founder, in 1899, of the École des Roches, the most significant realization of active schooling in France for the children of the French bourgeoisie. This school—which Geddes observed with great attention, drawing inspiration from it—combined humanistic and scientific education with language learning (through periods spent abroad) and physical development (through exercise).

Geddes also developed a fierce critique of the university system and of academic teaching methods which, through the separation of scientific and artistic knowledge and the structuring of purely theoretical curricula, distanced students from the observation of empirical data. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of a new way of studying biology within a broader and more generalist vision that, in line with Darwinian evolutionary theories, connected the study of nature and living organisms with the study of the environment, as well as with historical, economic, philosophical, and social conditions.

With regard to Geddes' school and the programme he proposed, Charles Zueblin[7] wrote:

> «starting from the habit of proceeding from the concrete to the abstract, from the senses to the intellect, [...] the student, although first stimulated as an observer, is not regarded as a receiver of information, but as a potential producer of independent thought. Therefore the use of examinations [...] is definitively abandoned, [...] accustoming the student to take part in his own education»[8].

This comment also reveals the proximity between Geddes' position and the perspective developed in the present dissertation.

## The International School, Paris 1900

Following the recognition he gained for his educational commitment and for the pedagogical innovations he introduced, Geddes was invited by the French Ministry of Public Instruction to the *Paris 1899 Congrès International de l'éducation sociale*, which took place in Paris from 6 to 9 September 1900 on the occasion of the Paris Universal Exposition. The meeting was intended to discuss issues related to social education. Geddes did not merely attend the congress: he organized an international group of professors—many of whom had already been involved in the Summer School in Edinburgh—under the name *International School* or *Interna-*

6 Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra...* cit., p. 64

7 Charles Newton Zueblin was an American sociologist.

8 Zueblin Charles, Università di Chicago, *The world's first sociological laboratory*, in "The American Journal of Sociology", vol. IV, No 5, 1899.

*tional Assembly*. The aim of this initiative was to educate visitors to the Paris Exposition and guide them toward a deeper understanding of the new artistic and industrial products displayed throughout the French capital. As always in Geddes' approach, direct experience was the primary educational tool: the International Assembly organized walks and tours through the city, alongside lectures and seminars.

The outcome of the school proved positive. The *International School Paris 1900*—as the initiative would later be called—managed, within four months, to involve around one hundred professors (American, British, French, Swiss, Russian, and German), who offered lectures and guided visits in their own languages to tens of thousands of visitors.

Geddes recognized the educational value of the Paris Universal Exposition, arguing that young people there

> «spend their time better than at school, and at the same time obtain a better preparation. They move from the museums to the city and to the countryside; often they first learn to observe intensely, to remember vividly, to interpret shrewdly, and to question eagerly—and only afterwards to read eagerly»[9].

Geddes regarded the Universal Exposition as an opportunity of great educational value, a concrete and tangible encyclopedia.

One of the elements that most impressed Geddes was the *Roue des Nations*: a technical and artistic presentation of the products created by humankind. This exhibition led him to propose preserving the national pavilions—otherwise destined to be dismantled—in order to create an international laboratory, an international museum. His project for an *Index Museum*, however, did not receive support.

This failure later prompted him to design and establish his own urban laboratory in a tower in Edinburgh—a laboratory for the civic and urban education of citizens: the *Outlook Tower* of Edinburgh.

## The Outlook Tower of Edinburgh and the Experience of the Camera Obscura: A Tool for Learning to See

In 1892 Geddes purchased at auction the Castlehill tower, formerly the city residence of the Barons of Dalwolsie. Since 1853 the tower had belonged to Maria and Robert Henderson Short, professional opticians who, by modifying the roof and the upper floors of the building, constructed a camera obscura at its summit, which soon became a tourist attraction in the city of Edinburgh.

The tower would later become the site of Geddes' educational activities as well as the headquarters of his new publishing house, Patrick Geddes and Colleagues (a publishing venture that would achieve the financial success the professor had hoped for).

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9 Patrick Geddes, *Man and the Environment: a Study from the Paris Exposition*, in "The International Monthly", vol. 2 (Jun–Dec 1900), p. 20, note 59.

The project for the tower—later named the Outlook Tower—developed progressively over the years, also as a result of the various experiences Geddes pursued after his arrival in Edinburgh, and later through his work in Paris and India. It was particularly following the disappointment caused by the failure of his Parisian projects (above all the unrealized Index Museum) that Geddes devoted all his energy to strengthening the educational activities of the tower. His aim was to transform it into a civic museum through which citizens could acquire a greater awareness of the structure and history of their city, and gain the tools necessary to interpret it critically: a tool for learning to see, as Geddes repeatedly described it. The tower thus soon became both a civic laboratory and an observatory.

From the terrace it is possible to overlook the entire city.

> «Here the panorama can be analysed from time to time in its various aspects: astronomical and topographical, ideological and meteorological, botanical and zoological, anthropological, historical and economic, and so on. Each science is thus framed within its particular problem. [...] From the view that we offer from our observatory the child often begins his scientific studies, and the boy-scout his expeditions»[10].

After the terrace, entering the upper floor one passes through the particular view offered by the camera obscura, and then pauses in a dimly lit room conceived by Geddes as a space for reflection. The floor below the terrace was dedicated by Geddes to the *Museum of the City*, that is, a museum devoted to the city of Edinburgh. Descending another level, one enters a room arranged as a museum of Scotland; continuing downward, the space is dedicated to an exhibition on the English-speaking world: the British Empire and America. Then follows Europe, down to the ground floor, which houses a collection of globes.

> «Patrick Geddes indeed wishes that everyone should penetrate the true meaning of his city, in its past and present, in its possible future, and become aware of the place he occupies within it and of his duties towards it»[11].

The displays in the various rooms present on their walls drawings, engravings, photographs, and plans that recount the history and geography of different places: the result is a didactic and museum itinerary composed of panels crowded with drawings, maps, plans, photographs, and three-dimensional models. The room dedicated to Edinburgh presents a three-dimensional map of the city at a scale of 1:400, including the altimetric survey of all the buildings. The room devoted to Scotland instead displays a gigantic map drawn on the floor: it is therefore a total physical experience—not only a visual one—that interests Geddes, who was convinced of the importance of involving all the senses in the educational process.

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10 Patrick Geddes, *L'Outlook Tower*, in Patrick Geddes, *Città in evoluzione* (1915), Il Saggiatore, Milan 1970, p. 296.

11 Bernard Faure, *Le Professeur Geddes*... cit, in Leonardo Ciacci, La città è vostra... cit., p. 338.

«The method of learning on which Geddes works tirelessly is a continuous set of vertical paths, of ascents and descents, of crossings and overlaps that never abandon the pedagogical dimension assumed by direct and concrete experience»[12].

## The Camera Obscura

Within this process of learning about the city, Geddes attributed great educational value to the experience of the camera obscura: all citizens were invited to experience it as part of the Outlook Tower itinerary, especially his students.

As part of the activities and courses of the Summer School of Science, from 1890 Geddes introduced a course entitled *Edinburgh and Neighbourhoods. A Regional Survey. Twelve Lectures*. It is interesting to observe how the course promoted the study of the city through the direct exploration of urban space, beginning with the observation of the city also through the camera obscura of the Outlook Tower.

What, then, is the camera obscura, and what educational benefits did Geddes recognize in it?

The camera obscura, a device that was very fashionable in Victorian Britain, consisted of a tilted and movable mirror which, through a system of lenses, reflected light onto the table of a darkened room around which visitors could gather to contemplate the projected image of the surrounding landscape.

In a guide to the Outlook Tower written by Geddes in 1906, he described the camera obscura as «a large photographic camera [...] The only difference is that instead of being outside it, one is placed inside it [...] Moreover, the image we receive is not direct but reflected onto the table [...] our eyes quickly become more sensitive in the darkness; the ocular muscles tend to relax, becoming ready and receptive to appreciate the moving images and the pleasant colours projected onto the table»[13].

Geddes, whose eyesight had been seriously impaired since his return from Mexico in 1879, attributed great importance to visual experience and to images. In addition to appreciating various forms of art, he made extensive use of photography, optical instruments, diagrams, and other forms of graphic representation in his communication. He also soon developed an interest in cinema, which in the early decades of the twentieth century was increasingly used as a tool for dissemination and education[14]. Observation, for Geddes, was at once both a tool and a method, a means and an end[15].

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12 Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra...* cit., p. 108.

13 Conf. Geddes and Colleagues, A first Visit to the Outlook Tower, The Outlook Tower, Castlehill Edinburgh 1906.

14 Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra...* cit., p. 108.

15 Pierre Chabard, *The Outlook Tower as an anamorphosis of the world. Patrick Geddes and the theme of vision*, in "Le visiteur" n°7, see https://hodgers.com/mike/patrickgeddes/feature_eleven.html, February 2025.

The vision of the landscape and of the city through the camera obscura offered citizens a new and perceptually complex experience: a renewed way of observing spaces and things. The projection of soft pastel colours onto the table in the darkness, and the moving view of the landscape produced by the shifting of the lenses, emotionally engaged the observer. Geddes writes: «if we are observing from reality we are compelled to look at what lies immediately around us—our city and our region; it can be of great help to understand which habits have become commonplace, to awaken our interest and reactivate our perception of beauty»[16].

It is interesting to note how, several decades later, the photographer Luigi Ghirri from Emilia—who devoted numerous reflections to perception and to the need to educate the gaze—also recognised in the camera obscura of the castle of Fontanellato an important exercise in perceptual training. Gianni Celati recalls, remembering his friend:

> «in Fontanellato, in the castle, there is a camera obscura, like the one inside our cameras, but large enough to contain five or six people. It probably dates back to the seventeenth century. There is a small hole in the wall: light passes through a lens and projects onto a screen the inverted image of the square outside. Ghirri often returned to this place and said that it was like entering a photographic camera»[17].

## The Critique of the Public School System

In one of the last six texts he wrote for the American journal *The Survey Graphic*, with the support of Lewis Mumford, Geddes expressed his regret at not having succeeded in influencing sufficiently the collective consciousness of the societies in which he had worked.

In the same writings, particularly in *The Education of Two Boys* (1925), Geddes outlined a sharply critical picture of the educational methods of Victorian Britain. The British public education system of the late nineteenth century, he argued, was based on a one-directional transmission of knowledge, and on a form of learning that was almost entirely theoretical and verbal. Through the account of the domestic education he provided for his own children, he did not hesitate to criticize the methods and spaces of a typical school:

> «my young geographers and geotechnicians were not confined between a barrack called "school" and its desert drill-yard called the "playground"; rather they were preparing themselves to go anywhere and do anything, to know where they were, and how to make the best of it»[18].

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16 Patrick Geddes, *A schoolboy's Bag and a City's Pegeant*, in "The survey Graphic", n. 8, v. LIII, 1923, pp. 525-529+553-554.

17 Gianni Celati, *Ricordo di Luigi, fotografia e amicizia,* in Luigi Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia,* eds. Giulio Bizzarri and Paolo Barbaro, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2010, p. 253.

18 Patric Geddes, *The education of two boys*, in Leonardo Ciacci, *La città è vostra*...cit., p. 320.

He thus praised educational methods that encouraged contact with nature, «which must be self-education; first through direct contact with places and things, with work and experimentation; and secondly... with books»[19]. According to Geddes, the traditional educational system did not encourage young people to think autonomously or to develop critical thought; instead, they were conditioned by a prevailing moral framework. It was a verbalistic form of education, based on the separation of fields of knowledge and grounded in the principles of a capitalist economy.

Deeply convinced of the value of direct experience, the education that Geddes and his wife provided for their three children in their countryside home was inspired by the model of John Dewey's schools in Chicago, which Geddes and his wife visited in 1899 and 1900. It was an education based on the study of music, art, botany, and gardening, alongside theoretical studies and the study of Latin. It was a comprehensive form of education, ranging from folk music to classical music, from theatre to practical activities such as carpentry and shepherding, stonework and drawing. Geddes observed that these varied stimuli—forms of knowledge and skills acquired naturally, without the idea that they belonged to separate domains—allowed the young person to develop at once both a Dionysian and an Apollonian nature.

"Self-education" aims at fostering the independence of children through practical and direct learning, for «an increasing and extended capacity for action upon the environment»: teaching, the dominant activity in Geddes' life, was intended to induce within communities a direct and practical form of knowledge, derived from the experience of the environment within the environment.

«The general education of the public to take an interest in housing problems and to understand the advantages of garden suburbs has been slow and difficult until practical examples could be offered; but now it is making rapid progress, and in the simplest and most natural way: that of observation and direct experience»[20].

Geddes' educational practices thus anticipate a conception of learning as an incidental and embodied process, emerging from direct interaction with urban space and from the concrete experience of moving through it. In this perspective, the city is no longer understood as an object to be explained, but as an environment to be lived, used, and understood through practice.

19 ivi p. 310.

20 Patrick Geddes, *Educazione all'urbanistica*, in Patrick Geddes, *Città in...* cit, p. 269.

## 5.2 Colin Ward: Incidental Education in Built Space

Ugliness remains a quality of the modern city,
made acceptable by habit to a public that can
imagine only what it has seen[21]
G. M. Trevelyan

Atlas, pp. 146-149.

The reappropriation of urban space as a pedagogical environment is a recurring theme in both the reflections and the practice of Colin Ward (1924–2010), an anarchist thinker and English architect. The son of a teacher, Ward left school in 1939 to begin working as a draftsman in London in the office of an elderly architect trained in the Arts and Crafts tradition, Sidney Caulfield, who at that time was engaged in repairing London buildings damaged by bombing[22]. Ward's task was to survey, measure, and draw these buildings.

Enlisted in the army, he came into contact with anarchist circles in Glasgow and in 1947 joined the editorial staff of *Freedom*, the weekly newspaper founded by Piotr Kropotkin.

Because of his suspicious associations, he was transferred to a remote location in the Orkney Islands, where he was assigned to dismantle and reassemble military barracks. Some of the constructions built during those years together with Italian prisoners would later become part of the repertoire of unofficial architectures that Ward would document throughout his life.

His education was therefore extra-academic, practical, and "incidental," as Paul Goodman would have described it: a form of street education whose methods would later become a reference for the educational experiences he developed in the following years.

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21 Cfr. Colin Ward, *Educazione alla conoscenza per la trasformazione dell'ambiente*, in "Spazio e Società", no. 4, December 1978, p. 80.

22 Giacomo Borella, *Frammenti di un'Arcadia possibile,* in Colin Ward, *Architettura del dissenso. Forme e pratiche alternative dello spazio urbano*, ed. G. Borella, Elèuthera, Milan, 2016, p. 7.

## Ward's Work for the Town and Country Planning Association and the Birth of "BEE": Environmental Education

At the end of the 1960s, «dissatisfaction with the results of various planning policies in England»[23] led the British government to promote a research project, under the guidance of Arthur Skeffington, aimed at identifying possible strategies that could guarantee public participation in planning processes. The resulting document, *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning* (HMSO, London, 1969), known as the *Skeffington Report*, recommended a broad educational initiative concerning the built environment and the city «in order to give young people an awareness of their future civic responsibilities [and that] should form part of civic and humanistic studies in secondary schools»[24].

As Ward explains in the pages of *Spazio e Società*, although the Department of Education and Science completely ignored these recommendations, the same did not occur within the Town and Country Planning Association, a British non-governmental organization founded in 1899 at the initiative of Ebenezer Howard. In 1971 the association appointed Colin Ward to coordinate a training programme for teachers focused on educational practices related to the environment. The team led by Ward—later joined by Anthony Fyson, a geographer and teacher, and Eileen Adams, an art teacher and researcher—was involved in field activities, including the establishment of numerous Urban Studies Centres across England and the publication of a monthly journal for teachers, the *Bulletin of Environmental Education* (BEE)[25], whose editorial direction Ward oversaw from 1971 to 1979[26].

For Ward, the prototype of the Urban Studies Centres (UCS) was the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh: the civic observatory founded eight decades earlier by Patrick Geddes so that citizens could become more aware of and involved in decision-making processes and urban policies.

Supported by the TCPA (Town and Country Planning Association) and characterized by multidisciplinary expertise, the UCS (Urban Studies Centres) were spaces dedicated to learning from the built environment[27]. They provided teachers with tools and suggested teaching strategies for interpreting the city and its physical, social, and economic structure. They were also conceived as archives and centres for collecting documents, maps, and other materials. By the early 1980s, more than thirty Urban Studies Centres existed in England.

Regarding Ward's work in England, an editorial in *Spazio e Società* from 1978 states:

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23 Colin Ward, *Education for Mastery of Environment*, "Spazio e Società" n.4, 1978, p. 74.

24 ibidem.

25 Sol Perez-Martinez, *Deschooling Architecture*, in "e-flux Architecture", available at: https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/education/322673/deschooling-architecture/, March 2026.

26 The list of Colin Ward's writings in this journal can be found in the appendix to the following volume: Catherine Burke and Ken Jones (eds.), *Education, Childhood and Anarchism. Talking Colin Ward,* Routledge, London, 2014, pp. 221–222.

27 Sol Perez-Martinez, Deschooling Architecture… cit.

> «the configuration of the physical environment is the most significant record of the unfolding of human events. Therefore knowledge of the physical environment must be as widely disseminated as possible; and the more widely such knowledge is shared, the more likely it is that the physical environment will be actively cared for. [...] [Colin Ward] proposes that the whole city be considered an educational instrument; understanding education as direct experience in the dual sense of direct perception and direct action»[28].

## Environmental Education

If the aim of education is to help people understand, control, and influence their own environment, it becomes necessary to encourage an exploratory and investigative practice of places—what Ward calls environmental education: «an education that gives people the possibility of becoming masters of their own environment»[29].

For Ward, environmental education has a dual meaning. On the one hand, it may refer to the use of the environment as an educational medium and as a substitute for the classroom, according to the logic of the "deschoolers," such as Ivan Illich and Paul Goodman. On the other hand, it may indicate education about the environment, in the same way as a school subject like mathematics or French. «There is no subject called "Environmental Education" in schools, and yet there are subjects such as physical education or religious education»[30]: environmental education concerns multiple fields of knowledge and, if taught in the field—beyond purely academic settings—can broaden the environmental awareness and sensitivity of those who study it.

But what do we mean by environment?

> «Most people, teachers included, understand "environmental education" as education concerning the natural environment, which is considered good and threatened by the built environment, which is seen as bad. [...] Or it is understood as education about problems of conserving natural resources [...] It is far more rare that "environmental education" is understood as something that concerns the cities where the vast majority of European children live and go to school»[31].

## From the Artichoke Metaphor to the Method of Streetwork

Ward argues that in most schools nothing is taught about the built environment and architecture, except perhaps for some references to the history of architecture—rather than architecture within history, as Bruno Zevi would say.

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28 Editorial, "Spazio e Società", no. 4, 1978, p. 73, probably written by Giancarlo De Carlo.

29 Colin Ward, *Educazione alla conoscenza per la trasformazione dell'ambiente*, in" Spazio e Società" n.4 1978, p. 84.

30 Colin Ward, Anthony Fyson, *Streetwork. The exploding school,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, Londra 1973, p. 1.

31 Colin Ward, *Educazione alla conoscenza...,* cit. p. 73.

The teaching of environmental design—as Ward defines the approach to the study of the city and architecture—can take place through different stages of investigation, «like an artichoke eaten leaf by leaf»[32]. Its outer part is the one to be discarded, while the inner part proves to be the most valuable from an educational perspective.

A first approach to architecture—corresponding to the outer leaf of the artichoke—is what Ward considers boring for students, since it concerns the study of «official rather than vernacular architecture»: first the buildings and architectural monuments representing aristocratic and religious power, thus the study of palaces and cathedrals; then the study of the historical and stylistic evolution of architecture. Ward is equally sceptical about guided visits to those places fully recognised as «our architectural heritage, followed by a quick glance at the lions in the enclosure: all this has about as much to do with environmental education as a visit to Snow White's Castle at Disneyland»[33].

Another educational strategy is to introduce students to contemporary architecture, «generally preaching the orthodoxies of twenty years ago but at least inviting them to assess what has recently been added to the urban scene»[34].

The tender heart of the artichoke corresponds to the moment when the teacher recognises that the entire built environment deserves to be observed through direct experience. Students are invited to evaluate the quality of surfaces, tactile sensations, the characteristics of the spaces between buildings, and the volumetric and altimetric relationships between things, asking themselves: «is it hard, soft, hostile, friendly, human in scale, dramatic, suitable for modern ways of life?» [35].

Finally, Colin Ward proposes engaging students in the proposal and construction of an extension to the school building, based on the conviction that learning occurs through doing, and that the definition of living environments should not remain the exclusive domain of specialists but should involve future users as well.

For Ward, environmental education must therefore take place outside the classroom, in the spaces of the city, through what geographers call fieldwork and what

«in the urban context we might call streetwork. [...] Whole generations of city children have acquired their environmental education in the street», as Bernard Rudofsky—one of Ward's constant references—also observed. «The child, like the adult, learns the art and technique of citizenship not through admonitions or civic lessons, but through involvement in current issues»[36].

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32 Colin Ward, E*ducazione alla conoscenza*… cit., p.83.

33 Colin Ward, Anthony Fyson, *Streetwork*…cit, pp. 3-4.

34 Colin Ward, *ducazione alla conoscenza*… cit., p.83.

35 ibidem.

36 Ward frequently quotes the words of Michael Storm, an English scholar of education, who from the very first issue of BEE emphasized the educational value of young students' direct experience of the city, in Colin Ward, *Educazione incidental*e, ed. Francesco Codello, Elèuthera, Torino, 2021, cit., p. 104.

For Ward, environmental education also has an important political value: it is an invitation to return to the original meaning of *polis*,

> «an idea of the city as a place of freedom and participation, not of exclusion and obsessive control [...] Democracy is not taught, it is not learned through formal lessons, nor can the authentic practices of sharing be simulated through the banal staging of institutional bodies»[37].

## The Value of Play and Direct Experience: How Children See the City

If streetwork is understood by Ward as a cognitive activity—one of exploration, observation, critical reflection, and interpretation carried out by students under the guidance of architects or appropriately trained teachers—the child's autonomous experience of the city also has an important formative value. An example is the everyday walk between home and school: walking, experiencing places and streets, observing and listening are all formative actions and moments that allow the child to construct, in their mind, a dense and meaningful mental map of the route, rich in spatial impressions and information. Ward draws on the reflections of environmental psychologist Terence Lee to argue that «it is the perceived accessibility of one's own territory that makes the difference between children who walk to school and those who travel by school bus»[38]. The latter, more attentive to the dynamics occurring inside the vehicle than to the characteristics of the environment they pass through, accumulate from the real environment only a series of disconnected images.

Ward writes that, unlike adults, children are free from social conditioning; they are open to the world and to experience in a vivid and amplified way: the world belongs to them.

> «The perception of the surrounding environment began on the floor, then along the walls and furniture of the room in the house or apartment where the child grew up, then toward the passages leading to other rooms, finally the steps, the stairs, the courtyard, the doorway, the street, the shops, and the public park»[39].

Against every authoritarian solution imposed by adults, children are able to exploit every element that the city and the urban environment offer them as a space for play: a wall, a sidewalk, the changes in street level, the built fabric itself. Not in playgrounds specifically designed and constructed by adults, but incidentally, in the most diverse places of the city that children appropriate and use. Play is both a moment of learning and

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37 Francesco Codello, *Appendice del curatore,* in Colin Ward. *Educazione incidentale,* cit., p. 107.

38 Terence R. Lee, *Unwitting to School*, "Psicology Today", vol. 1, n. 2, May 1975.

39 Colin Ward, *Il bambino e la città. Crescere in ambiente urbano* (1978), L'ancora, Napoli 2000, pp. 37-38.

a moment of socialization. Yet, instead of guaranteeing children meaningful environmental experiences, contemporary society increasingly seeks to control their spaces and their time. «Just because a particular area is designated by a planning scheme as a playground does not at all mean that it will be used as such»[40].

Ward's critique is therefore directed at designers who undermine children's creative capacities by denying them the possibility of autonomously creating their own spaces for play, exploring the use of materials and testing their own bodies within space.

> «Much of the equipment we provide for children seems designed to exclude them from the productive process, forcing them to become consumers—indifferent and ungrateful—of performances provided by others»[41].

Drawing on the words of Steen Rasmussen, Ward argues that even a simple ball game against a wall can become an instrument of spatial knowledge. In this regard, he refers to an anecdote reported by the Danish architect concerning the playful experience of a group of children in Piazza dell'Esquilino in Rome. While tourists cross the square quickly, intent on ticking off yet another building on their list of places to visit—without pausing to read or experience the spatial qualities of the square and the steps near the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore—the same cannot be said of a group of children who regularly spend their school break playing with a ball against a wall, which sometimes bounces all the way down the steps to the obelisk.

> «I do not claim that these Italian youngsters learned more about architecture than the tourists did. But quite unconsciously they experienced certain basic elements of architecture: the horizontal planes and the vertical walls above the slopes. And they learned to play on these elements. As I sat in the shade watching them, I sensed the whole three-dimensional composition as never before»[42].

## Ward's Theoretical and Operational References

Much of the work Ward carried out throughout his life was that of an essayist. The experiences he developed as a teacher within the Urban Studies Centres and as editor of *BEE* allowed him to elaborate a series of reflections later collected in numerous essays. At least two of these texts recount his educational practice in relation to the built environment: *Streetwork. The Exploding School*—written together with Anthony Fyson in 1973—and *The Child in the City*, first published in 1978. These texts contain a

40 Colin Ward, *Educazione incidentale*..., cit., p. 136.

41 ivi p.38.

42 Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1964, p.17.

strong critique of the English school system and of traditional educational practices, as well as a particular attention to the ways in which young people experience space; they also reveal the influence of anarchist thinkers, philosophers, and pedagogues.

Ward looked with interest at contemporary experiments in education related to the built environment that were being carried out during those years. The *Schools without Walls*, inspired by the theories of Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, and Everett Reimer, made the street and the facilities of the city itself both the tool and the place of learning. This was the case, for example, with the *Parkway Education Program*, directed in Philadelphia in the 1960s by John Bremer, a member of the Faculty of Education at the University of Leicester.

> «The city offers an incredible variety of learning labs: art students study at the Art Museum, biology students meet at the Zoo; business and vocational courses meet at on-the-job sites such as journalism at a newspaper, or mechanics at a garage. [...] Students, then, in going from class to class, will travel around the city (normally on foot). There is a student-teacher ratio of 16: 1 and for every teacher a "university intern" is added to the staff»[43].

The *Parkway Education Program* was followed by the *Metro High School*, a school in Chicago that made use of unused buildings in the city, and by *Métro Éducation Montréal*: an educational experiment carried out in Montreal in the 1970s, which consisted of using underutilized urban spaces—such as those of the metro—as learning environments and could rely on qualified personnel willing to offer lessons to students[44].

Ward also refers in his essays to numerous anarchist and libertarian thinkers. The use of the street as an educational space had already been anticipated by Paul Goodman in his novel *The Grand Piano* (1942), where he wrote: «I think we should use the city itself as a school. Instead of bringing fake pieces of the city into the school building, let us walk at our own pace and go out among real things»[45] . Goodman, a psychologist, philosopher, and writer, was a mentor to Ivan Illich and a constant reference for Colin Ward. He proposed the model of the Athenian pedagogue who walks through the city with his young pupils, criticizing—within a libertarian perspective—the traditional school system. For Goodman, incidental education, that which takes place within society and within the spaces of the city, should be the primary instrument of learning because it is spontaneous and not mediated by an adult.

> «Until quite recently, in all societies, both primitive and highly civilized ones, a large part of education was incidental [...]. Generally speaking, this incidental process fits the nature of learning better than direct

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43 *School without walls*, "Bulletin of Environmental Education", n. 11, March 1972, in Colin Ward, Anthony Fyson, *Streetwork. The Esploding school*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 5-6.

44 See "L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui", December 1970–January 1971.

45 Paul Goodman, *The Grand Piano*, Colt Press, San Francisco, 1942, in C. Ward, *Educazione alla conoscenza...*, cit., p. 76.

> instruction. The young person experiences causes and effects rather than pedagogical exercises. Reality is often complex, but each young person can grasp it in their own way, in their own time, according to their interests and initiative»[46].

The history of anarchist and libertarian thought is rich in reflections on anti-authoritarian educational methods and experiences. Within this broad panorama, Ward also recognised the importance of the ideas of the anarchist philosopher William Godwin (1756–1836). Already in eighteenth-century England, Godwin acknowledged the importance of the child's relationship with society, so that the child might pursue independence: «the true aim of education, as of every other moral process, is the generation of happiness»[47].

## Concluding Reflections

Using the city as a space for learning spatial knowledge is, according to the pedagogue Egle Becchi, interesting for two reasons: «it challenges the privatization of childhood experience, which takes place between two segregated spaces, the home and the school [...]; it argues that the educational value of the city does not lie in seeing, but in the use of urban spaces»[48]. Yet, Becchi adds,

> «the naïve hope that the problems of the city may be redeemed by the child together with pure-hearted adults [...] is not enough, and must be grounded in the awareness that the city is a public issue and therefore requires a commitment that is not merely educational, but also concerns political action»[49].

In Colin Ward's thought, Geddes's intuition of the city as an educational environment is radicalized in a libertarian and everyday sense: the daily use of the city—and in particular of the street as a space of play, encounter, and experimentation—assumes an important pedagogical value. For Ward, learning appears as an incidental and relational process that develops outside formal educational institutions and is grounded in the bodily experience of space. Knowledge does not precede action but is constructed through use, making evident how education and urban life are deeply intertwined: a further authoritative confirmation of the validity of the argument developed in this research.

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46 Paul Goodman, *Summerhill, esperienza di educazione incidentale, in Egle Becchi (ed.), Summerhill in discussione*, Franco Angeli, Milano 1975, p. 135.

47 Colin Ward, *Educazione incidentale*...cit., p. 238.

48 Egle Becchi, *A proposito di Colin Ward,* "Spazio e Società" n. 5, 1979, pp. 5-6.

49 ibidem.

## 5.3 Radical Pedagogies: *Global Tools* and the Heuristic Learning Promoted by Riccardo Dalisi

Atlas, pp. 150-151.

Within the broader panorama of radical pedagogies that emerged between the late 1960s and the early 1970s[50], Global Tools represents an experiment conducted by a group of Italian designers, architects, and artists aimed at rethinking the relationship between education, design, and society.

Officially founded on 12 January 1973 at the editorial office of *Casabella*, then directed by Alessandro Mendini, Global Tools aspired to become a «school of popular arts and techniques»[51], a system of workshops intended to activate learning processes derived from direct experience, manual making, and collective experimentation. Global Tools presented itself as a non-school, openly and explicitly anti-academic, rejecting the idea of the educational process as the mere vertical and one-directional transmission of disciplinary knowledge.

The early 1970s—the years in which the Global Tools project was conceived and developed—were marked by profound fractures at both the international and national levels. On the one hand, the first global energy crisis of 1973, a consequence of the Yom Kippur War, called into question the industrial and consumerist development model of the postwar period, generating a widespread ecological awareness also among architects, artists, and designers. On the other hand, the Italian cultural climate was crossed by a strong generational conflict following the events of 1968, intensified by political radicalization and by the violence of extra-parliamentary groups—the so-called *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead). In this context, architectural discipline increasingly appeared inadequate for interpreting the complexity of reality, rigidly anchored to academic and professional models perceived as self-referential and corporative.

Within this scenario, architects, artists, and designers associated with Radical Architecture—including members of Archizoom, Superstudio, UFO, 9999, Zziggurat, and Gianni Pettena—together with figures from the fields of art and criticism such as Luciano Fabro and Germano Celant, promoted a critical reflection on the discipline and on its institutions. Global Tools thus became part of a broader reorganization of design knowledge, proposing a radical questioning of the school as a place separated from life and of design as a specialist practice reserved for a few.

As announced in the pages of *Casabella* no. 377 (May 1973), in the article significantly titled *C'è un posto dove provare*[52] (There Is a Place to Experiment), Global Tools aimed to become an open space for rediscov-

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50 Beatriz Colomina, Ignacio G. Galán, Evangelos Kotsioris, Anna-Maria Meister (eds.), *Radical Pedagogies*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2022.

51 *Una scuola di arti e tecniche popolari*, typescript, 1972, Ugo La Pietra Archive, in Valerio Borgonuovo, Silvia Franceschini, eds., *Global Tools. When Education Coincides with Life. 1973–1975*, Nero, Rome, 2018, p. 33.

52 Ettore Sottsass jr, *C'è un posto dove provare*, in "Casabella" n. 377, maggio 1973, p. 7.

ering practices, materials, and behaviours outside the academic and productive system of architecture and design.

The cover of the same issue, a collage by Adolfo Natalini, depicts the Global Tools for the first time, superimposing Carlo Bachi's group photograph onto an aerial view of Florence, the city of origin for many of the protagonists of Radical Architecture. Thirty-one individuals appear in the photograph forming the emerging Global Tools collective: alongside Riccardo Dalisi, Ugo La Pietra, Gaetano Pesce, Gianni Pettena, Ettore Sottsass, and Remo Buti stand members of ARCHIZOOM ASSOCIATI (Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello, Massimo Morozzi, Dario Bartolini, Lucia Bartolini); members of the editorial staff of *Casabella* (Alessandro Mendini, Carlo Guenzi, Enrico Bona, Franco Raggi, Luciano Boschini); the members of 9999 (Giorgio Birelli, Carlo Caldini, Fabrizio Fiumi, Paolo Galli); Adalberto Dal Lago from *Rassegna*; representatives of SUPERSTUDIO (Pietro Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia); Carlo Bachi, Lapo Binazzi, and Titti Maschietto of U.F.O.; and Adalberto Breschi and Roberto Pecchioli of ZZIGGURAT.

Franco Raggi writes that Global Tools represents «the last act in the creative trajectory traced by the avant-garde of Italian Radical Architecture, which had originated in the mid-60's »[53]. Indeed, the museum and media recognition of Italian Radical Design—achieved with the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*[54]—acknowledged its theoretical, cultural, and aesthetic value, but also gradually neutralized its subversive charge, integrating it into institutional and disciplinary circuits. For this reason, Raggi identifies the experience of Global Tools as the final phase in the trajectory of radical avant-garde research.

With regard to the educational objectives of the initiative, we read that

> «such a school should implement in its functioning a wide range of innovative processes, both from the perspective of teaching methods and from that of its cultural content. A school in which all those simple techniques capable of developing the individual's creative faculties are learned, recorded, and practiced. In this sense, the school does not transmit a culture to be learned, but rather triggers a cultural process»[55].

The theoretical references of the programme are explicitly linked to the ideas of Ivan Illich: against an educational model based on the theoretical and ritualized transmission of knowledge, Global Tools affirmed the idea of a permanent and global education in which every everyday experience could become an opportunity for learning. As Beatriz Colomina has emphasized, Global Tools anticipated a conception of learning as a

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53 Franco Raggi, *Notes for an Inverse Ergonomics. the Body Group Seminars*, in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds), *Global Tools*... cit., p. 91.

54 *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design,* ed. Emilio Ambasz, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 26 May – 11 September 1972.

55 *Una scuola di arti* e *tecniche popolari,* dattiloscritto, 1972, Archivio Ugo La Pietra, in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools...,* cit., p. 33.

network of distributed practices—a web of relationships and exchanges that crosses places, bodies, and forms of knowledge, making it impossible to draw a clear distinction between education, life, and design[56]. In this sense, the city—and more broadly the lived environment—becomes an active educational environment, a space for experimentation and for the shared construction of knowledge.

In *Tools for Conviviality*[57] Ivan Illich, criticizing the capitalist system, proposed the revaluation of convivial tools—technologies and institutions that can be autonomously managed by individuals and communities. Illich's ideas also found precursors in the experiences of artistic and design avant-gardes that had questioned functionalism and the disciplinary legacy of the Bauhaus, reclaiming the value of manual making, direct experience, and experimentation as instruments of knowledge.

Within this context, the figure of Ettore Sottsass Jr. assumes particular relevance. Sottsass had participated in the *Laboratorio Sperimentale di Alba* of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus[58]. The movement was founded in Alba, in Piedmont, in 1954, following the meeting between Asger Jorn and Pinot Gallizio, and emerged as a polemical reaction against the Ulm School of Design directed by Max Bill, which was accused of subordinating artistic education to the demands of industry and the market. In the experimental laboratories of Alba—conceived as spaces for free and collective research—artists from different backgrounds gathered[59], asserting the autonomy of art, the importance of working with one's hands, and the value of direct experience as tools of knowledge and as a critique of the technicism of design.

It is possible that from this experience Sottsass derived the anti-academic and anti-functionalist idea of the laboratory, grounded in experimentation, unpredictability, and the contamination between disciplines—an approach that stood in clear contrast to the conception of architecture as a rational and normative body of knowledge.

Global Tools was conceived as a school in which the modes of learning and the tools through which learning occurs coincide with the direct experience of practices and working environments. It was defined as «a school of formation rather than of information»[60], rejecting the idea of the one-directional transmission of knowledge in favour of learning through experience and autonomous discovery—that is, heuristic learning.

Within these laboratories, techniques and modes of learning emerge through dialogue with the future participants, conceived as co-experi-

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56 Beatriz Colomina, *Learning from Global Tools*, in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools...* cit., pp. 5-6.

57 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality,* William Collins Sons, Glasgow 1973.

58 Ettore Sottsass, *Per un Bauhaus immaginista contro un Bauhaus immaginario*, in E. Sottsass, *Per qualcuno può essere lo spazio*, Adelphi, Milano 2017, pp. 169-179.

59 Members of the COBRA Group (Appel, Corneille), artists of the Nuclear Movement (Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo), together with the artists Matta, Emilio Scanavino, and Lucio Fontana.

60 *Una scuola di arti e tecniche popolari,* undated document (1972), Archivio Ugo La Pietra, in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools*… cit., p. 33.

menters. As Adolfo Natalini, Roberto Pecchioli, and Remo Buti wrote in *Tipologia Didattica. Nota 2*:

> «1. It should be understood that this is not a matter of teaching by transfusion, nor perhaps even of teaching: the activity whose modes we are trying to define here consists of nothing more than the cataloguing of autodidactic possibilities.
>
> 2. The drawing up of didactic typologies should be the result of meetings and discussions among all the components of Global Tools: in particular it is only together with the recipients (students, co-experimenters...) that the most appropriate forms should from time to time be decided on»[61].

In the following note, Natalini, Pecchioli, and Buti list the instruments that may be employed in processes of self-learning—those natural, urban, and human "tools" through which, and with which, individuals can autonomously construct their own knowledge. It is particularly interesting to observe how the use and reappropriation of the city, its institutions, and its spaces—together with what they describe as the «proxemics of learning, that is, the spaces, conditions, and interpersonal distances»[62] —are understood by the members of the school as educational tools.

The organization of the school itself also reflected an approach opposed to conventional disciplinary divisions. In December 1973 five thematic groups for research and experimentation were established—*Body, Construction, Communication, Survival,* and *Theory*—each conceived as a temporary laboratory lasting a maximum of eight days, during which facilitators and participants jointly developed practices, tools, and forms of knowledge.

The *Communication Group*, composed of Ugo La Pietra, Franco Vaccari, Guido Arra and Gianni Pettena, focused on the critical analysis of mass media and their effects on the perception of the social and urban environment. The objective was not the production of messages, but rather the questioning of dominant communicative mechanisms and the activation of spontaneous, participatory and non-mediated forms of communication. Communication was understood as an environmental and political practice capable of generating collective awareness and stimulating active participation in cultural processes, in opposition to the passivity induced by mass media.

The *Body Group*, composed of Alessandro Mendini, Gaetano Pesce, Franco Raggi and Davide Mosconi, placed the human body at the centre of its investigation as a primary instrument of knowledge, measure and relation with space. In opposition to a functionalist or ergonomic conception, the body was explored in its potentials prior to social codifica-

Atlas, pp. 152-153.

61 Adolfo Natalini, Roberto Pecchioni, Remo Buti, *Tipologia Didattica: Nota 2/Didactic Typology: nota 2*, in "Casabella" n. 379, July 1973, p. 45.

62 ibidem.

tion, through actions, exercises, performances and experimental devices. The body was thus understood as the means through which processes of awareness concerning the use of space could be activated, challenging the separation between subject and environment.

The *Construction Group*, which included Andrea Branzi, Riccardo Dalisi and members of Superstudio, focused instead on the relationship between design, technique and material. Through practices of self-construction and the use of simple or poor materials, the group aimed to reconsider the value of manual making and to overcome the abstraction of drawing as the dominant instrument of design. Attention was directed more toward the process than the result, toward the experimentation with elementary techniques and toward the possibility of eliminating the technological, cultural and methodological filters that separate the individual from the act of building.

The *Survival Group* expressed particularly clearly the relationship between Global Tools and the historical climate of the energy crisis and the Cold War. Its activities revolved around themes such as self-sufficiency, the use of minimal resources, techniques of adaptation and alternative ways of living, often drawing on extra-academic and vernacular forms of knowledge. Survival was not understood in an emergency sense, but as a radical critique of the productive and consumerist models of industrial society, and as an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the individual, the environment and labour.

Finally, the *Theory Group*, composed of Lapo Binazzi, Remo Pecchioli and Remo Buti, was tasked with questioning the very meaning of theory within a project that rejected the separation between thought and action. Far from being an abstract or systematic apparatus, theory was instead understood as a reflection emerging from experience, behaviours and practices. Through analogies, conceptual games and references to fields apparently unrelated to design, the *Theory Group* aimed to destabilize disciplinary codes and to redefine the role of critical thought within a non-academic form of education.

Taken together, the five groups constituted a pedagogical dispositif in which learning coincided with experience and collective experimentation. *Global Tools* thus appears not as an alternative school in the sense of proposing a new and different model, but rather as a field of self-educational possibilities.

The centrality of the body, the rejection of the vertical didactic model, and the appeal to elementary devices are the reasons why the experience of *Global Tools* occupies a significant place within the present dissertation.

Atlas, pp. 154-157.

## Riccardo Dalisi's Workshops

Within the activities developed by the *Construction Group* of Global Tools, the experience carried out by Riccardo Dalisi in the Rione Traiano district of Naples assumes a central role for the radical way in which it places the body and the physical experience of urban space at the centre of educational and design processes.

An architect, designer and professor at the University Federico II of Naples, Dalisi initiated between 1971 and 1974 a series of experimental workshops in the Neapolitan neighbourhood, involving children, university students and local residents. In doing so, he effectively moved teaching activities outside the university and treated the city itself as a genuine educational environment.

As early as 1960 he had envisioned «university fragments disseminated throughout the territory precisely in order to implement this close relationship between University, City and Territory»[63]: in Rione Traiano the streets and basements were transformed into real classrooms. The idea of a «city as an educational environment»[64] outlines an educational process grounded in direct engagement with the complexity of reality.

Rione Traiano is a district of Naples built at the end of the 1950s by the CEP — Coordinamento Edilizia Popolare. By the early 1970s the neighbourhood was marked by conditions of decay, abandonment, overcrowding and a lack of services and transport, to the point that it was described as one of the «most degraded districts of the Phlegraean area in Naples»[65]. Dalisi would later write in the journal *Spazio e Società*, edited by Giancarlo De Carlo:

> «Subsidized neighbourhoods are conceived, designed and built with the conviction that public administration has already done enough by providing housing under favourable conditions to social groups that cannot face the prices imposed by the free market. Everything is therefore focused on economic efficiency, and the way to increase it is to reduce land costs by locating them in the most depressed peripheries and to reduce construction costs by standardizing typological choices and technological solutions. [...] Modern architecture has ignored the child as a protagonist, as the one who "makes" the city, no less than others»[66].

The spaces of the peripheral city thus become places for manual and workshop-based activity: in the streets children, university students from architectural design courses, mothers and elderly residents draw, build small objects, sculptures and pieces of furniture using recycled materials. In the streets they produce

> «furniture and chairs made with pieces of wood never fitted together, string and plywood springs (in a thousand combinations) [...] with wood scraps (a practice already familiar to children, in any case innate to them from earliest childhood and which, among underclass children, seems to continue until the age of ten or twelve). [...] The children of

63 Elisa Salvatori Vincitorio, *Intervista a Riccardo Dalisi,* in E. Salvatori Vincitorio, *Animazione e conoscenza*, Dedalo, Bari 1978, p. 98.

64 Riccardo Dalisi, *Forma (intervallo) spazio. La città e l'espansione dello spazio didattico*, Stamperia napoletana, Naples 1967, pp. 55-57.

65 Riccardo Dalisi, *Architettura d'animazione, cultura del proletariato e lavoro di quartiere a Napoli,* Carucci Editore, Naples, 1975, p. 19.

66 Riccardo Dalisi, *Traiano e Ponticelli (Napoli): il recupero della autoespressione,* in "Spazio e Società" n.2, April 1978, pp. 41-70.

> Traiano produced drawings on paper, on fabric, on wood; mothers and sisters embroidered them, choosing the colours and then sewing»[67].

Between 1971 and 1973 Dalisi almost completely suspended his professional practice and moved a large part of his university teaching activities to the Traiano district, making teaching, research and urban intervention coincide. The workshops were not economically supported by any external institution, but sustained themselves through forms of self-financing: the sale of the objects produced, participation in competitions, and the use of Dalisi's own university resources.

Writing about the Neapolitan workshops in *Casabella*, Andrea Branzi observed:

> «it is a scientific experiment because it aims to verify experimentally the liberation of collective creativity, without directing it toward the formulation of general principles, but as a pure and simple state of natural energy»[68].

In Traiano first, and later in Ponticelli, children were not passive recipients of an educational action but active subjects who, through the body and through play, explored urban space, reinterpreted its uses and experimented with its possibilities. Learning thus occurred through direct experience: manual making constituted the core of this pedagogical practice. The use of poor and recycled materials — wood, metal, wires, cardboard — did not respond only to economic necessity but became a deliberate methodological choice. Building with one's hands meant restoring an active role to the body within the learning process, reactivating a tactile and sensory knowledge that precedes and accompanies abstract thought, as this study seeks to demonstrate.

## The Value of Physical Experience and the Body

Dalisi's practice stands in profound continuity with the reflections of Patrick Geddes and Colin Ward on the city as an educational infrastructure: knowledge is not constructed through disciplinary abstraction, but through the use, traversal and transformation of space. The city thus becomes an active agent of learning, capable of generating knowledge through gesture, movement and the bodily relationship with space.

> «Every year hundreds of ***scugnizzi***, in the streets of the most diverse neighbourhoods of Naples and Campania, draw together with my architecture students. For both groups this is already participation. Various materials of an unusual relationship pass from one to the other. Children are an authentic participatory channel, through which all the problems of the neighbourhoods run quickly and reveal themselves with particular clarity. Adults too have been involved and, not least (1975), the

67 ibidem.

68 Andrea Branzi, *Tecnica Povera/Minimal technology*, in "Casabella", no. 385, January 1974, p. 6

elderly workers of Ponticelli. And yet the availability and mobility that distinguish children from adults facilitate and make possible relations with all the presences of the neighbourhood. [...] The child is a supporting pillar of society. He "makes" the city no less than the adult. In the sub-proletarian neighbourhoods it is he who dominates; in the residential area he is the primary actor»[69].

The theme of physical experience and the use of the body unites the research and experimentation of all the Global Tools groups: a "non-school" that sought to «trigger creative and cognitive processes [...] attempting to stimulate in participants the reappropriation of their own creative individuality through manual acts with eccentric yet illuminating outcomes. The theme of the "body" appeared from the very beginning as one of the most fertile in stimulating alternative investigations and proposals»[70].

The workshops activated by the different groups privileged action and behaviour even before conceptual reflection: thus the body and physical exploration became the primary instruments of inquiry. In this regard, in the report of the *Body Group* from October 1974, signed by Andrea Branzi, Gaetano Pesce, Alessandro Mendini, Franco Raggi and Ettore Sottsass, we read:

«the body as a primary instrument. In conventional learning processes (the ways through which experience is systematized through notions), the body is considered an impediment or in any case a negligible factor, whose conscious use is not taken into account. In religion the body is experienced as a fault; freeing oneself from its physicality is considered an achievement»[71].

If Dalisi employs the body and immediate making within urban space, the Milanese designers employ the body by constraining it through ingenious devices—stockings, extensions, objects that are useless from a functional point of view yet capable of activating particular bodily awareness. By appropriating and reinterpreting the proposals of *arte povera*, body art and conceptual art, the *Body Group* placed bodily experience at the centre as a primary instrument of knowledge and of relation with space, anticipating themes that would traverse many later experiences of experimental and participatory pedagogy.

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69 Riccardo Dalisi, *Traiano e Ponticelli (Napoli): il recupero della autoespressione,* in "Spazio e Società", no. 2, April 1978, pp. 41–70.

70 Franco Raggi, *Notes for an Inverse. The Body Group Seminars*, in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools... cit.,* p. 93.

71 Global Tools, *Gruppo Corpo, Relazione di: Branzi, Pesce, Mendini, Sottsass,* in V. Borgonuovo, S. Franceschini (eds), *Global Tools... cit.,* p. 96.

## Epilogue

Like many radical experiences of those years, Global Tools was marked by strong internal tensions and by a structural paradox highlighted by Colomina: the attempt to dismantle traditional educational institutions inevitably produces new institutional forms and new organizational arrangements. The progressive bureaucratization of the collective, together with economic and managerial difficulties and the impossibility of establishing the courses on a stable basis, led to the closure of the experiment in 1975. Nevertheless, the significance of Global Tools lies less in its operational outcomes than in its capacity to critically redefine the field of architectural pedagogy, opening the way to a conception of education as a situated, bodily and environmental practice. In continuity with the reflections of Geddes and Ward, Global Tools thus proposes a vision of the city as a diffuse educational environment, in which learning emerges from the direct interaction between individuals, spaces and everyday practices.

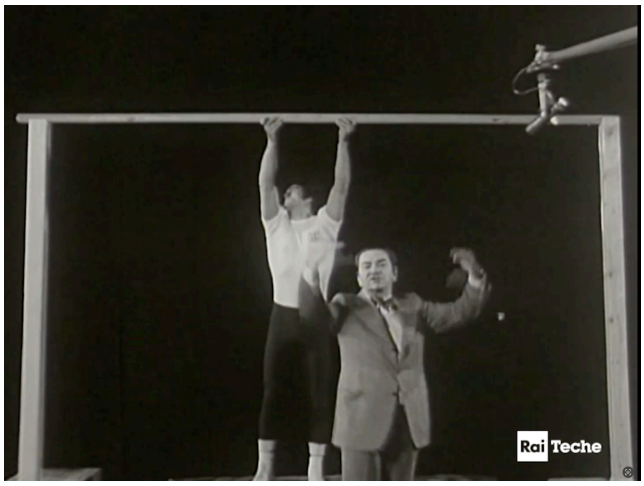
Read in sequence, the contributions of Patrick Geddes, Colin Ward and Global Tools outline a pedagogical genealogy that runs through the twentieth century and that recognises in the city—and in particular in the ordinary space of the street—a privileged place of learning. Beyond the differences of context, approach and political orientation, these experiences share a conception of education as a situated and non-formalized process, grounded in direct experience, in making and in the active involvement of the body within lived space. In this perspective, learning results from the observation, use and transformation of the everyday environment. The city thus appears not as a simple backdrop to educational practices, but as a pedagogical device capable of activating forms of incidental, critical and collective knowledge, challenging the separation between design and use, between education and life, and between built space and experience.

Frames from the series Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura, cura ed and presented by Bruno Zevi as part of the television programme Habitat. L'uomo, l'ambiente, conceived by Giulio Macch October 1974, RAI Second Channel.









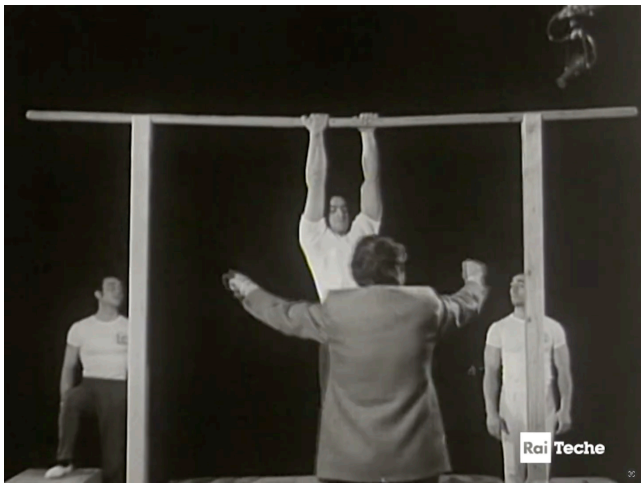















# 6. Learning Space: The Use of Mass Media and a Simplified Language

After investigating the value of bodily experience and the role of the built environment—whether designed or not designed—as a means for acquiring spatial awareness, this chapter focuses on another crucial step in the research: the transmission of architectural and spatial knowledge to civil society.

The quality of the built environment also depends on the capacity of a community to understand, interpret, and critically evaluate the space it inhabits. Education in space cannot be limited to direct experience alone; it also requires forms of cultural mediation capable of making complex concepts accessible to a non-specialist public.

In the decades following the Second World War, within a context marked by postwar reconstruction and the formation of new democratic structures, several architects and critics consciously assumed this responsibility. Bruno Zevi, Jaap Bakema, and Yona Friedman each simplified the communicative modes through which architectural and spatial notions could be conveyed, employing different channels of dissemination. Through the general press, television, and the invention of essential graphic grammars, they transformed specialized knowledge into a public discourse. Zevi adopted a clear and strongly critical argumentative style in the pages of widely circulated weekly magazines and in television programmes; Bakema used the televised lecture and the blackboard drawing to speak of a "love for space"; Friedman developed a pictographic system and illustrated manuals that reduce text to a minimum and privilege visual immediacy.

In all three cases, the simplification of language does not correspond to a reduction of content, but rather to its reorganization: architecture is explained through examples, models, images, gestures, and metaphors. It is both a pedagogical and a political operation, aimed at abolishing the distance between experts and citizens.

The chapter therefore analyses these experiences as significant moments in the democratization of architectural discourse, reflecting on the role of media and on the construction of a language capable of making space understandable, debatable, and shareable.

## 6.1 Bruno Zevi: Militant Criticism and Mass Media

Bruno Zevi (Rome, 1918–2000) was an architect, historian, architectural critic, and political figure, and one of the most influential voices in Italian and international architectural debate in the second half of the twentieth century.

As a militant critic, he placed his voice at the service of civil society, conceiving architecture as a cultural and political matter. For Zevi, dissemination was a fundamental tool of civic education and social change, to which he devoted himself continuously and consistently. As a gifted communicator, he skilfully employed all the mass media of the postwar period in order to share and debate architectural and spatial issues—even with audiences beyond the circle of specialists.

Enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture at "La Sapienza" University in 1936, he was forced to leave Italy three years later following the promulgation of the racial laws. He first moved to England and then to the United States, where he obtained a Bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1942 under the supervision of Walter Gropius.

It was in the United States that he came into contact with the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and with an understanding of architecture intimately connected to spatial experience and to the democratic dimension of design. Architecture, in this perspective, is a living organism and a space to be experienced. This approach, which intertwines ethics and perception, would accompany Zevi throughout his critical activity.

After returning to Italy, Zevi began an intense editorial, academic, and political activity, which saw him engaged not only as a historian and theorist but also as a public intellectual. A professor first in Venice and later in Rome, founder—among other initiatives—of the APAO (Association for Organic Architecture) and the INARCH (National Institute of Architecture), director of journals and newspaper columnist, Zevi was a critic capable of moving with ease between the academic, editorial, and political spheres.

Already during his student years in the United States, he experimented with radio communication as a political instrument, conducting intense anti-fascist propaganda:

> «Zevi went on air for the first time in early February 1941. [...] The need to communicate political topics to a broad and unprepared public—often poorly informed on the subject—pushed him to develop a colloquial, synthetic, and incisive form of expression. This was quite different from the modes he had previously adopted in the few writings and articles he had published up to that point»[1].

The present section focuses precisely on this aspect: the communicative ability with which Zevi used the press, publishing, and above all television to disseminate architectural knowledge within postwar Italian society.

1 Roberto Dulio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi,* Laterza, Bari 2008, p. 15.

## The Ignorance of Architecture

In February 1948, Bruno Zevi published *Saper vedere l'architettura. Saggio sull'interpretazione spaziale dell'architettura (Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture)*[2] with Einaudi, a text that, more than any other of his writings, achieved extraordinary international circulation. The essay «influenced the first steps of generations of aspiring architects also in the United States and Croatia, in Spain and China; the Hebrew edition is preceded by an introduction by Martin Buber»[3].

In *Saper vedere l'architettura*, Zevi begins a systematic reflection on the ways of observing, understanding, and interpreting architecture and its history, placing the experience of space at the centre as the fundamental critical key. «From this work onward, the pragmatic mode of argumentation that Zevi had learned in the United States began to combine with the critical framework he had developed before leaving Italy»[4].

It is therefore no coincidence that in the first chapter, entitled Architecture-The Unknown (in the original Italian edition *L'ignoranza dell'architettura*) Zevi denounces a structural gap in Italian culture, and more broadly in Western culture: while music, painting, sculpture, literature, and cinema enjoy a stable presence in the press and in public debate, architecture is almost entirely excluded from it. Yet it is the art that most deeply affects the collective experience of dwelling, shaping both the urban and the natural landscape and influencing the ways in which we live and move.

> «While everyone is free to shut off the radio, to walk out on concerts, to shun the movies and the theater, and to stop reading a book, no one can close his eyes to the buildings which form the setting of city life and which set man's stamp on the countryside»[5].

Zevi also emphasizes the need to develop a bodily awareness of spatial experience—an experience that includes the fourth dimension, namely the time of movement and the duration of direct experience. To understand architecture means to live it, to perceive its spatial sequences, its voids, and its dynamic tensions. It is not sufficient, Zevi writes, to extend to architecture the evaluative methods associated with the visual arts; architecture is a spatial and temporal phenomenon.

However, the elaboration of a critical method is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by a systematic effort of dissemination. If architecture inevitably conditions collective life, then society must be placed in

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2 Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura. Saggio sull'interpretazione spaziale dell'architettura*, Einaudi, Torino 1948; English edition: *Bruno Zevi, Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture*, ed. Joseph A. Barry, Horizon Press, New York, 1957.

3 Francesco Dal Co, *Nell'età dei Patriarchi. Bruno Zevi, ottant'anni,* in "Casabella" n. 653, February 1998, p. 3.

4 Roberto Dulio, *Introduzione a* ...cit., p. 67.

5 Bruno Zevi, *Architecture as Space*... cit., p. 15

a position to understand and judge it. Architecture must be brought out of specialist manuals and inserted into the circuit of general culture: in the press, in radio programmes, in television broadcasts, and in affordable editorial series. The public's lack of interest in architecture is due, in part, to the inability of critics and historians to convey an accessible and comprehensible message capable of «spreading the love of architecture, if not to the general public, then at least among the masses, or at least to the cultivated [...] To look at architecture with any system and intelligence one must already have a lively interest in the subject and be provided with a good deal of good will»[6].

It is precisely in the development of this strategy—first through printed media and later through television—that the specificity of Zevi's contribution emerges in relation to the other protagonists of architectural communication in the second half of the twentieth century.

## Zevi as Editorialist of "L'Espresso"

Bruno Zevi wrote in *Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture*.

> «whereas every selfrespecting newspaper has regular coverage of music, theater, movies and, at the very least, a weekly art column, architecture remains the great unknown»[7],

A few years later, that observation would become a programme of action. In 1954, when Gualtiero Jacopetti and Antonio Gambino asked him to contribute two or three articles to the new weekly magazine "Cronache"—which from 1955 would take the name "L'Espresso"—Zevi refused the offer of an occasional collaboration and responded with a counterproposal: «Thank you for the offer, but I cannot accept. Two or three articles are of no use. I am willing to collaborate with you only for a systematic column, the kind that no one has ever edited before, similar to those dedicated to literature, cinema, theatre, or the visual arts. Take it or leave it»[8].

The request presupposed that architecture was a matter of permanent interest, worthy of a stable presence within the principal circuit through which Italian public opinion was formed. It was a political act as much as a professional one—an entirely unprecedented initiative within the national context.

An agreement was eventually reached. Jacopetti also decided that once a month—every four articles—the column would occupy a double-page spread, as was the case throughout the entire period of *Cronache*, from 18 May 1954 to 27 September 1955. With the birth of "L'Espresso", however, the situation changed. Arrigo Benedetti considered architectural photographs too "static" and intended to eliminate them. Zevi

6 ivi p. 16.

7 ivi p. 15.

8 Bruno Zevi, *Zevi su Zevi. Architettura come profezia,* Marsilio, Venice 2018, p. 75.

protested openly: speaking about architecture without seeing it made no sense. Adriano Olivetti eventually intervened to resolve the issue. From that moment onward, photographs gradually acquired more space within the column.

The weekly column curated by Zevi uninterruptedly—apart from a brief interruption in 1967[9]—represents an almost unique case in the history of contemporary architecture. For nearly half a century[10], a critic intervened regularly in a widely circulated general-interest weekly magazine, bringing architectural questions into the national political and cultural debate.

"L'Espresso" was a weekly magazine oriented toward investigative journalism and political debate, one of the principal platforms for shaping public opinion in republican Italy. For this reason, Zevi regarded it as an ideal instrument, capable of reaching a broad and non-specialist audience.

From its pages, Zevi launched sharply critical judgments against any form of architecture he perceived as authoritarian or repressive—from the EUR district to the Vittoriano, from rigid symmetry to built spaces that reproduced hierarchical models—thus articulating a political and cultural vision of architecture far broader than a purely formal analysis.

The titles of his columns—often provocative, sometimes ironic, always unequivocal—contributed to constructing this militant stance: they were not technical reviews but critical readings capable of intertwining urban planning, politics, architecture, and history.

This position, first developed through the printed press, would later find a further extension in the medium of television, as effectively shown in the documentary *Bruno Zevi. Architettura come profezia* by Luca Guido[11], which gathers excerpts from programmes, interviews, and appearances in which Zevi appears not as an academic, but as a host and passionate communicator, constantly engaged in transforming architecture into a matter of public discourse.

Atlas, pp. 158-160.

### *Habitat: L'Uomo, l'Ambiente*. A Programme by Giulio Macchi

To truly understand how Zevi translates criticism into dissemination, it is necessary to follow him within the televisual apparatus, where time is limited, the audience is generalist, and argumentation must become immediately visible and understandable. In this sense, *Habitat: l'uomo, l'ambiente*—the first Italian television programme to address environmental issues, conceived and directed by Giulio Macchi—represents a privileged

9 There was only one interruption in the writing of the column: between 18 June and 19 November 1967, L'Espresso appeared to adopt an anti-Israeli position. Zevi resigned with a very forceful letter. Eugenio Scalfari reacted with great fairness: the column, he told him, was his and would not be entrusted to anyone else. They invited him to wait, assuring him that the newspaper was not at all against Israel and that Gambino's positions were personal. Zevi reciprocated this loyalty by refusing offers from other weekly magazines and eventually resumed his collaboration with L'Espresso through Gianni Corbi; see Bruno Zevi, Zevi su Zevi. Architettura come…, cit., p. 75.

10 Between 1971 and 1981, the publisher Laterza collected the entire series of Cronache di architettura in twenty-four volumes, together with an index volume.

11 The author wishes to thank Luca Guido for making his documentary available for this research.

observatory. Not only because Zevi appears in it several times, but also because the programme itself was conceived as an experimental format capable of bringing together environment, city, science, and visual culture, precisely that "total" horizon within which architecture ceases to be a discipline reserved for specialists.

Journalist, author, and director, Giulio Macchi has been recognised as a central and pioneering figure in the field of scientific television dissemination in Italy. Between the late 1960s and the following decade, Macchi promoted unprecedented forms of collaboration between public television and the world of contemporary art, involving numerous artists in the design of sets and opening sequences, thereby transforming television space into a site of experimentation and dialogue between different languages. The sets of his programmes were designed, among others, by Mario Ceroli, Tano Festa, Gino Marotta, and Giorgio De Chirico[12].

The sets of *Habitat* function as environmental installations: those designed by Marotta consist of artificial vegetal forms made of plastic material that materialise an artificial habitat. The set thus renders physically perceptible the tension between natural and artificial, between environment and design[13].

In several episodes in the early 1970s, *Habitat* hosted segments curated by Zevi, explicitly conceived as lessons in reading space. Particularly emblematic is the short series already announced in 1972 as *La poetica degli angoli* ("The Poetics of Corners"), broadcast on the second channel of RAI in prime time[14]. The point is significant: Zevi was invited to construct a didactic format within a generalist television programme.

### *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura:* Contents of the Episodes

Two years later, in October 1974, again for *Habitat*, Zevi curated the series of episodes *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura* (*The Modern Language of Architecture*). The studio was arranged like a classroom: a worktable on which models and modular solids were placed, while behind him a projector and screen displayed images and film sequences. Zevi worked like a lecturer: he alternated the gesture of assembling and disassembling models with the projection of images, using the three-dimensional object to convey concepts that might otherwise have remained abstract. Among the themes addressed were the inventory of functions; the critique of the residential building conceived as a sum of regular box-like elements; the

12 Chiara Mari, *Giorgio De Chirico e Giulio Macchi: la collaborazione per la trasmissione Rai Habitat,* in "METAFISICA. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 14/16, 2017, pp. 253-262

13 Chiara Mari, *Giulio Macchi, autore televisivo in dialogo con l'arte contemporanea*, in "Comunicazioni Sociali. Journal of Media, performing arts and cultural studies", n.3, 2016, pp. 503-519.

14 «HABITAT (Second Channel RAI, 9:15 p.m.). Two segments are scheduled for this evening. The first opens a short three-episode series curated by Professor Bruno Zevi entitled La poetica degli angoli (The Poetics of Corners), an examination of the "dynamic" function of the corners of buildings in a city. The second is an investigation into new hospital technologies, during which a discussion takes place on how new hospitals should be built (when they are actually built)». Quoted from the column Oggi vedremo in L'Unità, 11 January 1972, https://archivio.unita.news/assets/main/1972/01/11/page_007.pdf, accessed February 2026.

decomposition of the "box" introducing the fourth dimension; the temporalisation of space; the Michelangelesque revolution; and the discussion of the structural behaviour of cantilevered elements, translated into a physical demonstration.

*The Modern Language of Architecture* is presented as a system of invariants, each demonstrated through models, objects, and images. The starting point is the "inventory" of functions. Modern architecture is defined as a language based on legible correspondences between space and use. The building is not composed starting from the façade but from inhabited space: openings are not aligned according to symmetry but vary according to function. The window of the entrance, that of the staircase, and that of a principal room assume different proportions and orientations. The form of the envelope is therefore a consequence of the internal organisation.

Commenting on a model of a residential building placed on the table, Zevi criticises architecture conceived as a succession of boxes. The superimposition of identical prisms is interpreted as the expression of a static way of thinking, incapable of responding to the variety of human behaviours. The alternative is an organic architecture capable of articulating different volumes, generating a plastic dialectic able to express diverse ways of living.

The reference to *Fallingwater* by Frank Lloyd Wright reinforces this idea: asymmetry, the tension between vertical and horizontal elements, and matter projecting into space and reconnecting with nature are presented as a synthesis of modern invariants. The building does not exhaust itself in a frontal view but unfolds in time and requires an experience through corners and sequences, Zevi explains while commenting on the images and films projected on the screen.

Handling a dismountable model—at an approximate scale of 1:20—Zevi asks:

> «Why must a building be constituted as a box? What is a box? Why can it not be dismantled? Why can we not decompose the box into the planes that form it? Why can we not remove the ceiling, then remove a wall, another wall, and so on, finally breaking the boxing-in of human behaviour?»[15].

He then freely recomposes the model, generating openings and intersections that produce a dynamic perception of space. The fourth dimension—time—enters the project: form is determined by a plurality of paths.

In the Barcelona Pavilion by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe this logic finds exemplary expression: surfaces that slide beyond the perimeter, walls that extend into open space, and a continuity between interior and exterior. Architecture becomes a system of autonomous planes in relation.

One of the most incisive moments from a didactic point of view con-

15 Bruno Zevi, *Il linguaggio moderno dell'architettura,* in *Habitat. L'uomo, l'ambiente* di Giulio Macchi, October 1974, RAI Teche.

cerns the fifth invariant, namely the involvement of the entire architectural organism in the structural play. Zevi addresses the issue not through abstract diagrams but through a physical demonstration. A beam is placed on two supports positioned at its ends; an athlete hangs from the centre, causing a pronounced deflection. The conclusion is immediate: such a configuration requires a more massive beam, which is uneconomical and wastes material.

By modifying the position of the supports—bringing them closer together and leaving portions of the beam cantilevered—the situation changes radically. When the load is applied through the athlete, the central deflection is reduced; by adding weight to the lateral cantilevers—asking two additional athletes to hang from the wooden beam—the stresses counterbalance each other. The experiment visually demonstrates that the distribution of supports influences structural efficiency and that the cantilever is not a formal caprice but the logical outcome of a more effective management of forces. Translated into building practice, this principle implies moving the columns back from the corners of the volume. Freeing the corner makes it possible to design transparent walls and spatial continuity. Modern steel and reinforced-concrete structures favour cantilevers, canopies, and balconies: structural reasoning becomes a compositional device. Structural behaviour does not remain concealed but participates in the definition of space. In support of this argument, Zevi refers to Buckminster Fuller's geodesic structures and Frei Otto's lightweight membranes as examples of the integration between form and statics.

The experiment demonstrating the deformation of the beam possesses extraordinary cognitive immediacy. Zevi demystifies technique: on the one hand, structural behaviour is not an esoteric knowledge reserved for engineers but an observable, understandable, almost intuitive phenomenon. On the other, he shows that form and economy are inseparable: a more rational structural configuration produces not only material savings and economic efficiency but also new spatial possibilities, such as the free corner or the pronounced cantilever.

For the sixth invariant—the temporalisation of space—Zevi proceeds to explain, through models, balloons, strips of paper, and photographs, the spatiality of the Pantheon, Hadrian's Villa, and the catacombs, understood as systems of paths that introduce a dynamic conception of architectural experience. The Christian basilica mediates between a longitudinal axis and a static structure; Gothic architecture intensifies the conflict between vertical and horizontal direction. In medieval urban space, as in Piazza del Campo in Siena, the enclosure breaks with classical rigidity.

Finally, the seventh and last invariant—the functional reintegration of the city—challenges the modern zoning of urban space. Here too Zevi, using models and solids of different sizes and materials, seeks to explain that residence, work, and commerce should not remain separated into rigid compartments. The example of *Habitat '67* by Moshe Safdie, together with that of multifunctional buildings, demonstrates the possibility of superimposing functions and generating continuous vitality. The city must be integrated, just like the life it hosts.

*Habitat* thus offers Bruno Zevi the opportunity to present to a wide audience the concepts expressed in *Saper vedere l'architettura* and in his other writings, transforming them into a sequence of guided experiences. The result is a form of communication that, while maintaining Zevi's characteristic vocabulary—even when it is sharp or polemical—becomes accessible because it proceeds through visible actions and simple demonstrations.

Atlas, p. 161.

## *Cantiere Aperto*: Renzo Piano's Lessons on *Habitat*

The trajectory opened by Bruno Zevi's televised lessons finds, only a few years later, a significant point of continuity in the *Habitat* episodes curated by Renzo Piano.

In 1979 the programme hosted *Cantiere Aperto* (*Open Construction Site*), a cycle of ten episodes conceived and presented by Piano with texts and screenplay by Magda Arduino[16]. The young architect arrived on television after the experience of the Centre Pompidou—designed with Richard Rogers—and after the *Laboratori di Quartiere* promoted with UNESCO. In this case as well, the television medium was conceived not as a showcase but as a pedagogical device.

If Zevi had made visible the spatial and structural behaviour of modern architecture through models and demonstrations, Piano addressed construction as a process. The declared objective was «to restore the relationship between users and builders», demystifying the apparent inaccessibility of technical knowledge. The episodes reconstruct historical construction sites—such as those of medieval cathedrals—in order to present them as places where design and manual work coincide, where the master builder is at once designer, builder, and inventor of tools.

Here too the discourse relies on prototypes built live: trusses lightened with steel cables, emergency shelters made from two sheets of plywood stiffened through tension, models of jute structures or balloon-frame systems assembled in front of the camera. The principle is the same that animated Zevi's demonstration with the beam and the athletes: making structural behaviour intelligible through visual and physical experience. Construction is understood as a set of verifiable relationships. As Piano himself states:

> «The knowledge of specialists, science and technology must be brought to citizens so that they may have the possibility of using them to solve their problems and improve their living conditions»[17].

The media, therefore, are not ancillary tools but strategic sites for the transformation of the discipline. The press, radio, and television represent

16 Lorenzo Ciccarelli, *Cantiere Aperto*, Fondazione Renzo Piano, 2018, https://www.fondazionerenzopiano.org/it/page/cantiere-aperto/download-story, accessed February 2026.

17 ibidem.

spaces in which architecture can move beyond academic self-referentiality and assume a civic dimension. Dissemination becomes a responsibility: it means providing citizens with critical tools to read the space they inhabit, to recognise its political implications, and to evaluate its quality.

Zevi fought against that "ignorance of architecture" he had denounced since the immediate postwar years, turning the media into a field of cultural struggle. *Habitat* becomes the place where a broader project takes shape: transforming architecture into a matter of public debate, making it understandable, discussing it openly, and freeing it from the apparent neutrality of form and from the esoteric discussions of specialists. The dissemination of architectural knowledge thus becomes an integral part of the project itself, because only a society capable of critically reading its own space can aspire to transform it consciously.

## 6.2 Jaap Bakema and the Television Programme *van Stoel tot Stad*. From the Chair to the City. A Story of People and Space

*One of the principal characteristics of our time is the growing need, in all fields of social life, for better communication.*
Jaap Bakema, 1974

Atlas, pp. 162-163.

It is 21 October 1961[18]. Sunday evening. Dutch television broadcasts only one channel, in black and white. The young broadcaster AVRO (*Algemene Vereniging Radio Omroep*), the first Dutch public broadcasting association, had been established only ten years earlier.

Wearing a jacket and tie, left hand in his pocket and right hand holding a piece of chalk, facing the camera with his back to the blackboard, Jaap Bakema enters the living rooms of Dutch households.

The figure presented to families is that of a teacher rather than that of an architect. Yet by 1961 the office of Van den Broek and Bakema had already completed significant postwar works, such as the Lijnbaan shopping centre in Rotterdam and several residential developments, and had participated in important international projects.

At the beginning of the programme, the camera frames a chair and then a handwritten chalk title in cursive: *Van Stoel tot Stad* (*From the Chair to the City*). A few seconds later the shot cuts to a half-length view of Bakema, wearing a slightly mischievous smile, with a series of sketches visible on the blackboard behind him. In his hand he holds a piece of chalk with which he continues to play as he speaks:

> «Ladies and gentlemen, the story of the chair and the city is a difficult story. Difficult because, in reality, I do not wish to speak either about chairs or about cities, but about the space in which the chair and the city exist. [...] I wish to speak about love for space: you will understand how difficult such a subject may be, especially on a Sunday evening. Yet I believe it is worth doing. And I will gladly do it. For I have the impression that we are living in a historical moment in which love for space is missing»[19].

18 Jaap Bakema, *van Stoel tot Stad*, first episode, 21 October 1961. Cfr. Archive of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid), https://zoeken.beeldengeluid.nl/series/urn:vme:default:series:210160803002221633 1/urn:vme:default:program:210160805003900883 1?q=Bakema%2Bvan%2Bstoel%2Btot%2Bstad#210160805003900883 1, March 2026.

19 The two episodes of the programme are preserved in the archive of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (*Beeld & Geluid*). The first part of the programme is freely available at the following YouTube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPYRgLSYt6E, accessed March 2025.

These are the opening words of Jaap Bakema. The programme *Van Stoel tot Stad* was broadcast in two episodes between 1961 and 1962[20], and was directed by Leen Timp for AVRO, a liberal broadcaster rather than a left-wing one. As Dirk van den Heuvel recalls[21], Timp at the time was one of the leading Dutch television directors and was married to one of the most popular television presenters, Mies Bouwman. For the couple Bakema designed a single-family house (never realised) and later planned a rehabilitation centre for people with disabilities, built thanks to a television fundraising campaign organised and presented in 1962 by Mies Bouwman herself[22].

These details attest to the extent to which Bakema belonged to the Dutch postwar establishment. This position, combined with his remarkable communicative ability, enabled him to use different media to disseminate spatial issues, particularly to non-specialist audiences. Bakema was in fact able to rely on specialist journals, general newspapers, television, exhibitions, conferences, workshops, and video recordings in order to share urban and architectural choices with civil society, in accordance with a democratic vision of society.

### *Total Space and the Open Society According to Jaap Bakema*

As Francis Strauven observes, the work and thought of Jaap Bakema are closely connected to the principles and characteristics of Dutch society: «a society with a strong sense of the common good and a tradition of social cooperation rooted in Calvinist ethics; a country largely reclaimed from the sea and traditionally ruled by a strict geometric order, dictated by the requirements of drainage engineering»[23].

It was precisely in the Netherlands, in the northern region of Groningen where he was born and raised, that Bakema encountered some of his key theoretical references through the family of his wife, Sia van Borssum Waalkes: a family of doctors, teachers, and clergymen, through whom he came into contact with the theosophy of Krishnamurti and the anarchist ideas of Domela Nieuwenhuis[24]. Inspired by these currents of thought,

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20 The dates of the programme are not consistent across sources: in the book resulting from the transcription of the programme Bakema indicates the dates 1962–63, whereas the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision reports the dates 1961 and 1962.

21 Dirk van den Heuvel, professor at the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft, is the founder and director of the *Jaap Bakema Study Centre* at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. He was also co-curator of the Dutch Pavilion at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, dedicated to the Dutch architect. See Dirk van den Heuvel, Arjen Oosterman, Brendan Cormier (eds.), *Open: A Bakema Celebration,* Die Keure, Brugge 2014.

22 The television programme *Open het Dorp* (Open the Village) raised the funds necessary for the construction of the disability centre Het Dorp, designed by the Van den Broek and Bakema office to accommodate people with disabilities, in Dirk van den Heuvel, T*owards an Open Society. The unfinished work of Jaap Bakema*, in D. van den Heuvel, A. Oosterman, B. Cormier (eds.), *Open: A Bakema Celebration*… cit., p. 5.

23 Francis Strauven, *The Dutch Contribution: Bakema and Van Eyck,* in "Rassegna" 52 (The Last CIAMs), 1992, p. 48.

24 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of Relativity*, Architectura e Natura, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 215.

Bakema conceived the world as a space filled with energy: energy is the generative principle of everything, while space and human beings are its derivations.

> «Life is a flowing process. The ***panta rei*** of the Greeks was given a new meaning by Descartes and Einstein. Man increasingly aware of the tensions and the relationships which form the solid element, the matter»[25].

For Bakema, space is "total" in the sense that it globally contains the energy of all creation, of all existing matter: human beings are part of this whole, and architecture is the means through which relationships among individuals—and between each individual and "total space"—are expressed[26].

This theosophical vision of life and space «was not exclusive to Bakema; he builds on the earlier modernists, from Berlage and De Bazel to De Sijl, they were all interested to move beyond a Christian centred society to this pantheistic, holistic vision»[27].

Within this perspective, the architect, for Bakema, is a figure who must mediate and facilitate the collective understanding and use of space within a democratic and just society: the open society.

> «For Bakema the idea of the open society evolved around the relationship of the individual toward the larger whole, be it the neighborhood, the city, society itself, or what he called 'total space'. Architecture then was to enable the individual to become aware of his or her relationship to this larger whole, while the open society should be so generous and tolerant as to allow for the individual's self-realization»[28].

Thus, for society to be truly democratic, citizens must become more aware, on the one hand, of their own housing needs and, on the other, of the possibilities offered by construction and building practice. In this context, television becomes a useful instrument for Bakema to share and explain certain architectural issues.

Atlas, pp. 164-165.

## The Television Programme: Set and Contents

In 1964 the contents of the programme were transcribed by Bakema's daughter, Brita Bakema, in the book of the same title *Van Stoel tot Stad* (*From the Chair to the City*). The choice of subtitle is emblematic: *A Story of People and Space*[29].

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25 Jaap B. Bakema, *New Architecture and Freedom*, Forum n 2, 1948, pp.48-50.

26 See Francis Strauven, *Bakema and the Ideology of the 'Social-Cosmic-Spatial-Composition'*, in F. Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of*...cit., pp. 215–219.

27 Dirk van den Heuvel, personal communication, 11 August 2025.

28 Dirk van den Heuvel, *Towards an Open Society*… cit., p. 5

29 Jaap Bakema, *Van Stoel tot Stad. Een verhaal over mensen en ruimte* (From the Chair to the City. A Story of People and Space), W. De Haan N.V., Zeist–Antwerp, 1964.

Bakema speaks on television about people, space, ancestral spatial actions, construction techniques, and much more, addressing a general audience with direct language and easily understandable metaphors. He does so while drawing. In the afternoon he prepares on the blackboard the visual structure of the evening lecture: an organised sequence of sketches and diagrams that anticipates and supports the development of his discourse. A remarkable iconographic path which, besides facilitating the understanding of theoretical concepts, also prevents a potential risk: «otherwise they fear he might speak for too long».

The use of an organised visual structure—a narrative sequence of sketches that guides and sustains the discourse—constitutes a highly effective educational tool, capable of facilitating both comprehension and the memorisation of content. In this graphic device one can recognise Bakema's maieutic abilities. The architect often used drawings, sketches, and diagrams to communicate the project once it had been realised. In Bakema's archive, preserved at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, numerous drawings produced *a posteriori* are preserved, created to explain and communicate projects not only to clients but also to ordinary citizens. Dirk van den Heuvel refers to them as apocryphal drawings[30].

> «Drawing had a particular meaning for Bakema. Traditionally, it was the most emblematic form of the artistic creative process. As such, it had been cultivated by the nineteenth-century community of architects in their struggle for emancipation from the engineering profession. A symbol of the autonomous power of architectural design, drawing was consciously employed by Bakema and imbued with new meanings. Bakema drew less to design than to explain. Many of his drawings were not personal annotations but attempts to convey a message. They usually appeared in series and, in their explicit and narrative nature—often combining images and text—they recall the language of comics »[31].

Dirk van den Heuvel notes that « The comic strip comes in a bit later I'd say, many of these drawings were made by Frans Hooykaas». He also observes that «it is interesting to underline how Sia Bakema [the architect's wife] illustrated some of the early books devoted to the [postwar] reconstruction of Rotterdam, such as the one centred on the idea of the neighbourhood»[32].

Like a comic strip, Bakema's narrative begins on a Sunday evening, in prime time, on Dutch television.

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30 As Dirk van den Heuvel writes: "Notably too, many of the sketches in the archive are apocryphal, made after the projects were realized in order to explain the basic design concept and how it fit his larger view on the discipline as a whole and architecture's role in society", in Dirk van den Heuvel, *The elusive bigness of Bakema*, in Dirk van den Heuvel (ed.), *Bakema and the open society*, Archis, Amsterdam 2018, p. 21.

31 Jean-Paul Baeten, *Een telefooncel op de Lijnbaan. De traditie van een architectenbureau*, Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, Rotterdam 1995, p. 3.

32 Dirk van den Heuvel, personal communication, 11 August 2025.

A narrative that can be divided into two parts: the first concerns the history of the transformations of space by human beings over the centuries; the second actualises those same transformative actions and construction techniques through what might be described as a Warburgian persistence of images of memory.

The story told by Bakema is «a story that began a long time ago and that we still know today: I recall it to you in order to make you reflect», he says. It is a story that moves, precisely, from the chair to the city: from the act of sitting as an ancestral act of appropriation of space, to the shaping of both natural and urban landscapes. Space and human beings are closely linked through reciprocal relationships: environmental quality depends on the way in which we inhabit space and appropriate it, Bakema argues.

«We do not build only to protect ourselves from nature, but also to seek a relationship with that nature». Digging a circular pit in order to sit together, planting a tree, building a church—these are actions that human beings have repeated for millennia, actions that shape the environment and seek a relationship with it, especially when that environment is the flat Dutch landscape.

The relationship that human beings establish with space through architecture persists even after death: as in the case of the ancient Egyptians, who were able to create, through the construction of pyramids, a lasting relationship with the blinding light and infinite space of the desert.

The concept of total space as an energetic flow in continuous transformation appears to guide and underpin Bakema's communication. The representations on the blackboard are not only perspective and axonometric drawings—three-dimensional representations of space easily understandable to everyone—but also two-dimensional abstractions such as schematic plans and sections. Rapid strokes, yet clearly legible. And then the gaze directed toward the camera, so as not to lose visual contact with the viewer and turn communication into a difficult monologue. Once again, Bakema's educational and communicative abilities become evident.

The narrative focuses on construction techniques and structural systems and their progressive evolution. He speaks about the Roman arch and draws the voussoirs in axonometry. The vaulted system replaces the Greek trabeated one: two fluted columns, composed of stacked drums—which Bakema carefully sketches—support the weight of the architrave and allow the space of the portico to be freed. The space of the temple's pronaos, lacking spatial constraints, could thus be experienced in a fluid and open manner.

Human beings gradually learn to manage different spaces and different construction techniques. Thus, the trabeated and vaulted systems are combined in the construction of Romanesque churches—imposing structures when related to the human figure, which Bakema draws on the blackboard. Romanesque architecture, majestic in scale, allows people to move freely within the church interior beneath a timber truss roof. This construction system differs from the Gothic one, characterised by pointed arches and buttresses that make it possible to reach greater heights.

What might appear as obvious notions to a specialist audience are

not so for a general public. Bakema is well aware of this and communicates them on television using simple vocabulary and easily graspable metaphors. Comparisons with contemporary situations are frequent, allowing him to update the discourse and bring it closer to the experience of the viewer. The Gothic system of pillar–pointed arch–buttress, for example, makes it possible to span large spaces comparable to those of a contemporary aircraft hangar.

Similarly, the Greek trabeated system is essentially the same system used in the construction of our houses: pillars and walls support the weight of beams and floors and transfer it to the ground. Transformative and inhabiting actions in space, together with their corresponding construction systems, therefore persist over time, even while naturally evolving. According to Bakema, the architect assumes the social role of facilitating specialised knowledge so that citizens can participate more consciously in collective matters and choose and modify their spaces with greater awareness. The desire to involve a broad public in the architectural debates of the postwar period fits, as van den Heuvel argues, within Bakema's idea of the open society, according to which

> «architecture must be democratic and inclusive, aimed at creating social fairness, that architecture is part of a larger historical movement of the masses towards individual and collective emancipation and away from dehumanizing anonymity. [...] Architecture, therefore, was also viewed as a matter of communication, from developing new ways to engage citizens, users, decision-makers, and builders in the making of the built environment, to the very straightforward problem-solving matter of orientation and wayfinding»[33].

The possibility of using such an effective and far-reaching means of communication as television in the early 1960s did not escape Bakema. With ease he addressed themes that had emerged from the discussions of Team 10, of which he was a member. Thus, on an autumn Sunday evening, crucial issues entered Dutch living rooms: public space, threshold space, the space between things—alongside a fierce critique of the

> «dehumanising spaces designed for the anonymous user. [...] Urban planning, architecture, construction techniques, and financial resources must be used [...] to exercise the right to live according to one's own vision of the miracle of existence. [...] The result could be the lively (vital) city. Lively thanks to the development of housing forms that respond to the needs of different types of family groups. [...] For architects and urban planners a new task therefore emerges, deriving from the human desire to establish a better relationship with the diversity that characterises the wonderful phenomenon called life»[34].

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33 Dirk van den Heuvel, *The elusive bigness of Bakema*, in Dirk van den Heuvel (ed.), Bakema and the open society, Archis, Amsterdam 2018, p. 19.

34 Jaap Bakema, *Van Stoel tot Stad. Een verhaal over mensen en ruimte* (trans. From the Chair to the City. A Story of People and Space), W. De Haan N.V., Zeist–Antwerp, 1964, pp. 26–27.

In contemporary society, people are often unable to choose the forms and spaces of their own living because they are predetermined in advance. Nor are individuals always able to express their own housing needs. For this reason it is important, on the one hand, to communicate and mediate spatial issues within society and, on the other, to imagine architectural solutions capable of adapting to different needs. The citizen «will be as happy with his dwelling as it corresponds to his conception of space»[35].

Spatial experience must be gratifying even in the case of working environments. Architecture should not respond merely to practical requirements but must take into account the various human activities that unfold throughout the day and across the seasons. Looking out of a window and enjoying a pleasant view, spending a lunch break outdoors in the warmth of the sun, sitting on a bench placed on the roof, leaning on a parapet, or looking outside through an opening—these are all actions that should be considered during the design process.

And the future inhabitant—the public to whom Bakema addresses himself on television—must become aware of his housing rights and of his spatial needs. He must develop that love for space and for architecture with which Bakema had opened the programme.

## Transitional Space, the Space Between Things, and the Human Metaphor

To emphasise the value of the space between things as the locus of human relations and the need to design qualitatively meaningful public spaces—central themes in the debate developed in the pages of *Forum* and in the meetings of Team 10—Bakema resorts on television to a metaphor whose graphic articulation would become emblematic and would later be used for the cover of the book collecting the transcription of the programme. Bakema states:

> «Public space (urban) and private space (architectural) become communicable through transitional elements that can be identified within the programme of every major building. Places of encounter linked to everyday life are created. Larger than those of a medieval city, yet equally varied. Buildings could once again become friends with one another, as sometimes happens between people through their children or animals. Buildings could have faces, like people, expressive of what is happening. Architecture could once again become an expression of human behaviour. [...] Just as buildings might, in a sense, extend their hands to one another again, the same could happen with the two sides of a street. Originally, in historic city centres, the street was a place where one could move freely. [...] Today there is a renewed awareness of the possibility of living together in the space of the street [...] a place where pedestrians can move safely»[36].

35 ivi p. 16.

36 ivi pp. 48-50.

To illustrate through drawing what he expresses in words, Bakema makes two drawings on the blackboard and relates them to each other. The first depicts an urban profile in which tall buildings on the sides define a central courtyard space—protected and human in scale. Bakema then associates this drawing with a second one: a group of people, two adults at the sides and four children in the centre. Through the energetic and positive impulse of the children in the middle, the adults re-establish a human and relational contact, just as the spaces of the inner courtyard resonate with the taller surrounding buildings. Public space is not merely a space of transition and passage; it is the vital space of being together. It is therefore necessary, Bakema argues, that «the relationship between individual space and public (total) space be the result of a design action capable of accommodating, at the same time, individuality and collectivity»[37].

## Knowing in Order to Care for Space

The programme *Van Stoel tot Stad* does not merely disseminate architectural notions: its opening premise, apparently simple, is in fact radical. Bakema does not begin from the city nor from architecture as a formal object, but from the elementary act of sitting. Sitting is not here an ordinary everyday gesture, but an ancestral action of appropriating space: identifying and delimiting a place, pausing, taking position. Even before construction, architecture is a bodily gesture that establishes a relationship between the body and the environment. The passage "from the chair to the city" does not describe a typological evolution, but the progressive extension of the same relational principle. From the circle dug into the ground for sitting, to the square, to the street, and ultimately to the shaping of the urban landscape, what interests Bakema is the way in which human beings situate themselves in space and, by situating themselves, transform it. The built environment is the complex result of gestures, movements, and acts of appropriation.

"Total space" should therefore not be understood as a cosmological abstraction, but as a dynamic field of relationships activated through bodily experience. Sitting, walking, leaning out, pausing at a threshold, crossing a courtyard—these are elementary actions through which individuals become aware of their position in relation to a larger whole: the neighbourhood, the city, society. Architecture thus becomes a device of orientation, an instrument that helps the individual recognise themselves as part of a totality without dissolving into it.

The critique of "dehumanising spaces designed for the anonymous user" acquires an additional meaning. It is not merely an ideological position against functionalist urban planning, but a defence of the concrete

37 ivi p. 21.

situatedness of the individual. A space becomes dehumanising when it does not allow the body to orient itself, to pause, to recognise itself; when it prevents the formation of relationships and reduces inhabiting to passive occupation. For Bakema, space is a field of relations activated through the body. The communicative intention underlying his work cannot therefore be separated from this conception: explaining architecture means making individuals aware of their own bodily experience of space.

The image of Bakema standing at the blackboard, drawing and speaking about architectural questions, is the image of a teacher rather than that of a solitary architect. It is certainly not comparable to the contemporary television appearances of architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, and later those of Rem Koolhaas or Jean Nouvel. As Sophie Suma argues in her research, such appearances tend to convey the image of the architect as an elitist intellectual: the architectural discipline disappears behind highly theoretical, technicist, and conceptual discourses that distance the public from understanding spatial realities. «Paradoxically, when architecture is presented on television by architects, it is no longer a popular subject! »[38]

The image of the architect communicated by the media is often stereotyped: an extremely erudite man, a solitary creator whose references are frequently drawn from philosophy, art, and music. For Bakema, by contrast, the architect has the task of involving and making civil society aware—particularly in the immediate postwar period—of the processes of territorial transformation. It therefore becomes necessary to promote actions and initiatives aimed at disseminating architectural knowledge. In contemporary society, he writes, decisions in the architectural field are taken by a restricted circle of professionals, while the majority of citizens possess no specific knowledge in this domain.

> «What does the average user know about our new buildings and cities, about the greater or lesser comfort that different spatial arrangements can offer in living the miracle of existence? Is it really true that, in this case, the concept of space is important? »[39]

The television programme *Van Stoel tot Stad* was broadcast in only two episodes: it would therefore be difficult to argue that it had a major impact on Dutch civil society in the postwar period. Yet alongside this initiative Bakema devoted himself to numerous other forms of dissemination aimed at facilitating the understanding of spatial notions. In addition to his involvement in the editorial work of the Dutch magazine *Forum* between 1959 and 1963, Bakema designed and realised several exhibitions—powerful communicative devices with a strong educational value.

If the exhibition *Building for an Open Society*, organised in 1962 at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, guided visitors along a path composed not only of drawings but also of life-size photographs of the studio's work (from the early projects of Michiel Brinkman in 1913 to

38 Sophie Suma, *Que font les architectes à la télévision?,* Éditions Deux-cent-cinq, Lyon 2021, p. 9.

39 J. Bakema, *Van Stoel tot Stad*...cit., p. 91.

Bakema's collaboration with Jo van den Broek[40]), the exhibition *Cityplan Eindhoven*, presented at the Van Abbemuseum in 1969, allowed citizens to move freely within a model of the urban intervention proposed by the Van den Broek and Bakema office for the city centre. The model was constructed at a scale of 1:20 and positioned at eye level so that the spatial experience would be more realistic and engaging[41]. In an adjacent room, an interactive model enabled visitors to touch, move, and manipulate the buildings as if they were Lego blocks.

The following year, the Dutch pavilion for Expo '70 in Osaka—designed by the Van den Broek and Bakema office in collaboration with Carel Weeber—was conceived as a gigantic communicative display that engaged the general public (thousands of visitors per day) even with architectural issues[42]. Filmmakers, directors, graphic designers, and artists worked on the pavilion. As Bakema wrote about the project: «it seems to me that these kinds of communication centres could become relevant as elements for local urbanization [...] The fact is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to relate to built forms in urban agglomerations»[43].

Alongside television, magazines, and exhibitions, Bakema also demonstrated a remarkable ability to use film as a medium for communicating architectural themes[44]. Already in the mid-1950s, as soon as they became available on the market, he purchased a Bell & Howell camera that accompanied him on all his travels and with which he filmed hours of footage, including the final CIAM meetings and the gatherings of Team 10. Bakema would later project these films during his lectures. Only later, in the mid-1960s, did he set up a real film laboratory within his office in order to produce explanatory videos of his projects: genuine documentaries—precursors of contemporary 3D visualisations—created by moving the camera through architectural models. In 1974, in Naples, during the screening of one of his documentaries, Bakema stated:

> «to realise a more vital democracy at every level means achieving greater participation by a greater number of people in a greater number of phases of the decision-making process. Let us limit ourselves to the problems of the built environment: if so many professionals encounter difficulties in making the built environment harmonious, how much greater will the difficulties be for non-professionals called upon to participate in these decisions? Often drawings, conventional perspectives,

40 Dirk van den Heuvel, *Toward an Open Society: the unfinished work of Bakema*, in D. van den Heuvel, A. Oosterman, B. Cormier (eds.) *Open: A Bakema Celebration*… cit., p.3.

41 Dirk van den Heuvel, *Cityplan, Eindhoven,* in D. van den Heuvel (ed.), *Bakema and the* … cit., pp. 264-269.

42 Jorrit Sipkes, *Communication Machine*, in D. van den Heuvel (ed.), *Bakema and the* … *cit.*, pp. 224-231.

43 Jaap Bakema, *Een verhaal voor-en achteraf, in Orandakan - 1970 World Expo Osaka*, Den Haag, Staatsuitgeverij 1971, p. 37.

44 See Maleanie van der Hoorn, *Filmische schetsboekjes en hippe projectpresentaties. De films van Jaap Bakema*, (Cinematic sketchbooks and fashionable project presentations. The films of Jaap Bakema), https://www.archined.nl/2020/12/filmische-schetsboekjes-en-hippe-projectpresentaties-de-films-van-jaap-bakema/, accessed April 2025.

> and even ordinary models prove insufficient for non-professionals [...] Projection, when used in combination with the best photographic or cinematic techniques, can produce a very realistic simulation»[45].

Television, newspapers, exhibitions, and projections were all tools masterfully employed by Bakema who, as a gifted communicator, transmitted spatial and architectural knowledge to society and to a broad public. Knowing, he argued, is the only way to care for space. Considering the aims of the present study, we can only agree.

> «The care of space can produce results only if it is a total care. [...] A care that must also be exercised through economic, political, socio-technical, and cultural discipline. Culture as a balance between use and care!! Culture implies aesthetics. Aesthetic discipline also concerns how one observes the relationships between dimensions, colours (sight), sounds (hearing), smells (smell), and tactile values. [...] It is possible to modify the overall quality of the built environment only if aesthetics is also accepted as a functional element within the decision-making process of society. Today, in 1974, we possess electronic and simulation technologies greater than those available in the time of Berlage or Le Corbusier. This process can only contribute to the creation of a better built environment»[46].

## Concluding Reflections

The television experience of *Van Stoel tot Stad* shows how, for Bakema, communication is an integral part of his civic responsibility. Making viewers aware of space means making visible the way in which human beings situate themselves within it. Dissemination does not coincide with reductive simplification, but rather with clarification: bringing to light the relationships that connect body, technique, environment, and society.

Beginning from the primordial act of sitting, Bakema brings architecture back to its bodily and relational origins. Urbanism and architecture are not presented as specialised fields separated from everyday experience, but as extensions of elementary gestures through which human beings establish their own space; the city is nothing more than the expansion of a posture, of a threshold, of a relationship.

Within this perspective, television, drawing, film, and exhibition become pedagogical tools directed toward a precise objective: enabling citizens to orient themselves consciously within "total space". The architect is no longer only a designer but also a mediator of understanding. The

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45 Jaap Bakema, *Il mezzo cinematografico. migliore visualizzazione, migliore comprensione, migliore partecipazione,* in Camillo Gubitosi, Alberto Izzo, van den Broek /Bakema, Officina Edizioni, Rome 1976, p. 45.

46 Jaap Bakema, *Architetturbanistica. Urbanizzazione totale. La società controllata dal sindacato*, in C. Gubitosi, A. Izzo, *van den Broek /Bakema*...cit., p. 20.

open society is not constructed solely through normative or institutional frameworks, but also through the possibility for each individual to recognise their active role in shaping the environment.

Ultimately, if in the previous chapters spatial education has been investigated through the direct and bodily experience of play and appropriation, the case of Bakema shows how such awareness can also be supported by devices of cultural mediation. The democratization of architectural discourse here passes through the clarification of its physical and situated dimension. Only a society capable of understanding the space it inhabits can aspire to transform it responsibly.

## 6.3 Yona Friedman: Communicative Urgency and the Invention of a New Language

Yona Friedman was an architect and a thinker, but he was also many other things, as Manuel Orazi suggests in *Quanti Yona Friedman?*[47]. In this section we will examine his work as a theorist and an outstanding communicator of architectural issues, particularly to non-specialist audiences.

Born in Budapest in 1923 into a middle-class Jewish family, the young János-Antal Friedman enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture at the Royal Joseph University of Budapest as an auditor, thanks to a special permit. During the German occupation in 1944 he joined a Zionist resistance group under the name Yona ("dove"), which he would retain throughout his life, before fleeing and beginning a long period of wandering. He continued his university studies at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa until 1957, when, after being expelled from the university, he moved to France where he completed his studies.

In 1956 he participated in the 10th Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in Dubrovnik—the congress that marked the emergence of the future Team 10. The title of the congress was *The Future Structure of the Human Habitat*. There Friedman informally presented a strongly critical document, *The Settlement Revolution*[48], in which one reads: «the problems of settlements cannot be solved by anyone other than the actual users. Information at the level of primary school is necessary to enable and encourage users to rely on themselves in solving their problems». Informing and communicating were therefore already urgent actions in the postwar period in order to refound the architectural discipline and to place at the centre of the discussion not so much the built object as the users and their housing needs. Friedman's work would in fact always move between architecture, sociology, and politics.

With regard to education about the built environment—the subject of the present research—Friedman's idea of the architect appears particularly significant: a figure who must guide individual citizens in identifying their needs and in shaping their living spaces. It is precisely this aspect of Friedman's multifaceted figure that most interests us here: that of the communicator and disseminator of spatial issues—issues that, as his work shows, should be learned already in primary school, as demonstrated by several of his projects addressed to children or to those unfamiliar with architectural knowledge.

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47 Manuel Orazi, *5 giugno 1923-20 febbraio 2020/Quanti Yona Friedman?*, doppiozero, 3 March 2020, https://www.doppiozero.com/quanti-yona-friedman, accessed November 2025.

48 Yona Friedman, Manuel Orazi, *Yona Friedman: The Dilution of Architecture*, edited by Nader Sera, Park Books, Zurich 2015, p. 379.

## The Invention of a New Architectural Grammar: Friedman's Pictographic Drawings

In the aftermath of 1968, Friedman developed a communicative method that was simple and essential, pictographic in nature, often accompanied by short captions. He invented a new language, almost entirely visual: a particular form of drawing that Andrea Bocco describes as «stylistically derived from the practice of teaching with the blackboard»[49].

Over the years, Friedman's representational methods underwent a significant transformation toward greater simplicity and graphic synthesis. From the early versions of the famous *L'Architecture Mobile* to the manuals of the 1970s, representation becomes progressively less realistic and increasingly schematic.

Friedman's interest in the pedagogical potential of images had already emerged in the early 1960s, when he worked together with his wife Denise Charvein on the production of a series of short animated films for French television. The series, entitled *Africa Tales*[50], was produced between 1960 and 1963 for the ORTF (*Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française*)[51], with the aim of bringing to the small screen the African folktales collected by the ethnologist Leo Frobenius. The animations were created as a kind of stop-motion technique, combining movable wooden cubes on whose faces were drawn different parts of the body—such as heads, torsos, and legs—in various positions.

Friedman would later write:

> «As an architect I like drawing, and I wanted to experiment with a method of prefabricating images, small images. It is a picture book in which the illustrations dance. What I like to imagine is a filmed library in which most literary works could be rendered in a vivid way, something that is particularly interesting from a pedagogical point of view»[52].

The episode dedicated to the cycle of stories of Samba Gana won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1962.

Friedman's attention to myth, anthropology, and ethnography can be traced, as Manuel Orazi writes, to his study of the theories of Károly Kerényi. Before leaving Hungary in 1943 as a consequence of the Second World War, the historian and philologist delivered a series of lectures at the University of Science in Budapest, which Friedman attended with great

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49 Andrea Bocco, *Nota al testo,* in Yona Friedman, *Tetti,* ed. A. Bocco, Quodlibet, Macerata 2017, p 381.

50 Sabine Lebesque, Helene Fentener van Vlissingen, *Yona Friedman. Structures serving the unpredictable*, NAI Publisher, Rotterdam 1999, p.39.

51 Stefania Schibeci, *Yona Friedman*, in Vincenzo Trione (ed.), *Il cinema degli architetti*, Johan&Levi, Milan 2004, pp. 206-111.

52 Yona Friedman, personal entry in the dictionary Cinéma d'animation. Des cinéastes comme les autres (cinémas nationaux au genre), «Image et Son. Revue du cinéma», no. 207, June–July 1967, p. 42.

interest[53]. The architect's admiration for the Hungarian scholar's theories and reflections is attested by a letter written in 1959 and preserved in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, accompanying a French copy of the pamphlet *L'Architecture mobile*. Friedman writes to Kerényi:

> «I am thinking of your cycle of lectures on the Eleusinian mysteries, during which you presented myth as "entertainment" and as "gossip" of general interest, as the creator and centre of society, also referring to Huizinga. On this basis I tried to arrive, even in architecture, at a similar analysis, which led me further on the technical level, as I attempted to show in the pamphlet»[54].

Friedman's attention to the housing needs of users, as well as to the playful and social aspects of the architectural discipline, can therefore also be connected to his reading of the celebrated essay *Homo Ludens* by Huizinga, according to which culture arises in the form of play; culture is initially played in its earliest phases culture bears the character of a game, it is represented in playful forms and moods[55].

In 1963 Friedman published, as an appendix to the fifth edition of *L'Architecture mobile*, *La théorie des systèmes compréhensibles*, a graphic investigation of the processes of urban transformation through the use of mathematical models.

> «Regardless of the specific content of these essays, it is important to note how Friedman employed drawing as a tool for communicating his research, and in particular for representing relational logics. The strong connection between the concept of the network and the expressive medium of drawing that matured in his work during those years represents a fundamental step toward the communicative form of the pictorial sequences that would later characterise his manuals»[56].

The results of these graphic investigations were shared by Friedman in 1964 during a cycle of lectures held at several prestigious American universities. The outcomes of these lectures were later collected, a few years afterward, in the essay *Pour une architecture scientifique*[57].

The title of the opening chapter of the book is *La démocratisation*, in which Friedman defines the role of the architect as

> «a translator of the client's specific needs into a language understandable to a specialised craftsman [...] we have entitled this chapter "democratization" because the word democracy means that everyone has a

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53 Yona Friedman, Manuel Orazi, *Yona Friedman. The Dilution of*... cit., p. 292.

54 ibidem.

55 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London 1949.

56 Andrea Bocco, Laura Trovato, *Un catalogo di tecnologia umanistica* in Yona Friedman, *Tetti*...cit., p. 390.

57 Yona Friedman, *Pour une architecture scientifique,* Pierre Belfond, Paris, 197.

> say in the decisions to be made. [...] Information is politics, and the only true form of politics»[58].

The desire to disseminate and communicate his reflections on architecture to a wider audience led Friedman to revisit the contents of the text in a graphic format that was accessible and immediately readable, publishing them in *Comment vivre avec les autres sans être chef et sans être esclave?* It is important to note that the book was also distributed in French primary schools thanks to the financial support of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs[59].

Friedman thus employed the communicative power of images—al-anguage immediately understandable even to non-specialist audiences—translating his theoretical reflections into the form of a comic strip. Each step of the argument unfolds within a frame; the characters are stylised with only a few lines; the representation is flat and two-dimensional; no setting defines the space of the sequence except for a few essential, rapid strokes. Each "panel" is accompanied by a short caption written in block letters with concise content: reading space, identifying needs, and becoming aware of spatial necessities are issues that concern everyone and of which each person should acquire knowledge and representational ability. As Friedman would later write, «knowledge of planning, construction techniques, the choice of materials, and artistic expression can be examined and learned already at the level of primary school»[60].

### *L'histoire de Monsieur Dupont*: A Manual for Primary School Students

Atlas, pp. 166-170.

Also in the early 1970s, and again for primary schools, Friedman prepared a series of manuals commissioned by the French Council of Education: texts for children between ten and twelve years old that gathered the outcomes of several educational activities conducted with schoolchildren. These manuals aimed to introduce young citizens—and future clients—to *le langage de l'architecture*. Through a pictographic language, *L'histoire de Monsieur Dupont*[61] introduces younger readers to themes such as building dimensions in relation to the human body, the reading of plans, and the relationship between interior and exterior space.

Friedman explains that each inhabitant has their own spatial needs and that, in order to avoid translation errors on the part of architects, it is necessary to learn to graphically represent one's own wishes and requirements. The risk, he argues, is that the designer may produce a house for an "average man," without taking into account specific individual needs.

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58 Yona Friedman, *Pour une architecture…* cit., pp. 13-27

59 A. Bocco, L. Trovato, *Un catalogo di tecnologia...* cit., p. 393-394.

60 Yona Friedman, *L'architettura di sopravvivenza. Una filosofia della povertà* (1978), Boringhieri, Turin 2009, p. 153.

Yona Friedman, *C'est mon manuel car je veux savoir dessiner ma maison!,* 1973; Getty Research Institute Archive, Appendix, pp. 167–170.

Thus, "let us begin to learn":

> «What is a house? How is a house used? Let us begin to learn! I am in the street. Outside. I open a door and enter. I close the door and find myself in a room. Outside it is raining; inside I am sheltered. [...] What are the rules for drawing the map of a house? At the beginning there is an outside. Then a part of this outside becomes separated. [...] The conditions within this separated and accessible zone are different from those outside. In architecture it is always a matter of separating a portion of space (an enclosed space).»

Regarding these manuals, an editorial in *Architectural Design* from 1973 entitled *Yona teaches the kids*[62] observed:

> «one of the most effective contributions architects could make to genuinely improve the environment might be to teach children how to acquire knowledge as designers. [...] Yona discovered that children, once they had become familiar with his method, realised that they could also make design assumptions on their own, and this interested them greatly».

## The CCSK

From the early 1970s throughout the 1980s, a significant part of Friedman's work consisted in the production of manuals[63] whose aim was to restore to citizens the capacity to act on issues that directly concerned them.

During these years he collaborated repeatedly with the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, engaging in dissemination programmes that led to the publication of manuals such as *How to Draw My House* and *It Is Your Town. Know How to Protect It*, which, as stated in the introduction,

> «presents in an easily understandable language the problems of historic cities and the ways to solve them. Understanding the urban structure and the interactions of its elements is the first step toward the active participation of citizens in decisions concerning the future of their cities».

From February 1980 onward, Friedman's manuals began to be published in India in the journal *Invention Intelligence*under the title *Immediate Education for Survival*[64]. Following the success of these experiences, in 1982 Friedman founded, together with Eda Schaur, the CCSK—the *Communication Centre of Scientific Knowledge for Self-Reliance*. The centre, financed in part by the United Nations University and supported political-

62 "Architectural Design", *Yona teaches the kids*, Vol XLII 7/1973, p. 420.

63 Andrea Bocco, Laura Trovato, *Un catalogo di tecnologia umanistica*…cit. p. 394.

64 ivi, p. 402.

ly by India, aimed to disseminate easily readable manuals among the less literate populations of the world and to transmit «information for the improvement of living conditions available in developing countries»[65].

Unlike a book, a manual relies almost entirely on drawings that can be easily reproduced by anyone and that can readily be transformed into posters to circulate information of various kinds: the use of simple construction techniques for building basic shelters, the collection of rainwater, or forms of self-organisation. The CCSK remained active until 1994: hundreds of manuals were distributed, reaching millions of people.

## The Educational Value of Direct Experience and Improvisation

The experiences developed during the 1970s were later collected by Friedman in the book *L'architecture de survie. Une philosophie de la pauvreté*[66], written, as he states in the introduction, for the "ordinary man": once again, therefore, his intended audience is the future inhabitant rather than the architect.

As in many specialised sciences that nonetheless closely concern society, one of the problems of architecture lies in the difficulty of communication and in the esotericism of knowledge. Friedman starts from the assumption—consistent with the perspective of the present research—that the crisis of contemporary architecture largely derives from the extreme difficulty of communication between architect and inhabitant. He writes that «we are faced with a case of acute non-communication: the future inhabitant knows what he would like to say but does not know how to say it; the architect ignores what his interlocutor means, yet tries to suggest it to him»[67]. Architecture may therefore be defined as an architecture of survival because it makes the inhabitant aware of his own spatial needs; in this way architecture will no longer remain a specialised discipline reserved for a few.

How, then, can such communication be restored? Through the drawing of the plan of the house one wishes to inhabit. Friedman understands the plan as the graphic translation, in spatial terms, of the responses to one's own living needs. Through the formulation on paper—through trial, error, and the verification of one's own assumptions—anyone is capable of producing their own plan, their own rudimentary spatial layout.

Within this process of spatial knowledge, the architect must assume, according to Friedman, the role of facilitator in order to «disseminate information». This mediation, he reiterates, begins already in primary school and requires the formulation of a new language and the use of a manual: a new grammar reformulated and taught by the architect, who

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65 Yona Friedman, *Centre of Scientific Knowledge for Self-Reliance*, in "Leonardo" n. 4 1986, p. 333.

66 Yona Friedman, *L'architecture de survie. Une philosophie de la pauvreté, Éditions de l'éclat*, Paris, 2003. The first edition was published in 1978 by Casterman with a different subtitle (*Où s'invente aujourd'hui le monde de demain*); Italian translation: *L'Architettura di sopravvivenza. Una filosofia della povertà*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2009.

67 Yona Friedman, *L'Architettura di sopravvivenza*… cit. p. 17.

thus assumes the role of teacher of a new language.

Regarding the manual, he argues that it should

> «only indicate a few essential elements and leave you to decide which solution to adopt. In this case the manual truly becomes a tool, and your solution truly becomes a solution. Solutions that come from above are ineffective; only those that come from below are real solutions»[68].

The information to which Friedman refers, therefore, «must not be overly didactic». On the contrary, it is an «anti-didactic» form of information in the sense that it encourages direct experience: «its aim is to incite those who receive it to an anti-habit». The architect is strongly critical of traditional teaching methods—reassuring methods that reinforce habits. It is necessary, he often repeats, to promote a cognitive process based on improvisation as an inspiring concept for teaching and as an influential practice for the renewal of pedagogy.

> «Improvisation is, quite evidently, a taboo word in school [...]. The judgement of "improvised", when attributed to a lesson, sounds like an anathema, the attribution of a purely negative value, capable of generating feelings of inadequacy and inefficiency and of provoking widespread opinions of poor professionalism and competence»[69].

Experience and improvisation are closely connected: most everyday experiences are dictated by improvised actions rather than by actions studied and planned in advance. Improvisation is a resource, a confrontation with ever new and complex situations; it is a learning tool linked to aesthetics and creative processes, widely practiced in the performing arts. Indeed, only after studying and internalising acquired knowledge is the performer able to improvise. «Improvisation is also an aesthetic. [...] To improvise means to experiment, to discover, to constantly find something new»[70].

Thus, once the figure of the architect–teacher has been reformulated and a new elementary language has been invented to communicate simple and basic spatial concepts, it becomes necessary for the inhabitant to reconsider their own knowledge from the beginning, starting from direct experience and improvisation. «Survival architecture represents a new attitude toward the inhabitant, the profession of the architect, and the architectural object»[71].

The relevance of Friedman's thought today, aside from some ideological exaggerations, lies precisely in his attention to the user, to their spatial perception and experience. Attentive to themes of nomadic dwelling, Friedman was deeply convinced of the importance of architectural educa-

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68 ivi, p. 74.

69 Ivano Gamelli, Insegnare improvvisando ad arte, in Francesco Cappa, Cristina Negro (ed.), Il senso nell'istante: improvvisazione e formazione, Guerini Scientifica, Milan 2006, p. 28.

70 Yona Friedman, *L'ecodemocrazia*, in Chiara Bertola e Giliano Sergio (eds) *Paesaggi d'aria. Luigi Ghirri e Yona Friedman/Jean-Baptiste Decavèle*, Corraini, Mantova, 2016, p. 25.

71 Yona Friedman, *L'Architettura di sopravvivenza*... cit. p. 160.

tion as a prerequisite for a broader and more widespread spatial awareness.

For Friedman, manuals constitute the principal communicative tool, intended to make his ideas about the sharing of architectural knowledge and the active participation of inhabitants in spatial decisions concrete. «The right to understand is also one of the rights of man, just as important as the right to live, the right to work, and the right to justice»[72].

72 Yona Friedman, *Le droit de comprendre*, 1983.

## Concluding Remarks

The experiences of Zevi, Bakema, and Friedman demonstrate that spatial education does not end with the direct experience of the built environment, but requires a conscious intellectual operation. Communication, in this sense, becomes a design act: a project aimed at forming a critical gaze.

It is no coincidence that all three architects were active in the post-war period, in a context marked by the need to rebuild civil society and the welfare state on democratic foundations. In this climate, the architect could no longer remain confined to the role of technician, but became a public figure—an engaged intellectual responsible both for the quality of collective space and for the cultural maturation of citizens.

Both Zevi and Bakema speak, in different ways, of an "love for space". For Zevi, this love coincides with the critical capacity to understand architecture as a dynamic experience, to inhabit it through time and space. For Bakema, love manifests itself as the desire to re-establish a conscious relationship between the individual and "total space", beginning with elementary gestures such as sitting, pausing, and dwelling. In both cases, love is a cognitive posture: it implies attention, care, and responsibility toward the built environment.

Through newspapers, television, manuals, drawings, models, and live demonstrations, Zevi, Bakema, and Friedman attempted to make the principles of modern architecture transmissible, transforming disciplinary language into a civic instrument. Their work suggests that the democratization of architecture does not depend solely on the transformation of physical space, but also on the transformation of the cultural conditions that make it possible to understand it.

To communicate architecture therefore means assuming a political and pedagogical responsibility: contributing to the formation of citizens capable of demanding a qualified space. It is precisely in this tension between design, society, and media that the themes of the entire research converge, bringing back to the centre the idea that the quality of the built environment ultimately depends on the degree of collective awareness of those who inhabit it.

# PART 3. LEARNING SPACE
## Concluding Reflections



Nigel Henderson, Photograph of children playing on Chisenhale Road, Londra, 1951.

# 7. Concluding Reflections

*A child is always, first and foremost,*
*an aesthete: they respond to appearances,*
*surfaces, lines, and forms.*

Joseph Brodsky

## 7.1 Synthesis of Results and Comparison Between the Case Studies

This research originated from a critical observation: the poor quality of a significant portion of the contemporary built environment does not depend solely on economic, technical, or regulatory dynamics, but also on a widespread lack of spatial awareness within civil society. If inhabitants are not enabled to perceive, understand, and critically evaluate the space they live in, they will hardly be able to desire a better one, demand it, or transform it responsibly. From this arises the question that has guided the entire work: how can spatial awareness be fostered? And how can the gap between specialist knowledge and common knowledge concerning architecture and the city be reduced?

The hypothesis advanced here is that education in space does not coincide exclusively with the intentional and formal transmission of knowledge, but is largely constructed through bodily, sensory, and incidental experience. Space is first and foremost known by moving through it, measuring it with the body, touching it, dwelling within it, playing in it, and transforming it through use. In this sense, children's play emerges as a privileged form of spatial learning: it allows for the appropriation of space, its interpretation, and the attribution of rules, meanings, and possibilities for action. The research thus demonstrates that the earliest forms of spatial awareness are structured through repeated gestures, bodily measurement, physical contact with the environment, and the exploratory freedom of childhood.

The comparison between the playgrounds of Aldo van Eyck and the *Children's Games* by Francis Alÿs represents the core of this reflection. The two case studies made it possible to investigate spatial learning from

two complementary perspectives: on the one hand, space designed to host and stimulate play; on the other, ordinary, non-designed space that children spontaneously transform into a field of action. If van Eyck sets the conditions for experience by constructing places capable of activating perception, relationships, and imagination, Alÿs observes what happens when these dynamics emerge from below, through the unexpected and inventive use of the city. It is precisely within this tension between design intentionality and spontaneity of use that one of the main outcomes of the research lies: education in space belongs neither exclusively to design nor to occurrence, but is generated in the living relationship between body and environment.

The analysis of the Amsterdam playgrounds has shown how architecture can foster forms of spatial learning without resorting to didactic or prescriptive devices. The elementary forms employed by van Eyck constitute a primary language capable of inviting gesture, movement, and encounter. The hundreds of playgrounds across Amsterdam can be understood as spaces of the in-between: threshold places of relation and mediation between opposites, in which the child can experience a spatiality that is not rigidly determined but open to interpretation. The design does not impose a single behavior; rather, it offers occasions, possibilities, and invitations. From this emerges an idea of architecture as "constructed meaning," that is, as a form capable of making the relationship between bodies, space, and community both experienceable and shareable.

At the same time, the investigation into the work of Francis Alÿs has demonstrated that even unqualified, residual, or non-pedagogically intended spaces can generate spatial awareness. The games documented by Alÿs reveal the extraordinary capacity of children to reinvent the city through minimal actions: jumping, running, marking, pushing, tracing, hiding, waiting. These actions are not merely playful but cognitive. They construct a bottom-up reading of urban space, revealing micro-geographies of use, threshold zones, margins, voids, and interstitial spaces. The city thus appears not only as functional infrastructure, but as a sensitive and relational environment, continuously reactivated through use. If van Eyck shows how design can set the conditions for experience, Alÿs demonstrates that the child's body is capable of producing meaning and learning even in the absence of spaces specifically conceived for that purpose.

Starting from this core, the research broadens its scope to show that education in space has a wider genealogy, involving art, radical pedagogy, urban practices, and communication tools. The chapter dedicated to the contribution of art has highlighted how many twentieth-century artistic practices anticipated architectural reflections on the bodily and haptic experience of space. From the tactile experiments of the avant-garde to the performative and environmental practices of the second half of the century, art has constructed devices of knowledge based on the direct involvement of the body, shifting attention from the artwork as object to the artwork as experience. Artistic research, therefore, is not a separate field of inquiry, but rather a fundamental laboratory for developing new forms of spatial awareness.

Similarly, the experiences of Patrick Geddes, Colin Ward, Riccardo Dalisi, and the Global Tools have shown that the city can be conceived as a diffuse educational environment. Here, learning is not understood as the abstract acquisition of content, but as a situated, active, and relational process, grounded in observation, movement, making, and the transformation of the everyday environment. In these practices, the separation between school and life, theory and use, education and the city is weakened. What emerges is a vision in which urban space is also a pedagogical device capable of activating forms of incidental, critical, and collective learning.

Finally, the analysis of the dissemination work of Bruno Zevi, Jaap Bakema, and Yona Friedman has made it possible to identify a further crucial step. Direct experience of space, however fundamental, is not sufficient on its own. For a society to truly demand qualified space, it must also possess the cultural and linguistic tools to understand it. The democratization of architecture thus also passes through communication: newspapers, television, manuals, drawings, images, and simplified languages become means to make knowledge accessible beyond specialist domains. Communicating architecture is a political act, even before it is a pedagogical one: it means forming citizens capable not only of inhabiting space, but of reading it critically. To know how to read space and its qualities means having the ability to formulate demands for the quality of the urban environment. Education in the built environment is therefore clearly a political operation, one that makes citizens active participants in present and future transformations.

## 7.2 Spatial Education and Transdisciplinarity

Taken together, the materials analyzed allow us to affirm that spatial awareness arises from the intertwining of multiple dimensions: bodily experience, play, the relational quality of space, everyday use of the city, the contribution of the arts, and the cultural mediation of architectural knowledge. Such awareness does not coincide with specialized technical competence, but rather with a form of attention, sensitivity, and judgment. It implies the ability to recognize the qualities of the built environment, to perceive their effects on the body and on relationships, to imagine alternative uses, and to exercise a critical demand for space. In this sense, education in space reveals itself not only as a pedagogical issue, but as a civic and political one.

The research has shown how this form of knowledge can be understood as embodied, situated, and relational: the body, through movement, touch, and multisensory perception, constitutes the primary device for orientation and interpretation of space. As emphasized by Juhani Pallasmaa, to know architecture means first of all to inhabit it, to move through it, to experience it with the whole body. Likewise, the incidental learning described by Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, and Colin Ward demonstrates that knowledge is not constructed solely through intentional processes, but develops through everyday practices, direct interaction with the environment, and participation in social life.

Education in space thus takes the form of a diffuse process that crosses and connects different disciplinary fields. It is no coincidence that the figures analyzed—from Aldo van Eyck to Francis Alÿs, from Geddes to Friedman—operate consistently at the margins between architecture, art, pedagogy, and the social sciences. Their work develops against a logic of disciplinary separation and hyper-specialization, proposing instead an integrated vision in which design, experience, and knowledge mutually inform one another.

Already Patrick Geddes, trained as a biologist, had grasped the necessity of a "generalist" approach to the city, understood as a complex system of social, cultural, and environmental relationships, and as an educational device capable of forming conscious citizens through direct experience. This perspective is taken up and radicalized by Colin Ward, who recognizes in the street, in play, and in the spontaneous use of urban space privileged sites of learning.

The research therefore suggests that a politics of spatial education must operate on multiple levels and according to a transdisciplinary logic.

On the one hand, it appears necessary to promote, from early childhood, practices and programs capable of fostering a bodily, tactile, and critical sensitivity toward the built environment, as has long been the

case in various Northern European contexts[1]. Such an educational action should begin in early childhood education and continue throughout the entire school curriculum, with activities of increasing complexity in relation to students' age and development. In this sense, spatial education should be recognized as an integral part of citizenship education, contributing to the formation of conscious and responsible individuals.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that such education also takes place—and perhaps above all—outside formally designated places of instruction. As Giancarlo De Carlo[2], points out, the richest and most active part of education occurs elsewhere, in direct experience and in the variety of contacts with the world. Streets, urban voids, playgrounds, museums, media, and the ordinary spaces of everyday life constitute a diffuse educational infrastructure in which the subject learns through use, observation, and relationship.

The city itself can thus be understood as a pedagogical device capable of activating processes of incidental learning and the construction of spatial awareness. Architecture, therefore, no longer merely organizes functions or solves technical problems, but contributes to shaping ways of perceiving, of being together, of imagining, and of transforming the shared world.

Finally, it becomes clear that education in space cannot be entrusted to a single discipline. It requires the construction of alliances between architecture, art, pedagogy, sociology, and social practices, within a shared field of research and action. In opposition to the contemporary fragmentation of knowledge, the need emerges for a culture of space capable of integrating experience, design, and knowledge, restoring to architecture a profoundly educational and political dimension.

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1 See, for example, the architecture schools for children Arhitektuurikool, in Estonia, and De-a Arhitectura, in Romania, whose activities in state schools are free of charge and funded by their respective ministries of education; see Alessandra Gabriele, *Esperienza dello spazio. Educazione ludica all'architettura*, Libria, Melfi 2024.

2 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Perché/come costruire edifici scolastici. Ordine-istruzione.educazione-disordine*, in Giancarlo De Carlo, *Gli spiriti dell'architettura*, edited by Livio Schirollo, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1999, pp. 213-234.

## 7.3 Future Perspectives. Towards the City as a Third Educator

The reflections developed lead to a broader question concerning the role of public space in the contemporary city. As highlighted by Elena Granata:

> «After the two World Wars, European democracies made urban reconstruction and its public services the symbol of collective rebirth. It was the highest moment of the idea of the welfare state and of the 'city for all', grounded in a kind of secular faith in urban design as an instrument of progress. [...] At the beginning of the 1970s, this balance began to fracture. Cities grew, but so did inequalities; welfare systems entered into crisis under multiple pressures—economic, demographic, cultural. Neoliberal ideologies redefined the role of the state, reducing it to a regulator of the market. The city began to become a commodity rather than a right. The public city gradually gave way to the market city: shopping malls, gated communities, speculative developments [...] the citizen was progressively transformed into a consumer, and public space began to resemble a showcase. [...] It is not difficult to observe that something has changed in urban space. One increasingly encounters squares or gardens of low quality, where design is primarily aimed at minimizing maintenance costs or at discouraging the presence of undesirable users. [...] The city has become a machine for attracting capital, the house a financial product. Language changes accordingly: 'to enhance,' 'to regenerate,' 'to make attractive.' Words that sound seductive, yet reveal a dangerous idea—one that measures value solely in terms of profit»[3].

We are thus witnessing a progressive privatization of urban space: the city is transformed according to capitalist logics, while public space is impoverished and regulated through devices that limit its use. Space is never neutral: it welcomes or rejects, includes or excludes, activates or passivizes. As this research suggests, it acts as a true "invisible director" of social practices, orienting behaviors, relationships, and possibilities for action. The quality of the built environment directly affects the quality of individual and collective experience.

One of the most evident consequences of this transformation is the gradual disappearance of children from public space. The contemporary city appears increasingly unsuited to their rhythms, movements, and need for exploration and autonomy. The child who once inhabited the street, moved independently through urban space, and spent much of their time there is now almost entirely absent. The more children are confined to dedicated and controlled spaces, the more the city is impoverished, losing its living, relational, and educational dimension.

In this context, it becomes urgent to rethink the city as a diffuse educational space, recovering an idea already present in the reflections of

3 Elena Granata, *La città è di tutti. Ciò che ha valore non ha prezzo*, Einaudi, Torino 2026, pp. XIII-XV.

Geddes, Ward, and van Eyck: the city as an environment capable of forming its inhabitants through direct experience, use, and relationship. Space can be understood as a "third educator," according to the expression coined by Loris Malaguzzi: an active device for learning, relationship, and growth. Space educates insofar as it offers possibilities, invites action, enables exploration, and supports the construction of relationships.

Adopting this perspective implies several directions for research and design, which emerge as operational outcomes of this investigation:

– the need to restore to public space an inclusive, accessible, and free dimension, recognizing it as a common good and a fundamental educational infrastructure;
– the design of environments capable of activating the body, movement, and sensory experience, overcoming a purely visual and functionalist conception of space;
– the development of spatial education practices within public education, as long-term and progressive processes of awareness-building, integrated into curricula rather than relegated to occasional experiences;
– the elaboration of transdisciplinary approaches that bring architecture, art, pedagogy, and social practices into dialogue, constructing a shared field of research and action.

In opposition to contemporary fragmentation and hyper-specialization, the need emerges for an integrated vision capable of recognizing space not only as an object of design, but as a field of shared experience and a cultural device.

In this direction, architectural design can once again assume a profoundly cultural and political role: not merely to construct spaces, but to contribute to the formation of conscious citizens, capable of inhabiting, understanding, and transforming the world they share.

# APPENDICES



Hannie and Tess van Eyck in the Bertelmanplein playground, Amsterdam, designed by Aldo van Eyck in 1947. Photograph by Aldo van Eyck. Courtesy of the Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.

# Interviews

*Oral history interviews might have the capacity to puncture through architecture's professional mask and bring to the fore unauthorized, polyphonic, human, and social narratives.*
Naomi Stead, Janina Gosseye[1]

The interviews collected during the course of this research constitute a body of oral sources that accompanies and complements the theoretical and documentary framework developed in the preceding chapters. They were conducted throughout 2025, following the first of two semesters spent at the Department of Architecture at TU Delft and after a preliminary period devoted to collecting materials and preparing the research tools, as part of the research activities carried out in the Netherlands and Belgium. The interviews involve scholars, curators, direct witnesses, and residents who have lived in or studied the contexts under investigation.

As Naomi Stead and Janina Gosseye have observed, interviews make it possible to bring to light plural, unofficial, human, and social narratives. Giving a voice not only to the architect but also to those involved in the production and use of space makes it possible to broaden and deepen our understanding of architectural history.

The use of oral testimony therefore arises from the need to complement official archival and bibliographical sources—collected and systematised in the atlas accompanying this research—with a narrative dimension capable of conveying aspects that rarely find a place within established historiography. In particular, the perspective of the user, which has seldom been investigated, assumes a central role here in understanding how space is used, appropriated, and experienced.

The use of oral sources forms part of a broader research method developed within the *Architecture Archives of the Future* research group, coordinated by Professor Dirk van den Heuvel. This method combines the study of archival sources with practices of direct investigation, contributing to the construction of a more complex, articulated, and multifaceted interpretative framework for architectural histories.

1 Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, *Oral History, Part I: Methods and Mistakes*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 4 Luglio 2017.

More specifically, the interviews presented below in alphabetical order involved a heterogeneous group of interlocutors. Among them were several Amsterdam residents, born between 1955 and 1977, who used and experienced the playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck and provided direct testimony of the bodily, sensory, and social experience of these spaces.

Alongside these accounts are the voices of figures directly or indirectly connected to van Eyck's work. Tess van Eyck, the architect's eldest daughter, offers an internal perspective linked both to her childhood experience of playing in the playgrounds and to the family dimension and design processes that accompanied their development, as well as to later attempts to preserve these spaces. Max Risselada, architect and professor emeritus at TU Delft, and formerly van Eyck's assistant, instead provides the perspective of the academic environment and cultural context in which van Eyck's teaching activities developed.

A fundamental contribution is provided by the testimony of Francis Strauven, Aldo van Eyck's principal biographer, whose research has extended over several decades. Strauven also conducted the previously unpublished interview with Jacoba Mulder, architect and engineer, initially a collaborator of Cornelis van Eesteren and later a senior official in the City of Amsterdam's Public Works Department. Mulder was a central figure in the conception and promotion of the playgrounds. It was she who proposed the construction of the first playground in 1947 and entrusted its design to the young Aldo van Eyck. The interview, conducted in 1982 and never published, constitutes a source of extraordinary value for reconstructing the origins of this experience.

The picture is completed by the testimonies of Ingeborg de Roode, design historian and curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, who co-curated the 2002 exhibition that helped rekindle interest in the playgrounds at a time when they were increasingly being neglected, and Vincent Ligtelijn, author of one of the most comprehensive monographs devoted to van Eyck, whose contribution offers an interpretation attentive to the compositional and urban aspects of the play structures.

These testimonies were also intended to include the valuable perspective of Herman Hertzberger, whose interview, scheduled for December 2025, was postponed for health reasons. Drawing on his years as a member of the editorial board of *Forum* from 1959 onwards, as well as his extensive teaching and design experience, his testimony would have made a significant contribution to conveying the complexity of the history of the playgrounds and, more broadly, of a new way of understanding the architectural discipline, deeply rooted in users' needs and in the everyday experience of space.

A further limitation of the present research is the absence of a direct exchange with Francis Alÿs. Owing to the artist's numerous commitments, it was not possible to obtain his direct testimony regarding the *Children's Games* project. This absence nevertheless opens up a possible avenue for the future development of the research, with the hope that his contribution may be incorporated at a later stage.

The testimonies collected convey a narrative and temporal dimension that is difficult to discern from written sources alone, helping to clarify design processes, ways of using space, and forms of transmitting architectural knowledge. The interviews actively participate in the construction of the research, offering an internal perspective on the phenomena examined and establishing connections between experience, design, and interpretation.

The interviews are presented in transcript form, with minimal editorial intervention intended to ensure readability while preserving the dialogical structure and oral character of the discourse.

## Tess van Eyck

*15 July 2025, Loenen aan de Vecht*

I would start with your relationship with art as a child. In the essay The Child, the City and the Artist, Aldo emphasises the importance of aesthetic experience for children and cites Herbert Read's book Education Through Art. What was your relationship with art like as a child? Did you visit exhibitions? Did you meet any artists who were friends of your father?

Everything happened spontaneously; everything was a discovery. As children, my brother and I played games, drew, and played in the playgrounds. My parents had many artist friends; there was a true collaboration between Aldo and them. We – my brother and I – met many of them, but there was always an age gap. We were Aldo and Hannie's children.
But with Karel Appel it was different. I remember him well: he was one of my father's artist friends who loved children the most and knew how to relate to them. With him, I made a work – I'll show it to you. We were at the table, my father, Appel, and I, and we made this drawing together: if I remember correctly, I did one half and he (Appel) did the other.
I remember visiting his studio with my father when I was still a child: it was incredible, huge, and to me everything seemed even bigger. I remember a huge space, full of drawings and works on the walls. He let me choose one: I picked – according to a child's taste – a painting with some animals, an elephant, a bird. It was incredible; I was ecstatic.
Corneille was also very nice to us children, and Tajiri paid attention to us as well.
We often attended exhibitions with my parents: I remember a Tinguely exhibition very well. My father and I participated in a sort of happening. We had one of those Tinguely drawing machines – I should still have it somewhere.
It was an experience that opened your eyes: it was a highly formative experience to be surrounded by these creative minds, by these people.

And what memories do you have of Carola Giedion? Did you ever meet her?

I remember her as a lovely person, always with a big cat.
I don't recall when she died, but I think she never came here, to this house in Loenen. She was an inspired person and someone who inspired others. She explained things.
Once, Hans Arp made a sculpture and gave it to my father when my father went to visit him – (Tess looks for it and shows me a small, flat sculpture) – it's very sweet.

I remember Carola Giedion's reading of this sculpture, and her reflections with us on forms, volumetric relationships, and outlines. She always conveyed so much enthusiasm, so much energy.

In Aldo's essay *The Child, the City and the Artist*, in a note in the first chapter, Aldo gives a wonderful definition of education: "the realization of ourselves… the personal annihilation of the impersonal." What kind of education did your parents give you and your brother?

My father did not follow any pedagogical theory, nor did he formulate one. He simply educated us through experience. It was the environment and conditions he created that educated us. Everything was autonomous discovery.
My brother attended a Montessori school; I went to a classical high school.
My father was against indoctrination; he preferred us to discover things and experience them. Indeed, the orphanage project, as well as the playground projects, were based on the desire to facilitate and encourage exploration.
He did not think of the child as a child, but as a human being capable of developing a certain awareness, a certain sensitivity.
If a child grows up having certain experiences, we will have a more aware, more sensitive society.
For example, Constant did not speak of the child as a child, but as a human being, as the bearer of a certain carefree spirit, without any constraint or conditioning.
We are who we are because we explore, because we create, because we have certain experiences: the experiences we are allowed to have from birth.
And he – Constant – does this consciously, as an imperative, with a pedagogical method.
My father, on the other hand, educated us through challenges, through experiences, but without relying on theories or preconceived notions.

Speaking of exploration and playgrounds: what memories do you have of these playground experiences as a child?

At first, we explored them: every place and every element of the playground. In the sandbox we made things, sculptures. And then I remember the sensation of feeling the sand between my fingers, shaping these objects. Understanding what you can do with this material.
And by playing with these things, you learn: it's like when you are at the beach. You learn to handle, to shape, to create. To make things with your hands.
There was a large container, the sandbox, but inside there were sculptural elements that we used as tables: child-height tables to make things.
We explored textures, materials, and shapes. We were completely free.

And what tactile memories do you have? I think it's important that children develop tactile skills, that they experience things with their bodies.

Yes: aluminium is different from iron, even just by its smell.
Yes, it was playing as a way of experiencing things. But it was a different kind of play from what you have at Disneyland!
It was exploration. Exploration of material qualities, of concentric and square shapes. But obviously it was not a conscious exploration: we were not aware of what we were learning.
Everything happened spontaneously, while playing. It was the maturation of a spatial awareness. This is interesting.
At first there was only sand; then, as we became more aware, we started jumping from element to element, those concrete cylinders almost always present in the playgrounds.
This is the interesting thing: the development of the ability to know space, of motor skills in space.
Little by little we became braver and more capable of trying other games, of making other movements. We gained awareness of our actions in the playground space. We became braver, until we faced the igloos of different shapes: the space on the structure and the space in between.
I spent years and years on those metal structures.
Hanging from them, sitting on them, experiencing them in a thousand possible ways. Years and years.
We went from object to object, with no plan, doing everything spontaneously.
We chose where to sit, how to move, what to do in the space. You became aware of distances.
You made choices about different types of activity.
Then, of course, there were other children as well.
I clearly remember my brother's presence with me at the playgrounds.

And were your parents with you?

No, usually not.
I remember when they were creating the mural in the Zeedijk playground: my father came with us to the playground to check on the progress of the work.
An interesting thing I remember is that, when he was designing the playgrounds, men from the Amsterdam municipality came to our house with drawings of the sites where the playgrounds would be built.
They discussed, for example, the presence or absence of electrical boxes.
They sat and discussed.
Then the official would leave, and he (Aldo) would say: "I'm sorry, that box has to go!"
It was very interesting – and also fun – to see the ideation and evolution of those spaces, and of the play objects, in relation to existing objects.
Playgrounds did not always arise in interstitial spaces of the historic city.
I also remember playgrounds and their creation in new neighbourhoods – no, not those of the 1950s, but those built before the Second World

War: huge spaces, so wide that they could contain many cars.
But at that time there were still not many cars.
There, he wanted to connect the playground to the environment, for example to the paving of the street...
It was interesting to observe the ongoing development of these spaces, as an outsider. Observing them from outside.

What was Hannie's role in the playground project?

She was very involved in the project: she and Aldo often discussed the playgrounds at length. But I don't remember her being actively involved in the drawing and design.
Hannie officially started working with Aldo when he stopped collaborating with Theo Bosch.
But I remember the long talks and reflections between Hannie and Aldo. She had her studio in the apartment where we lived, in Amsterdam: so the playground projects were always discussed at breakfast, during coffee breaks, at lunch, over drinks... always... all the time!
People often ask me: "What was Hannie involved in? On which project did she work directly, in practical terms?"
It's very difficult to answer this question: it's the mystery of continuous collaboration, which makes it hard to establish what my mother worked on directly and on which project.
I realise that recovering this information today is important, especially now that people are trying to bring to light the role of women in architecture. But it's really difficult.
When my father died in 1999, I tried to understand – not so much what my mother designed – but to hear stories of trips, anecdotes. But she didn't particularly like sharing this information. All secrets! Secrets and secrets! Even my brother doesn't remember much. It's a pity.
The story of their collaboration... I think we are living in a historical moment when people want to know everything precisely.
But back then there were different ways of sharing skills.
I know my father drew everything – regarding the orphanage, and regarding horizontality.
It was my mother who was interested in the aspects of the horizon, of horizontality: everyone says that focusing on horizontal extension was her invention.
But it wasn't about inventing, but about sharing.

I find your testimony and observations very interesting, and very much in line with my thesis: the idea that you acquired spatial awareness, an awareness of distances, by spending time in the playgrounds...

It wasn't something conscious, something we were aware of.
But it simply happened through using and playing with these objects.
And by relating them to one another.

That's exactly the point: the relationship between these micro-spaces for play and the objects for play is what matters. I have seen igloos or other play

objects designed by Aldo installed in isolation.
Very often they are objects that survived demolition and were recovered.
But I think that, used and installed in this way, the important relationship with the other play objects, with the space and with the paving is lost.

Yes, their relationship was important.
People said that Le Corbusier was a fascist, but everything he built proves exactly the opposite, because he started from human dimensions.
And what Aldo did with the playgrounds was exactly the same.

Still about playgrounds: Jacoba Mulder, Van Eesteren's assistant, was the first to have the idea of creating a playground. After that first playground, as we know, hundreds and hundreds followed.

Yes, it was she who emphasised the importance of play after World War II. Aldo did not want to work on the expansion plan with Van Eesteren. Van Eesteren spoke with Jacoba Mulder, and she had the intuition. Unfortunately, I never met her: she was an important figure.
Unfortunately, not many playgrounds remain: there are about twenty or so. Sometimes I happen to see some of these objects designed by my father.
Not far from here, I saw two the other day.
But they are not the same thing.
They are objects produced by a contemporary company, based on Aldo's design, but isolated, without any relationship to the context.

What do you think about the situation of those that remain?

Do you know the playground in East Amsterdam, completely renovated and transformed into a sort of historic monument?
I think it was definitely remodelled: I had a discussion with them, because Aldo could not possibly have designed it that way.
There are two sandboxes, very close to each other, a bench, and greenery creating a sort of fence, so close to the sandboxes that it blocks the passage.
I pointed out that Aldo would never have done that.
Aldo attached great importance to spatial quality and to the discovery of space: it was a principle he also followed in building design.

Have you tried to preserve those that remain, working with the municipality?

Yes, since I returned to the Netherlands from England, but not while my father was still alive.
I think someone wrote something about the safety of these playgrounds in the 1980s.
Of course, I tried, I really did.
There was a man at the municipality who had started this fight...
But when a municipal department decides that an object is no longer

safe, it is taken away, put in some kind of storage, and can be used by someone else.

I don't understand the municipality's decision to install these play structures, these objects that have nothing to do with the original playground.

It's not a decision: they let things happen, without a real plan or programme.
It is precisely the absence of any kind of idea that allows this to happen.
Together with my husband and some people from the Foundation, we had so many meetings with the municipality.
But it was always too late.
At the beginning of the 2000s, they removed the larger playgrounds, and the objects contained in them no longer exist.
They were destroyed. Always too late.

## A Group of Amsterdam Residents

Amsterdam, 5-7 November 2025[1]

The interview was conducted through a questionnaire administered to a group of Amsterdam residents born between 1949 and 1978 who had used the playgrounds designed by Aldo van Eyck during their childhood. The aim was to collect first-hand accounts of their experience of these spaces, with particular attention to the bodily, sensory, and relational dimensions of play.

The respondents came from different areas of the city—Centrum, West, Nieuw-West, and Zuid—and attended the playgrounds primarily between the ages of 3 and 10. In most cases, they played independently or in the company of friends and siblings, while adult supervision was limited

Approximately how old were you when you used the playgrounds?

3–6 years old: 60%
7–10 years old: 96%
11–14 years old: 2%
Over 14 years old: 4%
Other: "When I was older, I took part in activities organised by the playground association": 14%

Who did you usually go to the playground with?

Alone: 48%
With siblings: 56%
With neighbourhood friends: 84%
With parents: 20%

Which play equipment or features do you remember most clearly?
(e.g. metal igloos, geometric structures, sandpits, concrete cylinders)

«Climbing structures of different shapes, and the sandpit.»
(Ingrid Brouwer, born 1953)
«The climbing arch and the horizontal bar for swinging around.»
(Yolanda Bonnes, born 1959)
«I remember all of them: the metal climbing structures, the sandpit, and the concrete cylinders. When we were small, the distance between the bars of the igloos and geometric structures was too wide for us to reach, so we used the lower bars. From the age of seven, we were able to climb them

1 Online questionnaire: https://forms.gle/8DfkTu5SmGNWVf2g9

by using the bars as steps. From the age of twelve, we would simply sit on top of the structures, relaxing and chatting with our friends.»
(Marjolein Blok, born 1962)

Do you remember the tactile experience, the materials, and the sensations you felt while using these spaces?

«The metal was always very cold. Climbing the structure frightened me a lot and made me feel dizzy.» (Yvonne Kostelijk, 1951)
«Yes, the cold metal; we played with sheets to turn the igloo into a tent. I remember the hardness of the stones, which left me with bruises or scratches.» (Anonymous, 1958)
«The funnel-shaped structures and the domes were made of metal; the rest was made of concrete, which was slightly rough.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)
«I remember that, when I was little, the bars were too thick for my small hands, and I became frustrated because I could not climb or swing from them as I was too small. Sometimes my father came with us and lifted me up so that I could hang from one of the rings of the igloo.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«Yes, the metal of the igloos was smooth, warm in summer and cold in spring and autumn. The sandpits were, well… sand.»
«The materials always seemed sturdy and solid. I can still remember the edge of the sandpit, which had a kind of pebble finish.» (Alex V, 1959)

Is it a pleasant memory?

«The playground was always fun; I spent a great deal of time there.» (Agnes Linhard, 1955)
«Still fond memories.» (Vincent Teughels, 1975)
«Yes, very pleasant, because you could climb very well and it was an open space; the sandpits were a place where I spent hours…» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)
«Absolutely; I spent a lot of time there.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

Do you think you learnt anything from using Amsterdam's playgrounds and their elements? Do you feel that you developed a different physical and spatial awareness? What was it like to play in the sandpit or climb the metal structures?

«I do not have any immediate recollection, but I assume that the overall experience was pleasant and undoubtedly contributed to my later relationship with objects and play.» (Max Carbaat, 1949)
«I played at the playgrounds in Columbusplein and Bilbaoplein. I went to Columbusplein every day; it was my favourite playground. In summer, water came out of one of the metal climbing structures—it was wonderful! There was also a large igloo, where I spent countless hours climbing, hanging, and swinging: doing somersaults in pairs, hanging by my arms or by my legs, from the backs of my knees. I would hang upside down,

simply swinging and looking at the world turned on its head. Wonderful. I played with girls from the neighbourhood or friends from school, but also by myself, and I did not mind that at all.» (Evelien Donker, 1977)
«Yes, it made you aware of your physical abilities.» (Marjoleine Roosendaal, 1958)
«I think the igloos are excellent because they invite you to move in every possible way.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«Perhaps a sense of challenge and adventure.»(Frank van der Schaar)
«Spatial awareness, physical ability, the development of balance, group play, and courage.» (Anonymous, 1958)
«I certainly learnt to climb very well.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)
«Through climbing, somersaulting, and jumping, you learnt—unconsciously—to understand your own limits. You sought adventure, sometimes you fell, but then you immediately climbed back up. You felt free to do and try things. And many of the play elements could also be used in other, less obvious ways. Building a tent over the igloo with an old sheet, for example. Selling sand cakes on the concrete elements in the sandpits.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

Van Eyck called them "tools for the imagination" because children continually invented new ways of using these playgrounds. Do you agree? Did you ever invent a particular or unusual way of using the playground elements or spaces?

«Climbing the igloo was more of a physical challenge than an invitation to invent a story, at least for me.» (Max Carbaat, 1949)
«Yes, I agree. The igloo and the other metal play equipment never became boring. As I remember it, I played on them for years, always in different ways.» (Evelien Donker, 1977)
«I remember falling and endlessly swinging around the metal tubes of the igloo—but we all did that as children.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«I always tried to reach the top in different ways.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«I built tents by covering the igloo with pieces of fabric.» (Anonymous, 1958)
«Yes, we built tents by fastening pieces of fabric to the metal igloo.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)

The playgrounds formed a network throughout the city. Did you ever visit other neighbourhoods and recognise these play spaces?

«Yes, the layout of most playgrounds was the same, although they did not always have a concrete sandpit.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«Yes, they were everywhere. You could always find somewhere to play.» (Anjo Witlox, 1960)
«I mainly used those in the Vondelpark, between Amsterdam South and West; sometimes I also went to other places, but not often.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«I went to other neighbourhoods and recognised the play equipment.

But in Nieuw-West the neighbourhoods all looked similar, so it was not particularly surprising.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«Yes, there were several playgrounds in the neighbourhood. I mainly went to other playgrounds because my classmates had playgrounds closer to their homes.» (Anonymous, 1958)
«Of course! There were several in the Vondelpark that I visited, and I went to many others near our home in the neighbourhoods of the Western Belt. I became familiar with and used many different variations.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

What kinds of games did you mainly play?

«Climbing, doing somersaults in pairs, and group games such as "feet off the ground" and "don't touch the ground".» (Ingrid Brouwer, 1953)
«Climbing, running around in circles, and playing in the sandpit.» (Alex V, 1959)
«Climbing on the metal tunnel. I fell several times and once injured my head. I loved playing on the metal bars. We built racetracks in the sandpit with all the neighbourhood children and raced toy cars. We also draped old curtains over the metal tunnel or the bars and pretended to go camping.»
«Climbing, playing "don't touch the ground", or simply sitting on the structure.» (Giovanni Margaroli, 1953)
«Climbing, building tents, and using it as a slide when it snowed.» (Carla Scheffer, 1957)
«Climbing and hanging upside down.» (Anneliese de Boer, 1963)
«Climbing! And sitting on top of the igloo chatting with friends.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«Climbing and playing football on the nearby field. I also remember that we stayed at the top for as long as possible, chatting and preventing the other children from reaching the top.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«Climbing and building racetracks in the sandpit.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)
«Climbing and clambering, building tents with the igloo, playing in the sand, and "selling" sand cakes.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

How would you describe the atmosphere of the playground?
(Safe, stimulating, creative, boring, dangerous…)

«I felt safe, although I vaguely remember falls and grazed knees. It was not boring at all; we had a lot of fun.» (Agnes Linhard, 1955)
«It felt safe at the time, although I would see it differently today.» (Anna Krull, 1955)
«Safe, stimulating, encouraging you to be more daring, close by, and easily accessible.» (Carla Scheffer, 1957)
«It was a safe place. There were never any problems, and it was clean.»
«At the time, I felt safe. Looking at them now, they were not very safe, but they were creative.» (Renee)

«It was simply an opportunity to be active, I think.» (Max Carbaat, 1949)
«The atmosphere was pleasant; it was also a meeting place.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«Socially safe, stimulating, involving an acceptable level of risk, capable of pushing you beyond your limits, and fostering connection.» (Anonymous, 1958)
«Safe and open/friendly—"our territory", not our parents'.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)

Do you remember whether parents were present, or whether children mainly played on their own?

«I think there was at least one mother keeping an eye on the neighbourhood children, but at the time I did not consider it important.» (Agnes Linhard, 1955)
«My sisters and I usually played on our own. Most of the other children did the same. Parents watched from the windows of the surrounding apartment blocks. My mother would clap her hands when the food was ready.» (Giovanni Margaroli, 1953)
«Parents sometimes came to collect us, or the mothers sat on the benches talking to one another.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«We had to go home when the streetlights came on.» (Renee Prins, 1957)
«As far as I remember, we mostly played without our parents.» (Evelien Donker, 1977)
«It happened both ways: sometimes I saw many parents around me, while at other times there were fewer or none at all. It varied, but there were usually always a couple of adults present.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

Is there a particular event or memory connected with the playground that has stayed with you?

«Not really; more a feeling of freedom and enjoyment...» (Agnes Linhard, 1955)
«Every now and then, the sand in the sandpit was replaced. It was always quite a spectacle. Of course, the first time I fell from the tunnel, I ended up with a bleeding cut on my head. My mother said: "Next time, hold on more tightly!"» (Giovanni Margaroli, 1953)
«Falling from the structure and grazing my knees because of the paving stones beneath and around the metal climbing structure.» (Yvonne Kostelijk, 1951)
«The sandpit was regularly emptied and refilled with clean sand.» (Carla Scheffer, 1957)
«Nothing in particular. All the children from the neighbourhood came to the playground after school when the weather was good.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«When I was little, I did not dare climb to the top of the igloo. A friend

of my parents wanted to photograph my sister and me on top of it. In the photograph, I cannot get beyond the first step, while a child we did not know is laughing at the top.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«Once I had a terrible fall from an igloo, but everything turned out fine. I remember that the climbing rock always attracted me, precisely because it was quite unusual. The one in the Vondelpark was nice and large. Wonderful!» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

Do you think the playgrounds influenced the way you experience the city or public space? If so, how?

«At that time, whenever the weather allowed, we stayed outdoors... whether on the pavement in front of the house, skipping rope or playing marbles, at the playground, or farther away on a piece of wasteland...» (Agnes Linhard, 1955)
«Yes. Playing freely with very little. I do not need much to enjoy myself.» (Anna Krull, 1955)
«Yes... Playing within spatial structures such as igloos and tunnels made you perceive the difference between these concepts. Fifteen years later, I studied this in Buckminster Fuller's class. I do not know whether my architectural studies changed the way I look back on my childhood in Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds.» (Giovanni Margaroli, 1953)
«No, because it was such a natural part of life. Perhaps that is why I was not aware of it.» (Anna Dekker, 1978)
«Definitely. I felt free and independent enough to explore the rest of the city as well.» (Carla Scheffer, 1957)
«No, it was simply normal.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«I think of the feeling of freedom and playfulness.» (Anjo Witlox, 1960)
«The fact that you saw them in every neighbourhood created a certain uniformity. Later in life, I realised that Amsterdam had advanced public infrastructure and services at the time.» (Hans van der Meer, 1963)
«It may have contributed to my overall experience of the outside world, like all the things you experience while growing up as a child.» (Max Carbaat, 1949)
«In my memories, the playgrounds were large and formed a fixed point in the way I perceived my surroundings.» (Evelien Donker, 1977)
«Yes, they were familiar places and therefore felt safe and reassuring.» (Marjoleine Roosendaal, 1958)
«Whenever I pass an igloo, it makes me think of the happy times I spent there as a child.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«Absolutely. I am truly a child of the "tuinsteden" [garden-city neighbourhoods]; I could sense the progress they represented, and the playgrounds were part of that. As a child, I found Amsterdam's older neighbourhoods and city centre unattractive. In the tuinsteden, you could always play outdoors, and there were many children. When I was twelve, we moved to the Concertgebouw neighbourhood, which I still find a depressing environment today, including its residents. Of course, this ap-

plies to every resident. Interaction, social formation, and the individual's personal development affect the entire environment.» (Frank van der Schaar, 1959)
«Yes, they were and still are islands of joy for children, and looking back on them makes me happy.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)
«They were places where you could be outside the home without going too far away, and therefore without needing transport, while releasing your energy. They were spacious, especially in the tuinsteden, and thus closely aligned with the urban-planning principle of "Light, Air and Space".» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

Looking back today, what do you think was special or different about these playgrounds compared with other play spaces?

«Simple, but still enjoyable.» (Ingrid Brouwer, 1953)
«These playgrounds were very basic. There was not much else.» (Anna Krull, 1955)
«One word: "Solidarity". A roundabout is fun with three people. Building a racetrack for Dinky Toys in the sandpit is a community project.» (Giovanni Margaroli, 1953)
«It was all we knew, so it did not seem special to us.» (Marjolein Blok, 1962)
«Outdoors and free.» (Anneliese de Boer, 1963)
«I think they were highly recognisable.» (Hans van der Meer, 1963)
«They encouraged me to be creative.» (Vincent Teughels, 1975)
«Playgrounds developed later, for example in newly built neighbourhoods, were often small and boring.» (Evelien Donker, 1977)
«Somehow, you never become bored with the igloo—and they are beautiful as works of art in themselves.» (Didi Daams, 1968)
«The feeling of openness and space.» (Hennie Schwithal, 1955)
«Today's play spaces are not necessarily bad, but they are very predictable; specific pieces of equipment often allow you to do only one thing and nothing else. Aldo's playgrounds were simply different. It was the power of simplicity and abstraction. They almost naturally invited you to seek adventure and use your imagination.» (Ronald Aker, 1960)

## Vincent Ligtelijn

July 17th, 2025, 3pm
Pruisenbergen 14, 1251 CH, Laren (NH)

Let's start with the playgrounds: none of your articles you write that Aldo actively searched for spaces in Amsterdam to convert into playgrounds. Did he tell you this himself?

Yes. In 1951, Aldo began working as an independent architect. He left the Amsterdam Public Works Office, but he still worked for them as a freelancer.
At that time, he often cycled around the city looking for places that could be transformed into playgrounds, to enrich a network of small spaces for play.
The idea of a network wasn't planned from the start—it was something that developed over time.
The network of playgrounds grew little by little.

The architectural historian Liane Lefaivre wrote that these playgrounds formed a kind of network of environmental artworks, especially those in Dijkstraat or Zeedijk. Do you agree?
I'm not sure what she means by "art." If you want to make art, you don't say "I am making art." Art is a product of society.
Herman (Hertzberger), for example, says that Aldo was making art. But I don't agree with him: Aldo wanted to make good architecture.
I think the playgrounds were his most important work. I called it "re-urbanisation": a new way of doing urban planning and architecture, simply, not through a masterplan.

A kind of urban acupuncture operation that anticipated many current theories on urban regeneration and architectural reuse.
Yes, exactly. And this idea grew over time. He did not design the first playground with the conscious intention to work in interstitial spaces or recover them through a detailed network.

A wonderful definition he often gave these spaces was "tools for imagination." Aldo van Eyck believed that through experiencing these places and their equipment, children could expand their imaginative ability.
That's exactly why he used concrete shapes. He didn't design giraffes, elephants, or other fake animals: instead, he left children the freedom to invent how to use these structures.
They were fixed structures, simple in form and material, that did not move—the children had to move their own bodies.

From the late 1980s onwards, these places started to disappear...

Yes, because of the growing number of cars in the city. The Municipality of Amsterdam showed no respect for these places. And when they intervened, it was in the worst way.
It was a slow, gradual disappearance. An ongoing, almost inevitable process.
It was very hard to stop it.
If you want to see how they ruined one of the best playgrounds, just go to Bertelmanplein. Have you been there?

Yes, it's enough to say they fenced off the playground with iron bars: there's only one entrance! Unbelievable.

No, there is no sensitivity at all. They used all kinds of plastic, in all colours. And the rubber flooring replaced the terracotta bricks. Unbelievable. There's no thought behind these changes.
Yes, that's why I keep stressing the urgent need for educational, aesthetic, and architectural action in society.

Speaking of education, what do you remember about van Eyck's way of teaching and communicating with others?

He never tried to impose or transmit his theories in a sterile way.
I remember him well as a teacher: we worked in a big classroom, and he never told us how we had to design. No! We had to discover it ourselves, following our own path.
He helped us, listened to us. He followed step by step the journey that would lead us to define our projects on our own. He did this sitting beside us.
He never tried to impose his point of view or tell us how we should design or draw. No. He encouraged us to do it ourselves, to give our best.
He stimulated imagination. It was incredible because, although he had a very strong personality, as a teacher he was extremely empathetic.

How did you meet him?

When he came to Delft as a teacher. I was still a student.
Then, while still a student, I became his assistant: I helped younger colleagues, always under his supervision. I don't know why he chose me, but I couldn't say no to Aldo van Eyck!
After graduation, I became his first assistant when Max (Risselada) left for the United States. This was from around 1969 to 1974.
His course was in Interior Design, but he had a very particular idea of interior space: for him, inside and outside were the same thing.
We did exercises on urban projects at different scales, small and large.
Basically, we organised the course: at that time he was very busy in Amsterdam.
He never gave frontal lectures, he didn't like talking about his projects.

We had to push him, convince him to do it. But he never did it spontaneously. He never gave lessons about projects he had done or was doing.

Not even more theoretical lessons, like about art?

Not at Delft. He talked about art and artists, but he mentioned them at the worktable, while looking at the projects. He didn't give special art lectures.

What was Aldo van Eyck's biggest contribution to the Delft school in this regard?
His pedagogical approach and the activities he proposed in class: attention to differences, to uniqueness. It was a new and different way of seeing and teaching.

About his work: he was one of the few architects who contributed greatly to both practice and architectural theory, always with a poetic touch. You worked on both his theoretical and architectural work: what do you think about that?

Yes, he was a poet who made architecture. And at the same time, his texts and articles perfectly reflected his work. "Texts followed the forms": words followed the shapes and architectures, not the other way around. That's why in the monograph on Aldo that I edited, I paired his work with his theoretical reflections. For example, in the Hubertushuis he worked on colour and also wrote about colour. His written reflections always came from the design process, never the opposite.

Regarding his writings, did the new and now-famous Forum editorial group, active from 1959 to 1963, have an impact on the architectural world?

Yes, especially Aldo and Bakema, with a new and international approach to architecture. Both gave lectures in different countries. They were very strong together: two very different personalities who helped each other. Bakema helped Aldo a lot, especially after the orphanage was built, when Aldo didn't have much work: he was a difficult man, with few clients. Two very strong men, both.

Just think that in the same year Aldo wrote *The Child, the City and the Artist*—a difficult and complex book, not for everyone—Bakema appeared on TV talking to a general audience about architecture in a very simple and understandable language. It was 1962.

Replace with: The book was never published, but it circulated so widely in American universities that it influenced many people. Aldo was well known in America. Bakema was a more sociable man who could easily communicate his ideas.

Why did you decide to publish the posthumous essay together with the collection of his writings?

It was incredible that there were no books about Aldo van Eyck: neither books on his work nor collections of his reflections and writings. One day I was in a bookstore in The Hague, in the Architecture section: I realized there was no monograph on Aldo van Eyck. So I decided to write one.
We worked closely and very well together on that monograph. He chose which projects to publish and which not, what kind of book to make, whether it should be a hardback or paperback edition—we discussed and decided every detail together.
Later came the idea to publish his writings; unfortunately, he had already died—he died a year before the monograph was published, so he never saw it.
While working on the monograph—I lived in The Hague then—we often discussed the possibility of publishing his collected writings.

About the posthumous publication of *The Child, the City and the Artist*, how did you choose the images to include with the text?

The original manuscript didn't have many images. We used the images Aldo had chosen, adding others that we thought Aldo had in mind. We tried to select images closely connected to his way of thinking and capable of clarifying his ideas.

## Jacoba H. Mulder

Interview conducted by Francis Strauven on 30 March 1982

From the end of 1946 until the beginning of 1951, Van Eyck worked under your direction as a civil servant in the Urban Development Department of Amsterdam Public Works. What memories do you have of that collaboration?

He was introduced to Public Works by Van Eesteren, who at the time was head of the design division within the Urban Development Department. I had already been working there since 1930, and Van Eyck was entrusted to my supervision. The first assignment I gave him was a small subdivision plan south of Rivierenlaan, at the bend of the Amstel. He worked on it for quite some time, but I heard nothing about it. After a few weeks, one day I thought: «Now I really must go and have a look.» But he was still sitting in front of a large blank sheet of paper. He had nothing yet. And when I asked him: «So, how is it going?», he said to me: «Well, I once designed a chair, and it took me a year. I worked on it every day.»
That is how serious a man he is. He found that subdivision plan such a complex assignment. Until he had fully understood all the information, he could not get anything down on paper. I no longer remember exactly how things went after that, but later I gave him a different kind of assignment.

The playgrounds. How did the idea for this assignment actually arise?

It is rather curious how I came up with it. At that time, there were actually only a limited number of enclosed playgrounds in Amsterdam. They belonged to the Amsterdams Speeltuinverbond, the Amsterdam Playground Association. They were fenced-off grounds with a playing field, sandpits, swings, seesaws, and the like. But for young children in whose neighbourhood there was no such playground, there were practically no facilities.
I was living in such a neighbourhood at the time, and every morning, on the pavement in front of my house, I saw a little girl using a small spade to dig away the soil around a tree until she reached the sand, and then she would play in it. You know, Amsterdam has been entirely raised with very fine sand, and around the planted areas there is a layer of black earth over it. I found that so sad, and it made me realise that it would be appropriate to provide at least one sandpit in every neighbourhood for children like her.
In 1947, we did this for the first time, as an experiment, at Bertelmanplein, which happened to be in the neighbourhood where I was living at the time. I then asked Van Eyck to design it. And he did so with great enthusiasm. He drew a large sandpit and, on his own initiative, designed

several simple pieces of play equipment: tumbling bars and a small climbing arch. He was also determined to include benches for the parents. I found that very typical of him.
This playground was so well received by the Mayor and Aldermen that, quite soon afterwards, they made one million available for several more to be built.

So it was on your initiative that Amsterdam began constructing this kind of «open» playground?

Yes, and from 1950 onwards their number continued to grow. Just for fun, I looked up a few figures: in 1950 there were 12, in 1955 there were 54, in 1960 there were 234, and in 1965 there were 437. Today there are more than 700. Van Eyck designed most of them, including all that play equipment, the various climbing domes, arches, and frames. He continued doing this for a very long time. Now, I believe, he no longer does it.

He continued until 1978. After that, he received no further commissions for them.

Yes, I had already noticed that. Here in this little public garden, near Rubensstraat, some of those new pieces of play equipment have been standing for some time—dreadful things, all in garish colours. Van Eyck would never have done that. I believe they now order them from some company or other.
Van Eyck, by contrast, succeeded in creating attractive places with extremely simple means, places that fitted very well into their surroundings. Sometimes they were a real breath of fresh air for the neighbourhood.
(Shows a photograph of the now-demolished playground near Dijkstraat beside a photograph of the same site before the playground was built.)
When you see that space, when you see the result he achieved there with such simple means, I find that extraordinarily skilful.

But this had to make way for the metro. It is remarkable how often precisely the most beautiful playgrounds have either been brutally mutilated or simply disappeared. Take the one near Zeedijk, which he realised in collaboration with Joost van Roojen. It was so terribly damaged that it became completely unrecognisable. It was one of the few successful examples of the «integration of the arts», about which there was so much talk in the 1950s. During the period in which Van Eyck worked at Public Works, he was also a member of the Nederlandse Experimentelen, the Dutch Experimentalists. How did people at Public Works view a civil servant who took part in such a turbulent artistic movement?

At Public Works they found that very strange, but I found it very interesting and great fun. Appel made the mural Questioning Children for the coffee room in the Town Hall, but the people who came there to drink coffee did not understand it; they found it dreadful. They wanted to whitewash it.

Van Eyck then went to defend Appel's work before the mayor, and later he gave a lengthy speech to a number of aldermen and city councillors who were having some refreshments in the coffee room before the council meeting began. I was not there, but he had told me that he was going to do it.
In the end, the Mayor and Aldermen did give in to the coffee-room public, but they did not have the mural painted over. On the advice of Merkelbach, who was then the city architect, they had a small wooden partition built in front of it, which, fortunately, was removed again in later years.
Van Eyck later put me in contact with several of the Experimentalists. I can still see him coming in with Appel. Appel had that stubbly hair at the time. He was very poor then, as indeed were the others. I bought some of their work.
(Shows several small paintings by Appel, Corneille, and Constant; the small work by Appel contains figures strongly reminiscent of Questioning Children.)
I actually find this small work more beautiful than all those large, brightly coloured things he made later.

I believe you also played a certain role in the way Van Eyck received the commission for the Burgerweeshuis, the Amsterdam Orphanage.

Perhaps indirectly. When Van Meurs, who was then the director of the orphanage, was looking for an architect, he came to see me. He already had several names in mind, and he asked me what I thought of Van Eyck. Perhaps he had come across his name through the playgrounds.
I strongly recommended Van Eyck. I said: «When that man immerses himself in something, he does so extraordinarily thoroughly.» So, in fact, I did not draw his attention to Van Eyck, but I encouraged the interest he already had.

Later, when he was a member of the editorial board of Forum, Van Eyck strongly opposed post-war CIAM practice. In the public lecture you gave in 1966, when you took up the position of Reader at the University of Amsterdam, you quoted a text by Van Eyck in which he summarised his criticism of CIAM practice. How do you view this criticism now?

I did find that criticism useful, but you must not forget that the new neighbourhoods were still very young at the time and had not yet become fully lived-in.

In that quotation, he spoke in particular about the inability of the contemporary urban planner to master large, multifaceted commissions. But is it not true that you yourself played an important role in the development of the Bijlmer?

That project did indeed originate while I was head of Urban Development, but that does not mean that I agreed with what was eventually

built. That is quite a story.
The design was by Nassuth, a German urban planner of Egyptian origin who worked in our department. At the beginning of the 1960s, when industrialised construction was emerging here, we had a minister, Bogaerts, who wanted to promote this building method, and who said: «If Amsterdam is willing to undertake high-rise construction, I will allocate it additional housing quotas.»
That was tempting, because there was still a severe housing shortage. Nassuth then designed the Bijlmer almost entirely as high-rise development: 90 per cent high-rise and 10 per cent low-rise housing.
I never agreed with that, primarily because I found the large empty spaces between the buildings extremely inhospitable, and also because I suspected that many of the ideas he believed he could realise in this high-rise development—large residential terraces on every floor, communal facilities such as a nursery and doctors' consulting rooms at the base of the buildings—would not be implemented, as later proved to be the case.
I then had an alternative plan developed, with 40 per cent high-rise, 30 per cent medium-rise, and 30 per cent low-rise housing. At the time, Joop den Uyl was the alderman. The models of these two plans were hung in his office, and I naturally explained to him that I considered my proposal more humane and therefore better.
But Nassuth's plan, with its beautiful hexagons, proved much more attractive to Den Uyl, and that was the one he ultimately chose.

## Ingeborg de Roode

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, July 11, 2025, 3:00 PM

The 2002 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum reignited interest in Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds, many of which had been abandoned in the 1990s. How did the idea to dedicate an exhibition to these spaces and the theme of play come about?

I remember it well. The idea came from Liane Lefaivre, who at the time was working at TU Delft. So it started outside the museum. I had just begun working at the Stedelijk, and that was my first big exhibition, opening almost a year later. That's how it all began.
We decided to collaborate: she handled the architectural aspects, the spatial study of the playgrounds; I, as an industrial design historian, was very interested in the objects.
When architects write about design objects, they often focus on the architectural aspects. I thought it was necessary to investigate the playgrounds also from the perspective of the objects composing them. Even in Francis Strauven's major biography, there's no critical reflection on the objects.
So we decided to start research on archival photographs: it seemed important — and more interesting — to see how these spaces and equipment were actually used.

It was 2002, and Aldo van Eyck had passed away just three years earlier. Did you get to know him or discuss the exhibition with him? And what about Hannie van Eyck?

Unfortunately, I never had the chance to meet Aldo van Eyck. I believe Liane contacted him. But I did get to work with Hannie van Eyck and the Van Eyck Foundation, especially regarding the choice of archival material like models and drawings.
I even managed a brief interview with her: it was a short but intense meeting, and if I'm not mistaken, the interview is published in the catalog. It was an important moment for me.

The exhibition was crucial in reviving interest in these playgrounds, which had been abandoned in the '90s. Were you already aware of this at the time?

Yes, only a few playgrounds remained intact; others were partially preserved or absorbed by the city.
The sandboxes — we call them ... — were the elements that resisted best, given the solidity of the concrete.
Municipal regulations changed, and unfortunately, many playground

surfaces were updated and altered. Some playgrounds had wonderful brick flooring, whose texture was obviously part of the design. Replacing it with rubber slabs caused a radical change to the playground.
Also, some play elements were modified or replaced because they were considered unsafe, especially climbing structures.
By the late '90s, these playgrounds were gradually disappearing. I think the exhibition was a chance to tell their story and awaken a collective awareness.

Van Eyck already had a long relationship with the museum: from the 1949 COBRA exhibition to the "Purple Room" with Constant and The Cube Project in 1971. Does the figure of Sandberg fit in somehow?

Yes, probably, but I'd have to do deeper research to answer better.
Sandberg was one of the most important directors of the museum, especially in the '50s and '60s: back then, there were very few curators, and he must have been the real link to many artists.
But to really understand more, we'd have to do more research and refer to those who studied that period, like Caroline Roodenburg.

Why did you decide to hold an exhibition about this kind of urban acupuncture in a contemporary art museum?

Our museum collects design objects, not architecture, but design.
There are also architecture programs.
For me, it was logical to hold this exhibition here: in 1975, the Stedelijk hosted an exhibition about the Amsterdam School.
It was natural for me to host this exhibition here, focusing on the design aspect of these structures, these tools composing the playgrounds.

From the catalog, it's clear that archival research was fundamental. I read that Van Eyck himself encouraged you to start systematic research. Is that true? What did he think?

No, Aldo didn't, because I never met him.
I think it was logical to start with archival research in the Amsterdam city archives. The Amsterdam Public Works office commissioned these projects, so it felt natural to start from the municipal archives.
And I realized, as I told you, that no one had ever done research on the objects as industrial design.

The before/after photos of the playgrounds are very powerful: they show the urban potential of minimal interventions. How long did you work on this image collection?

Not long: I started working here in 2001, and the exhibition was in 2002. We worked intensively for one year.

Other beautiful elements of the catalog are the maps and plans of the playgrounds, which clearly show their distribution in Amsterdam's urban fabric. How was that data reconstructed?

Yes, those plans are very nice. It was work done by Liane Lefaivre and her research group at TU Delft.

How did you design the exhibition layout?

The layout was done by Kossmann de Jong, also an architect, and in my opinion, he did a great job. He did something very interesting: he used photos as large screens.
The exhibition was in a wing that no longer exists after the 2012 museum expansion: it was a '50s building designed with large floor-to-ceiling windows, both on the first floor and the ground floor where the playgrounds were displayed.
It was a request by the museum's longtime director, Sandberg, to properly light the displayed objects, especially the sculptures.
But for the playground exhibition, it was important to show the original plans and drawings by Aldo van Eyck: you can imagine how the light coming through those huge windows disturbed the experience and viewing of the material.
So the architect had the idea to use wonderful photos of children using and experiencing the playgrounds to shield the light from the windows.
Together with the graphic and photographic material, we also installed the original metal climbing and somersault elements: it was the last exhibition before the building's renovation, so we were free to use the space, including the floor, without fear of damaging it.
What was interesting was that children visiting the exhibition could freely use this equipment and compare the old photos to the contemporary use of these structures.
Since 2002, we have acquired playable sculptures in the museum garden so people can play with them outdoors as well (photos available by email).

About those large-scale images of children on the playgrounds, I was struck by the similarity with the Children's Games exhibitions by Francis Alÿs: large screen projections, moving bodies, children playing, the scale of space as a central theme. Was the layout also designed to evoke physicality and experience?

Yes, the entire exhibition, including the first floor, was related to toys and children's games, with objects designed specifically for play and for children.
I think it was important to show how much capital and effort the municipal administrations of the time invested in creating so many playgrounds after WWII.
Before the war, there were gardens, maintained by associations, not playgrounds: you had to pay to enter these gardens. So they were not common spaces designed for play.

What we wanted to show and tell in the exhibition was the total abstraction of these playgrounds, through which, and by playing in them, the child feeds imaginative thinking: if you look at how playgrounds are equipped today, most are objects with specific forms that look like animals or fantasy characters. They are not abstract, not open to imagination. That was our point.

Yes, one of the most beautiful definitions, which greatly influenced my research, was given by Van Eyck and quoted by you in your essay: Playgrounds are tools for imagination.
Later, Richard Sennett writes that spatial ambiguity, its labyrinthine clarity, the materials chosen close to the city (wood, steel, concrete) induce a certain spatial knowledge. What do you think?
How important do you think play and toys are in spatial education? Do you think it's important to stimulate a child's sensitivity to aesthetics and architecture?

I think so. The structures composing these playgrounds remind me of architecture, especially igloos. Of course, I can't prove it, but I think that, by using them, people, especially children, can to some extent become more aware.

As Hannie van Eyck says in her interview, nowadays games are made to make children passive; even playgrounds often are. Here I find a great affinity between Aldo van Eyck and Bruno Munari: both came from an artistic background. For both, visual and tactile stimulation of the child through open, unfinished play was important.
What games were the playgrounds of Aldo van Eyck related to in the exhibition?

Well, we didn't want to create any direct relationship between the toys and the playgrounds. We simply displayed some toys from our collection. You know, we have toys: in 1965 we had an exhibition about children's toys, *Kinderspel*. Since then, we have been collecting toys.
Those were the toys on display, selected from our collection through internal research.

Earlier you mentioned the importance that the municipal administrations and Amsterdam's Public Works Office gave to play and children's playgrounds in the postwar period. Did the exhibition highlight Jacoba Mulder's role in inventing the playground system?

I don't think so; I don't remember. But I think we did not focus specifically on Jacoba Mulder.

## Max Risselada

Delft, July 7th, 2025, 10:30 AM

Let's start from the beginning: how and when did you meet Aldo van Eyck? You did an internship at the van den Broek and Bakema studio, finished your studies with Bakema and Van Eesteren, and you were the latter's assistant. But how did you become Van Eyck's assistant?

I started studying architecture in 1956 — yes, 1956! I had no idea what it meant to make art or architecture. To me, "making architecture" just meant building something. I was very attracted to that idea and followed exactly what my teachers told me to do—the old Delft school, Granpré Molière's very academic style. I had no experience and didn't question that method or the way of thinking about architecture or architectural drawing.
Then I started getting interested in modernism, in the work of people like Rietveld and Duiker, mostly thanks to some colleagues and classmates who were already involved in topics that the courses tended to ignore. In 1961, I joined a study and discussion group on architecture, the Architecture Study Circle (Bouwkundige Studiekring, BSK), with Michel Polak and Pjotr Gronggrijp. It was a small group, about ten people: we discussed not only architecture but also art in a transversal way[1].
In 1962, I was involved in organizing an exhibition called *Autonomous Architecture*[2], at the Prinsenhof in Delft, inspired by Emil Kaufmann's studies. I was the group's secretary, so I took care of organizing and coordinating the works to be exhibited. I remember we went to the Bibliothèque Nationale in France to take large photographs of Boullée's drawings — you can imagine how exciting this was for a young student. We also went to Nelly van Doesburg to borrow drawings, including those of Café L'Aubette.
My contribution was mostly related to music. At that time, I taught mu-

1 Dirk van den Heuvel, Madeline Steigenga, Jaap van Triest, *Lessons: Tupker/Risselada*, SUN, Amsterdam 2002, p.14.

2 It was an exhibition organised by the BSK, in which the students displayed «the work of DeStijl, Cubism, Dada, the Nieuwe Bouwen, Adolf Loos, Gaudí as well as work by Van Eyck. One of the favourites of the Circle students themselves is the Tessaract by Van Doesburg, a three-dimensional depiction of various cubes that can be read in various ways, for example as a movement from the inside to the outside and vice versa. The Tessaract thus becomes a kind of diagram for the kind of architecture that 'breathes in and out', a paraphrase of Van Eyck's ideas. The exhibition is a revelation for many of the people who come to see it. It presents a theoretical rather than a historical approach that ignores the conventional classification according to style. What is more, art and architecture are on display side by side. The students have managed to accumulate a wide range of original works, including work by Mondriaan and Schwitters. In Meudonthey have also picked up work by Van Doesburg, generously made available to them by his widow Nelly. On the weekend itself, the interdisciplinary approach is completed by a lecture on music by composer Henri Pousseur. », van den Heuvel, Steigenga, and van Triest, *Lessons: Tupker/Risselada*, SUN, Amsterdam, 2002, p. 16.

sic and was very interested in contemporary music, like Berio or Boulez. I discovered this kind of music by myself.
The development of these new, international, interdisciplinary, modern ideas could not happen inside the academic context of the time. Delft's professors were still tied to tradition.
It was around this time that we started talking with Aldo van Eyck. He still lived in Amsterdam in 1961-62. He was working on the book *The Child, the City, the Artist* — although I didn't know about his work in America then.
That was my first encounter with Aldo.
When I finished my studies and military service, people said Aldo would join Delft's faculty — which he did in 1966. So, I asked him if I could become his assistant.

In 1965, van Eyck took part in a summer school in Rome, and you accompanied him as his assistant. What kind of summer school was it? Do you remember his contact in Italy? Maybe Carlo Aymonino or Bruno Zevi?

Oh, it was a workshop organized by Columbia University. Aldo's work was already known in the US. The manuscript of *The Child, the City and the Artist*, supported by a Rockefeller Foundation grant, circulated as photocopies in American universities — you can still find it in some libraries. I know for sure one copy is in Philadelphia and others in various US faculties: his work was known. When I became Aldo's assistant, Bob Malz came to work with us from Harvard — he took care of the book *School House*[3] *at that time*. I was very motivated to work with Aldo, but unfortunately, I think he wasn't really interested in mentoring young people around him. I never really worked with him; I supported him. He was involved in teaching but never really integrated into the academic system — at least not in a positive sense, supporting the growth of new teachers or researchers. He wasn't that kind of professor. At the same time, I started following two other "heroes": the Smithsons. But that's another story. Before working with Aldo, I had been in the most important Dutch studio of the time: Van den Broek and Bakema. I think I was really inside the heart of Dutch modernism — and I wanted to stay there. That's why I also went to Russia later[4].

In 1966, Van Eyck started teaching at TU Delft: what course did he teach?

Yes, in 1966 he became professor of Interior Design. He taught once a week. I was his only assistant, and the course had eight to ten students max. We put plans and drawings on the table and discussed them one by

3 Bob Malz et Al., *School house. Selection on the Architecture of Education*, Techische Hogeschool, Delft, 1970.

4 Together with Gerrit Oorthuys and Otto Das, Max Risselada curated the exhibition *Architecture and Urban Development in the USSR*, 1917–1932.

one: it was all very beautiful, very stimulating. Looking at the drawings and following the processes was wonderful: everything was open.

But was it really interior design?

Well, not exactly — it was a trick! Officially the course was registered as interior design, but in reality it was very broad and free. The classes were held in a building in Delft's historic center, by a canal, separate from the main architecture faculty. It was the same building as the Art History Department — which was an interesting combination. We collaborated, and the Art History classes were held next door.
Van Eyck wasn't hired full-time at first; he was a contract professor. This gave him a lot of free time.

So, formally, he was a professor of interior design, but he was actually teaching architecture. How were the courses structured? What themes did he propose? What kind of relationship did he have with students? What was his pedagogical approach?

Students worked on small projects, like houses along the canals — dike houses, facing water — which dealt with vertical development. Or they designed small public buildings, light pavilions, like floating tourist offices on Amsterdam's canals.
But the most famous exercises were those about the zoo: Aldo asked students to design animal houses — for hippos, giraffes... very different animals. This forced students to rethink housing totally: the form, function, and needs of each inhabitant. Imagine a house for a hippo, a huge water animal! It was clearly a trick, a way to bypass contextual constraints and focus on spatial logic.
The exercises had little or minimal context. While Bakema was interested in the city, the ground, and urban context, Aldo preferred simpler, isolated, independent exercises.
Of course, houses along canals had a context, even a historical one. But over time, the course got more popular: many students and more assistants joined. The number of assistants quickly grew from one to four. At that point, Aldo couldn't follow individual students or their progress anymore.
He was present only during collective critiques, when drawings were hung on walls; he no longer followed the individual learning process. And that made things more complicated.
It was also a particular time for him: the late 1960s. He was very involved with revolutionary movements in Amsterdam, like the Provo movement — though he didn't fully understand them. He wasn't an activist and didn't go to protests. He studied the city and talked about it, but that militant aspect wasn't his. It was a mental change, I think. He was also heavily criticized by students at Delft[5].

5 See Rutger Huiberts, *A Short-Lived Democratization,* in B. Colomina, I. G. Galán, E. Kotsioris, and A. M. Meister (eds.), *Radical Pedagogies*, MIT Press, p. 31.

At that moment, I decided to distance myself from him and follow other paths.

How much was art present in his studios and lessons? Did he talk about art, show artworks, connect with avant-gardes or contemporary art?

No, he didn't give lectures. Not in the classical sense. He only talked at the table, in front of drawings. It was the same during Team 10 meetings: that was his way of working.
He never spoke about his own projects, only others'. And art was not part of his lessons.

Let's go back to the early 1960s, when Van Eyck was visiting professor first at the University of Pennsylvania and then at Washington University. The result of that work was the essay *The Child, the City, the Artist*. What impression did the original manuscript make on you?

I believe there are three copies of the manuscript preserved in the Van Eyck archive — I have seen them. Some pages have small corrections in red, probably language notes or details. Aldo was very precise.
The manuscript is also interesting graphically. It's all typed by Aldo himself, on A4 sheets. Chapter introductions have a special, very neat layout. And importantly, the images are full-page, always A4 size.
In my opinion, the publication edited by Strauven and Ligtelijn is a wrong interpretation: it's not faithful to the original manuscript. It's a complete rewrite in the selection and arrangement of images.
In the essay, Aldo talks about the child and the artist — in relation to the avant-garde world and the COBRA group experience.
When he talks about the city, he doesn't show his projects but those of other Team 10 architects. One figure per page, full format. There are images by Candilis, the Smithsons... all projects presented at Otterloo.
These are the same ones published in *Architectural Design* in 1962, in the issue after the first Team 10 meeting.

The manuscript came right after the Amsterdam orphanage and before the Nagele school and several playgrounds already built.

*Max's wife: It's interesting that when Van Eyck started working on Amsterdam's playgrounds, his daughter Tess was still very young. Probably watching her move and use space influenced his work.*
Yes, *The Child, the City and the Artist* must be read in this frame.
It's fundamental to understand and deeply study Van Eyck's work on playgrounds, the orphanage, and Nagele: these are projects where he could explore children's interaction with space.
It's important to see what happened between the late 1940s and the 1960s, what he was working on, and the experiences he gained.
As I said, in the Netherlands we knew nothing about this essay for many years.

Yet, since the 1960s, the text has circulated as photocopies in American universities.
I think Van Eyck had been in America before 1960, even before the formal invitation from McHarg in 1960.
I found some interesting documents by Alison Smithson — she closely followed Aldo van Eyck. She saw herself as the historian and archivist of Team 10. In the early 1980s, she wanted to document the work and mutual influences of the group members.
In the 1950s, for example, Bakema was a visiting professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Van Eyck probably followed him then.
Despite what Strauven and Ligtelijn write in the book notes, I am convinced Van Eyck went to America before 1960.
I need to check more carefully what Alison Smithson wrote about this.
The orphanage was completed in 1960, but Aldo was removed from the site before the end, and his assistant finished the project due to disagreements with the client.
So, for a long time, in the late 1950s, Van Eyck had no commissions and no new jobs. I believe that's when he started writing.
He was working on some competitions, sure, but I think he had already begun the essay or at least thought about it.
In 1962, Bakema invited him to enter a competition with him. In 1963, he entered and won the church competition in The Hague.
The essay was written and delivered to McHarg in 1962.
The reference to "The Artist" in the title comes from Aldo's acquaintance with Carola Giedion. I believe Aldo was sent to Switzerland because of his Jewish faith: it was 1936-37, and his mother's family was Jewish and came from Suriname.
In Zurich, Aldo met and got close to Carola Giedion, who introduced him to avant-garde artists—the "Artist" in his manuscript. In Zurich, he also met Hennie, who later became his wife, and together they had their first daughter, Tess, born in Zurich on May 17, 1945.
Before moving to the Netherlands at the end of the war, Carola Giedion sent Aldo to Paris (1944), where he met surrealists and van Doesburg's wife. In 1945, Aldo and Hennie traveled to Italy, visiting Guarini in Turin and Palladian villas near Vicenza and Venice.
In 1946, Aldo started working at the Amsterdam Public Works Department, led by Cornelis van Eesteren. Probably Carola Giedion or Nelly van Doesburg pushed for this job, since during the war Sigfried Giedion was stuck in the US, teaching there (another US connection for Van Eyck!).
Tess, his daughter, played an important role at that time: there are wonderful archival materials dedicated to her, signed by artists and poets.
Working at the Public Works Department under van Eesteren meant dealing with the eastern expansion plan of the Dutch capital, but Aldo was not convinced by Van Eesteren's modernist principles of city planning.
It was a woman, Jacoba Mulder, who gave Aldo the task of designing the

first playground: the idea of a playground network was not Aldo's, but Jacoba Mulder's.

This is a big mistake in the common narrative of Amsterdam playgrounds.

This is a great historical error because the idea came from Jacoba, an unmarried woman without children — a condition that allowed her to work in a public office, since married women couldn't work then.
Miss Mulder noticed that children had no safe place to play in the street; they had to watch out for cars and transport.
From a figurative and compositional point of view, Van Eyck's playgrounds owe much to Hans Arp's artistic research, which was Aldo's artistic basis. But I think the playgrounds also owe a great deal to the post-war focus on body care: there was a strong idea of a healthy society where movement and sports were fundamental. For this reason, a physiotherapist was involved in the playground projects.
So I don't think Aldo invented this "machine for play" alone: he probably had support from professionals like physiotherapists inside the Public Works Department. Someone suggested ways to climb and use the body.
In the mid-1940s (1937-49), the Dutch CIAM group De 8 was invited by van Eesteren to work on the Nagele project. The group was expanded to include the second Dutch CIAM group, Opbouw, from Rotterdam.
It's important to underline that the site plan composition isn't just Van Eyck's: the drawing and design work was a collective CIAM activity, and only at the end did Aldo make the schemes and boards to present to CIAM.
In my opinion, the drawing and building layout are attributable to Bakema, who at the same time was working on a new residential neighborhood south of Rotterdam.
The public space and green design are attributable to Aldo: the buildings are immersed in greenery. I think it's interesting for you to study Nagele as a city conceived as a big playground.
Nagele was completed in 1958, confirming that after these projects (the school, playgrounds, orphanage) and with no other commissions, Aldo had time to focus on writing.
When Aldo returned to the Netherlands, he got in touch with the COBRA group, especially Constant. These artists, unlike Aldo, had experienced the war directly and used painting and art to express the traumas and painful memories of war. Their drawings, with quick and violent strokes, looked childlike.
We must remember that childhood was already a focus at the beginning of the 20th century, with photographers concentrating on children's play and experience in the city. Think, for example, of Nigel Henderson's photos, showing how children start to appropriate urban spaces from floor experience to bicycle use — which is a conquest of moving space, faster. Aldo's photos in Africa, those in *Forum*, and threshold themes all have roots in

If we now jump forward to the mid-1990s, when you reconnected with Aldo van Eyck, what can you remember?

In 1994, I had a very positive reunion with Aldo and Hennie van Eyck. That year, at Aldo's suggestion, we organized in Delft an exhibition on Lina Bo Bardi's work, promoted by the student group Stylos. We had initially looked for another venue in the Netherlands, but it was not possible, so we brought it to Delft. Her work is an important correction to the dominant image of Brazilian modernism, still too identified with Costa and Niemeyer.
My assistants and I were responsible for the installation, jokingly nicknamed "TEAMMAX" by Leo van Wingerden, with a stamp. Van Eyck actively participated in the opening with a very heartfelt, impactful lecture. This reignited a more relaxed relationship between us, including with Hennie.
A year later, in 1995, we went together to Brazil. We were filming a documentary about Lina Bo Bardi's work, produced by VPRO and directed by Paul Meurs. Aldo was involved as the narrator. There are beautiful shots of him walking inside Lina's buildings — he even convinced a Brazilian TV cameraman to follow him on those visits!
I was asked to accompany him because I seemed to have a calming effect on him during delicate moments.
Then, in 1999, a year after his death, I received an official invitation from the São Paulo Architecture Biennale to curate the Dutch contribution. The project, which I organized with Paul Meurs and Cornelius Mangold, was called *Past Modernism – Three Moments in Postwar Dutch Architecture*. It gathered four exhibitions: three monographs dedicated to Aldo and Hennie van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, and Mecanoo, and a restored re-edition of my old show *Raumplan versus Plan Libre*, with Daniel Micke's help.
The section dedicated to the van Eycks was based on a previous exhibition that Hennie agreed to reinstall despite Aldo's recent death. She worked with Vincent Ligtelijn and Abel Blom to update the materials. Hertzberger also collaborated on his section. For Mecanoo, it was the first time they had shown an overview of their work — including a beautiful scale model of the TU Delft library, made under Robbert Nottrot's guidance[6].
To hold all this together, I designed a large exhibition system: it was intense but very meaningful.
In a way, it was my way of saying a final goodbye to Aldo.

6 See also D. van den Heuvel, M. Steigenga, and J. van Triest, *Lessons*, op. cit., p. 91.

## Francis Strauven

Leuven, 12 September 2025, around 2:30 p.m.
Itinerant interview, conducted between the professor's living room and archive

I would start with the question: where and when did you meet Aldo van Eyck? How did your first meeting happen?

The first time I heard about AvE was in the early sixties, I think in 1963, when I studied architecture at the Brussels St. Lucas School, where one of my professors, Willy Van der Meeren, showed me the book *CIAM '59 in Otterlo*. He had participated himself in that congress and he drew my attention to AvE's contribution, featuring at the very beginning of the book. In his discourse 'Is architecture going to reconcile basic values?' AvE offered a striking summary of his ideas.
Subsequently, I wanted to explore his articles in Dutch *Forum*, but strangely enough my Brussels school appeared not to possess this review. I found It sometime later at the library of the Antwerp Academy.
The first time I saw AvE and heard him as a speaker was at the International Design Seminar (INDESEM) at the Faculty of Architecture in Delft, in 1967. He was an engaging speaker, passionate and inspiring. I was very impressed and asked my Dutch friends if there was any publication on AvE, or if someone was working on a monograph. As it proved not to be the case it occurred to me that maybe I should write a book on Aldo van Eyck myself.
But in the following decade I got plenty of other things to do. I worked on an inventory of Art Nouveau architecture in Brussels, and in 1970 I realized in collaboration with Geert Bekaert a big exhibition on post-war architecture in Belgium: *Building in Belgium 1945-1970*. And in 1973 I collaborated with the Horta Museum on the first monographic exhibition on Victor Horta. And it was through the appearance of the special issue on Team 10 of *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in 1975 that I felt urged to concentrate on AvE. So I made a summary of what I already knew about him and drew up a list of questions that I wanted to ask him. On 4 June 1976 I sent him a letter, explaining my interest in his work and ideas, and my plan to investigate and expound them in a book. Since he did not reply, I called him after a week. "Oh, is that you? Of course, come and visit me. Let's talk about it."
So the first time I went to Loenen I had a list of questions, which I had carefully written down. But when I arrived, I didn't even have the time to ask my first question before Aldo started talking, talking, talking. For hours. Since I was strongly interested in everything he was saying, I did not interrupt him but I recorded everything.
Back home, I transcribed everything and I drew up a detailed chronological overview of the facts which I already knew about his youth, his

education and his early practice until 1954, completed with the new information he had confided to me: 6 typewritten pages which I mailed him, as a preparation of our next meeting. For that meeting I had again prepared a list of questions, but Aldo had anticipated most of them and had elaborately annotated my 6 pages with red comments. If you like I can show it to you, downstairs, in my archive.

Yes, that would be great! – the interview moves downstairs, where he digs up some documents: his first letter to Van Eyck, and the 6 annotated pages.

For the next meeting I made a detailed overview of his biography from his Zurich period until 1956: 8 pages, this time interspersed with many questions. Aldo reacted in the same way, writing his answers and reactions on my pages, adding even two more pages. And when commenting his answers when we met, he added still more information. So, in that way I was able to collect a treasure of data at first hand, which I never would have found in any archive. In due time I incorporated all the data I was able to collect in a detailed chronological synopsis of 6 double pages. Look, here it is. It's a framework in which I inserted all the information I collected about AvE, his biographical data, his projects, his writings, his role in CIAM, and all this differentiated by year, by month, by day.
Furthermore I also interviewed some 40 people who knew Van Eyck as fellow student, as colleague, as co-operator, as a teacher or simply as a friend. 25 of these interviews were published in *Niet om het even*, a festschrift published in 1986 after AvE received the Rotterdam Maaskant price in 1982. But it is a book in Dutch. Do you read Dutch?

No, I don't read it, but I can translate it with a common translator! Professor, but how long did you work on this book? Aldo van Eyck - *The Shape of Relativity* is the most detailed and exhaustive text about his life, from his education to his design activities. The first version came out in Dutch in 1996 and the English translation two years later. How did the writing happen? Tess van Eyck told me that you worked with her father for at least 10 years to write this important text.

My work on AvE took indeed many years: first the research in various archives, libraries and other sources, and then the actual writing. After having collected the necessary material, I did a close reading of all Aldo's writings and in order to situate his ideas in their Dutch intellectual context, I studied the development of architectural thinking in the Netherlands, from the De Stijl-period until 1960. And as I said, I had some 40 interviews with people who knew him at different stages of his carrier. This research took place between 1974 and 1982, so it took 8 years. Writing my PhD took 4 years, from 1982 to 1986. But it appeared as a book only 8 years later, in 1994. Why this long delay? In the first place I expanded the text with substantial additions. I added the discussion of a dozen of projects which I had not dealt with in my PhD, and I also

discussed AvE's teaching at the TU Delft. And as I had to resume my teaching, at that moment at the Limburg School of Architecture, this writing took me 2 years. Subsequently my finished text was read and improved by the copy editor of Meulenhoff.
Afterwards I collected the illustrations, mainly in the photo archives of AvE. In general Aldo agreed with my preselection, but he was extremely critical and choosy in defining the definitive selection. Next, he was also very critical about the layout proposed by the graphic designer chosen by Meulenhoff. Aldo corrected his proposals according to his own design views. This resulted in a conflict with and the resignation of the designer. Then Aldo assumed himself the layout. As he explained to me, his approach aimed at an equivalence of text and illustrations, at the establishment of a non-hierarchical coherence between unequal parts. He did the layout of the first chapter after which he asked me to continue. So, in practice I made most of the layout of the book, while he himself took care of the more complicated cases. So, I remember him working a whole day on the layout of the stairway pictures of the Hubertus House (p. 586-587 of the Dutch edition, p. 578-579 of the English one).
During the preparation of the book I still published 4 texts on AvE: an article on the Hubertus House (1980), a little book on the Orphanage, the Catalogue paper of the AvE exhibition of 1989, and an article on the Moluccan Church in Deventer (1993). All things considered, I think my work on AvE until the publication of the Dutch version of my book covered about 15 years.
And it took 4 years to produce the English version. The translation was entrusted to Victor Joseph, a native speaker who had studied at Cambridge University and lived in Amsterdam. He did his best but in the matter of architectural thinking, he often missed the point. So I had to correct him frequently. My corrections became so numerous and fundamental that I invited him more than once to stay some days at my home, so that we could go through his translation in order to rectify it. Then he got tired and kept a pause for half a year. My corrections and discussions with him took up several months. The English text was finally copy-edited by Gregory Ball, an excellent translator living in Ghent.

Did you have the chance to meet Jaap Bakema?

Bakema was one of the first persons I wanted to interview, long before I was asked to do interviews for the Maaskant Price. But unfortunately he died early 1981. Nevertheless, thanks to the recommendation of Aldo, I was friendly received at his Rotterdam office by one of his former collaborators who gave me access to Bakema's still intact office room. There I found the nearly complete archives of the post-war CIAM and Team 10. A real treasure of documents, far more than one could have found in any official institute. Everything was fairly classified and untouched since Bakema's death. I still remember the emotion of being alone in that room, free to consult everything I was interested in. Moreover I was allowed to make Xerox copies of everything I wanted.

We move to a corner of the professor's studio, where the photos taken by himself are archived. The photographs are divided by subjects: photos concerning biographical aspects (family, cities where van Eyck lived and studied, photos of the English primary school), photographs of the playgrounds and so on…

These are the photographs I personally took at the King Alfred School in London, the primary school where Aldo van Eyck was educated. What struck me was the open-air auditorium in the construction of which Aldo had participated, at the age of only 6.
This is the photograph I took of Aldo's birthplace in the Netherlands, in Driebergen. And this is the house where he grew up in London.

The education received by Aldo van Eyck, non-traditional and non-authoritarian, at King Alfred School in England, led him to assign an important role to the educational processes of society. In the essay *The Child, the City and the Artist* he gives a wonderful definition of education: "the personal annulment of the impersonal." He discovered how important self-realization and experience are in learning. Can we say that the playgrounds are also a derivation of his awareness in terms of education and of his non-authoritarian upbringing, in the sense that they were meant to be freely experienced by children and citizens?

I don't think we can make such a causal connection. Surely his education had a great influence on his way of being, as it has on every other person. But there is no evidence that he had in mind his childhood at King Alfred School when he was designing the playgrounds. And as far as I know, there were no play devices at King Alfred School. Children played in nature, climbed in trees. constructed huts, experimented with elementary engineering. There were no sandpits or somersault frames.

Richard Sennett writes that spatial ambiguity, its labyrinthine clarity, the materials chosen as a sample from the city (wood, steel, concrete) induce a certain spatial knowledge in the citizen.
Do you think we can say that, through the daily use of these spaces, related to each other, made of elementary objects in materials belonging to the city, as van Eyck said, children learned the use of space? Do you think we can define the network of Amsterdam playgrounds as a landscape of spatial learning where children independently learned to manage space, to touch and physically experience the materials?

We can hope that the playgrounds had a salutary influence on the playing children, but what it specifically implies is almost impossible to trace. Unless you would manage to trace and to interview people who used to play in the original playgrounds.

Professor, in the essay *Neglected Pearls in the Fabric of the City*[1] you also write

1 Francis Strauven, *Neglected pearls in the fabric of the city*, in Liane Lefaivre, Ingeborg de Roode, *Aldo van Eyck. The playgrounds and the city,* NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2002, p. 67.

that in the design of the metal climbing structures, attention is paid to the dimensions and positioning of the elements, allowing children to practice on them. And to do this he used his own children, who tried these structures first. Was it van Eyck who told you these events?

Yes, yes, he told me himself. But I don't know to what extent this verification that Eyck carried out happened for all the elements he designed. Certainly, he placed great importance, down to the last detail, on the elements he designed; he had to be sure that, especially the climbing elements, could be used by children, even the youngest. He was very attentive to the dimensions between the metal bars of the climbing frames. The distance between the bars had to be large enough in order to avoid the head of a child becoming clamped between two bars.

Another thing that strikes me in your account of the playgrounds is the attention given to perceptive aspects: Aldo van Eyck studies and analyzes what could be seen from where. You write that the playgrounds were the architectural transcription of Klee's theories on the mobile viewpoint. In what sense? How important was the perception of citizens for Aldo van Eyck?

Paul Klee's theories were an important reference for Aldo van Eyck, especially during his early teaching at the School for Applied Arts in Amsterdam (1951-66). His teaching and the exercises he proposed were mainly inspired by Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. He held a course of basic design, involving a series of guided exercises aimed at giving the students an insight into the interplay of elementary spaces and forms. In essence these exercises required the student to define forms and spaces that were at the same time stable and dynamic. The way I describe these exercises in *AvE – the shape of relativity* on pp. 198-201, is a close reproduction of what Aldo told me. The accompanying drawings are a copy of the sketches he drew on that occasion.

I think that in the narrative that has been made over the years about the playgrounds, the importance that the Municipality of Amsterdam and the entire public works office had has been overlooked. The playgrounds are told as van Eyck's invention, but perhaps the attention that the municipality itself gave to the need for spaces for play should also be emphasized: the attention to the physical and psychological well-being of children. And last but not least, the importance of Jacoba Mulder's coordination in managing this network. What do you think?

I don't think that I overlooked the role of the Amsterdam Municipality. Perhaps you overlooked what I wrote on p. 101 of my book. There I explain clearly that Amsterdam had a considerable tradition in the area of children's playgrounds. I also point to the difference between the old 'speeltuinen' organized by the city, which were fenced off with high metal fences. One had to be a member for having access to them. So the public playgrounds were a new concept, introduced by Jacoba Mulder. They were not-fenced spaces, and were supposed to be controlled by the public. In note 101 I quote my interview with Mulder. So the way she

got the idea to build small public playgrounds in every neighborhood of the city is really not an urban legend. And the construction of the playgrounds was not an initiative of AvE. He never made a general plan of a network of playgrounds he wanted to construct. AvE simply designed the playgrounds which the city asked him to design. The Municipality identified one by one the places where to build them. In the beginning it were far apart lying spots without any interrelation. In the long run they grew into a network, but there was no general plan. The fact that the playgrounds were built piece meal, without general plan, appears clearly from the chronological inventory I composed. I drew up that inventory at the section Gereedmaken Terreinen of the Amsterdam Public Works Department. They had a complete archive of all the playgrounds designed by AvE. In 1980 I examined all of the 730 projects and made a filing card of each of them.

In 1980, at the conclusion of a happy thirty-year period 1947-1978 that saw 730 playgrounds built in Amsterdam, you created the first mapping of the playgrounds. Precisely in the 1980s began the slow decline of these spaces: they were forgotten, replaced, left to decay. Do you remember these spaces? And do you remember when they began to disappear?

I remember very well when I saw for the first time the playground at Dijkstraat, in the center of Amsterdam. I found it almost by chance while walking in the evening. It was not easy to find because it was located in a closed space between two houses: it had replaced an old house destroyed during the war. It was magnificent to find it like that, by chance, in the sleeping city. It was made of nothing, yet it was wonderful.
I also remember the playground at Zeedijk, but it was already in a state of near abandonment: such a pity. It was a masterpiece, a very successful example of integration between painting and architecture.

In the essay you wrote for the catalog of the 2002 Stedelijk Museum exhibition, you cite a thesis from the previous year by Charlotte Vermeulen and Ann Wildro from the University of Ghent: a 2001 mapping of the playgrounds still existing and their condition. At the time, there were still 90 playgrounds in a more or less acceptable state. Today, fewer than 20. Are they destined to disappear?

Yes, the two students visited all of the 700 sites I had recorded and made a detailed report of the state of the playgrounds at that moment: those that had disappeared, those that remained and their condition. Here is their thesis, and look, on page 193 they included a diagram that shows the condition of the playgrounds at that time. You see that already then, we are talking about 25 years ago, only 92 playgrounds remained intact. The remaining ones were either completely gone (216), or altered or modified in design and elements (237), or replaced with new play equipment (154), or never realized (32).

If we make a leap from design activity to theoretical and written research of van Eyck: in 1959 he joined the editorial board of Forum. The themes van Eyck developed in the journal's editorial work in those years were later expanded, deepened, and collected in the essay *The Child, the City and the Artist*. Do you think "Forum" was, in this sense, an important training ground to reflect on and develop a personal reflection on architectural themes? What is the relationship between Forum and the essay?

I would not call it an essay. *The Child, the City and the Artist* is a collection of essays, it's a book which he wrote at the age of 42, with the intention to deliver a comprehensive exposition of his ideas. He got the opportunity to do so when he was offered a grant by the University of Pennsylvania. As to the relationship to Forum, we can observe that the majority of the essays was never published before, neither in Forum nor somewhere else. On the other hand, some important essays like the those on the configurative discipline and the Dogon were first included in ChC&A before they appeared in Forum. And the very important essays like *Quivering Absolutes* and *Interiorization* were only published in ChC&A.
As to the relation between his Forum articles and the 1962 book, you can find some clues in the introduction I wrote to our edition of the book p. 6-13.

What did van Eyck say about the essay *The Child, the City and the Artist*? Why was it never disseminated in the Netherlands or in Europe in the 1960s when it was written? Why was it never published except posthumously?

After AvE handed in his typescript of *The Child, the City and the Artist* to the University of Pennsylvania in August 1962, he contacted several publishers, first George Braziller and Macmillan Company in the USA, then Ullstein in Germany and Studio Vista in England. They all showed interest, but after reading the manuscript, they all shied away, stating that this unusual book did not fit in their collection. Nevertheless the typescript is reported to have been widely circulated in the USA where it was fed through the photocopier in many a university. But due to the refuse of four publishers, AvE gave up, and converted parts of the manuscript into articles which were published on different occasions.

Why did you decide to publish the essay posthumously? Did you have the opportunity to discuss with van Eyck the publication of the essay and the collection of writings? And why the choice of images, many of which were different from the original?

When I first contacted AvE in 1976, my initial plan was to publish, next to my monograph, also his works – his œuvre complète – and his collected writings. This included of course *The Child, the City and the Artist*, of which AvE gave me a copy. It was self-evident that this book had to be published along with the collected writings.
A few years before his death Aldo had started working himself on the

edition of his collected *Works* with the assistance of Vincent Ligtelijn. After Aldo's death Vincent finished this edition in 1999. Subsequently, in 2000, Vincent and I started working on the Collected Writings. Initially our intention was to produce two editions, one in Dutch, the other in English. But owing to economic reasons we quickly decided to limit ourselves to the English version.
As to *The Child, the City and the Artist,* its original version was a thick bundle of stenciled paper in quarto format, and in consult with Hannie we decided to edit it as a handsome book, in the same format as the collected writings (17x24 cm). And in order to illustrate some of Aldo's descriptions we added pictures of Aix-en-Provence, Vigevano, and Venice from our own photo collections. Hannie entirely agreed with this but her daughter Tess would have preferred a facsimile edition of the original stenciled edition.

Regarding Forum and *The Child, the City and the Artist* and his theoretical work: I think van Eyck was one of the few architects able to express himself both through design practice and through theoretical reflection, managing to formulate almost his own philosophical theory of space. Terms such as "In between," "Twin Phenomena," "Labyrinthine Clarity" are his. He wrote using a language as persuasive as it was poetic, which is still in use today.

Yes, I fully agree. 'Identity', the 'in-between', 'doorstep', 'place and occasion', the understanding of architecture as 'built meaning', the 'multi-meaning' of architectural form, 'polycentrality' as an alternative to classical subordinative centrality, all of these are notions that became part of international architectural thinking and speaking. Today they seem so evident that one thinks they were always common matter, since time immemorial. But I remember clearly the architectural terminology of around 1960, when the architectural discourse was purely functionalistic, both in the architects' talking and their teaching, just like in their international publications. It was AvE who introduced and thematised the above mentioned notions in the course of the sixties, after which they gradually penetrated through a multitude of channels into architectural thinking. The introduction of a range of new concepts in the international terminology of a whole professional field, that's indeed no triffle. I think it's an extraordinary achievement. So, remarkably enough, AvE appears to have exerted a broader international influence through his writings than through his buildings

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As early as 1923, Le Corbusier identified the cause of the «current misery of architecture» in the inability to see and the lack of aesthetic sensitivity on the part of the client: the «EYES THAT DO NOT SEE» belonged to bankers, industrialists, merchants, but also to the average person, indifferent to the qualities of the spaces they experienced and inhabited.

According to the Swiss master, the solution is to «demand space»—but making a demand presupposes a developed spatial awareness. «Man comes into the world equipped with eyes, but only learns to see through a slow process of education», Gropius would write in *Apollo in Democracy*. In today's society, characterized by excessive specialization of knowledge and an educational system founded on pure rote learning, «the capacity for sensitive perception has remained atrophied, and with it the sense of beauty. [...] Only through a slow educational process that stimulates visual experience from the very earliest childhood can we awaken understanding».

In the not-so-distant past, before architecture became established as a specialized discipline, building was a practical knowledge rooted in tradition and therefore in the community. A community which, as Steen Eiler Rasmussen noted, «took part in forming the dwellings and implements they used. [...] The anonymous houses were built with a natural feeling for place, materials, and use and the result was a remarkably suitable comeliness».

Today, within a society dominated by abstract, notion-based knowledge, the houses and spaces in which people live often lack quality, without them even being aware of it. Citizens move through and experience poorly qualified urban spaces, most often in a state of distraction, as noted by Benjamin. And yet it is precisely within domestic and urban space that we take our first steps, learn to know the world, and begin to understand it through our senses. The quality of space inevitably shapes the quality of our learning processes; it inevitably shapes the formation of our very being.

We may therefore ask: how can we foster a demand for high-quality architecture? How can we cultivate, even among non-experts, a sensitivity toward adequate architectural and urban environments? And, further, how can we bridge the gap between specialized knowledge and common knowledge when it comes to space and architecture?

