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Het Schip:  
Michel De Klerk's Eigen Haard Project

Despite taking up an entire block with its red brick exterior, there is nothing monolithic or monotonous about the façade of Michel de Klerk's *Het Schip*. The building's varied sculptural embellishments and swelling undulations constantly yield up new delights to the roving eye. Ranging from one to five stories high, the building employs a wide variety of rooflines, windows, doors, and expressive motifs. The building contains such diverse forms and architectural details that the different sides of its triangular block might very well belong to three different buildings. Yet at the same time there is a cohesive unity and rhythm –an organic wholeness- to this idiosyncratic building. It is not excessive or baroque, and even almost one hundred years after its completion it still manages to feel decidedly modern.

This building is not some palace of culture, museum, or commercial attraction, but one of Amsterdam's oldest social housing projects. In the wake of the nineteenth century's rapid industrialization and urbanization, housing for the working classes came to prominence as a pressing social issue in Amsterdam. At the turn of the century, state and municipal governments faced pressures to address the overcrowded and unhygienic tenement housing that housed most of Amsterdam's poor and working class residents. One result was the Dutch Housing Act of 1901, which compelled local government to address these problems, and provided financial resources to create new housing stock for the poor, (to this day, the Netherlands retains the highest percentage of public housing stock of any EU

country). Municipal government partnered with new cooperative housing associations, often set up by workers' collectives, religious groups, and socialist organizations, in order to develop projects. It was one of these cooperatives, the socialist Eigen Haard ("Our Hearth") that developed much of the housing in the Spaarndammerbuurt neighborhood, including *Het Schip*.

Eigen Haard commissioned architect Michel De Klerk to carry out the project after the contractor of the adjacent block ran into financial difficulties. De Klerk had apprenticed with Eduard Cuypers, who along with Berlage was one of Holland's most prominent architects at the time. While working for Cuypers De Klerk befriended Piet Kramer and Jo van der Mey. The work of these three men would form the basis of what came to be known as the Amsterdam School, characterized by its expressive use of red brick, decorative architectural sculpture, and organic forms. De Klerk's work for Eigen Haard, and *Het Schip* in particular, largely defined the style of the movement and to this day retains its iconic status in Amsterdam, as well as continuing to function as low-income housing.

Spaarndammerbuurt is a port neighborhood, bounded by canal and the docks on one side, and by train tracks on the other. *Het Schip* is located on a triangular shaped block between two other blocks of social housing, built between 1913 and 1921, (*Het Schip* itself was initiated in 1917, and completed in 1921). The building makes use of Amsterdam's traditional perimeter block, with the building encompassing the entire lot and enclosing gardens and a semi-private central courtyard. In keeping with tradition, too, it is built entirely of red brick with wooden windows and ceramic roof tiles, though these materials are put to quite

different ends here. The building is five stories, also typical of Amsterdam, at its height, though, it steps down in various niches and at two of its corners. One corner features a turret containing a post-office (A). The shorter Western side of the building faces the entrance to the adjacent public housing block. It is stepped back from the street and features a tall steeple-shaped structure (B). The North side of the building contains a public school (C), which is distinguished by its darker brick and a recessed façade. An opening on the North façade provides access to the interior courtyard, which also contains a meetinghouse for residents. At ground level, the courtyard is surrounded by private garden plots. Many units on the upper stories feature balconies, whether on the block's interior or exterior. There are 102 apartments of 18 different types in the plan, in keeping with the variety of forms deployed on the exterior.

It is the façade that is the most immediately striking feature. The building's surface steps forward and back in various places, and makes various textural uses of the ubiquitous red brick. There is a consistent horizontal movement in the building's surface, with bands of brick and tile, as well as long balconies tracing lines across the building. Windows, doors, and sculptural motifs appear in a variety of forms. The building's overall form –as its name suggests- and its decorative details, evoke nautical imagery, from waves, to shells, to tropical birds (D). While there is a great attention to detail and craftsmanship in the decorations, none of them appear extravagant or baroque, rather they are incorporated into the surfaces and the unity of materials. The restriction of materials not only integrates the building into Amsterdam's architectural fabric, but also suggests functionality and a down-to-

earth sensibility. The whimsical decorative details emphasize the building's organic and expressive qualities without disrupting this unity or the sense of clean functionality and modernity conveyed in the building's overall form. The design balances a density of housing units with open spaces, greenery, and natural light. In these aspects there is a concern for health, both physical and social, as well as for cleanliness, and efficiency. These concerns would have seemed especially relevant in the wake of the condemnation of the substandard tenement housing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Het Schip* would have seemed eminently modern and hygienic compared with the dark rowhouses that had housed urban workers since Amsterdam's industrial expansion.

*Het Schip* is clearly different, on a number of levels, from contemporary and subsequent public housing projects. It rejects completely the modular uniformity and standardization of typical industrial worker's housing of the time. While these schemes maintained linear blocks of housing with separate individual entrances, *Het Schip* instead suggests, with its interlocking organic forms, a more holistic social unit, and thus a more organic and communal set of social relations. The block's self-contained, inward-looking space emphasizes the shared living space of residents. This is reinforced, too, by the social services and amenities shared by residents –the interior courtyard, the meetinghouse, school, and post office. These elements form the basis of a shared social space.

This holistic sociality derives in part from the sense of continuity evoked by *Het Schip's* design. The complex is thoroughly integrated into the urban fabric of the city, as noted before, through its use of traditional materials and forms (brick, the

perimeter block). The visual allusions to village and agrarian life also suggested continuity between traditional Dutch ways of living and Modern urban life for workers who were often first or second-generation urban dwellers. This continuity was made actual, too with the unprecedented amenity of a telephone booth in the building's post office –allowing residents to make calls to family who remained in the countryside. But if these residents were new to the city, the design and living arrangements of *Het Schip* provided them with a sense of ownership over their urban space that is not a consideration of the vast majority of public housing projects. The building's unique form and decoration established a sense of local identity, and a visual vernacular that paid homage to the residents' nautical occupations (as the neighborhood largely housed dockworkers). *Het Schip's* design imbued the Spaarndammerbuurt with a specificity and sense of place, making it an urban landmark that residents could readily identify with.

This sense of dignity and ownership of residents over their community was a major component of the Eigen Haard project. Influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, and the philosophies of William Morris and John Ruskin, the Social Democratic local government and socialist housing cooperatives believed design and aesthetics could serve as a moral tool to uplift workers and the poor. Not only was beauty considered spiritually uplifting, but the craftsmanship and aesthetic appeal of social housing projects were also considered to elevate the dignity of workers and pay homage to their work. The faceless, standardized rowhousing that characterized early public housing developments in England was seen as dehumanizing and degrading. *Het Schip's* organic shapes and crafted sculptural

adornments fly in the face of these monotonous industrial developments. Like Morris' Red House (E), another red brick dwelling, it quotes and makes use of a wide variety of forms in order to distinguish the building and create visual interest. This expressive variation emphasized that individuality and humanity of residents and workers.

While De Klerk and the Amsterdam School were deeply influenced by the Arts and Crafts critique of industrial standardization and dehumanization, they did not, however, reject modernity and urban life. De Klerk's project instead embraces its own version of modernity, seeking to produce livable, humanizing, innovative forms, which emphasized residents' individuality, while also seeking to integrate them into meaningful collective life. For municipal government, too, aesthetics were an important aspect of the city's housing problem. De Klerk's Modernism was especially appealing to Social Democratic leaders like alderman F.M Wibaut, (who later commissioned De Klerk to work on the Amsterdam Zuid redevelopment). Wibaut, who had criticized other public housing projects for their lack of innovative design, found a set of aesthetics here that matched his progressive vision for the city. The avant-garde and forward-looking nature of de Klerk's architectural style, coupled with its social concern for residents, made it a well suited visual expression of the Social Democratic Party's idealistic political program.

The Eigen Haard design doesn't rely on pure aesthetics in its project of improving the lives of the poor however. De Klerk's plan takes a number of social services as focal points. One, which was particularly novel, was the inclusion of a post office in the building. With regard to design, the post office interior (F) is every

bit as crafted and attended to as the building's exterior. A large half-moon shaped paned window (G) allows for the entry of ample natural light into the lofty space. Modern looking shiny blue tile covers the walls and floor in patterns that mirror the textural use of brick on the façade. As with the exterior, whimsical details abound. A stained glass window on the door of the phone booth depicts stylized birds sitting on telephone wires. The post office was intended both as a social space for residents, and a means of providing them access to communication and banking. Despite the Dutch post office's rapid expansion during the first decades of the twentieth century, many poorer neighborhoods lacked access to postal services. *Het Schip's* plan, however, moves postal services out of the realm of luxury and posits it as an essential amenity for the poor. The post office also included a telephone booth, a newly popularized technology that would have also perhaps seemed incongruous in a social housing development. Here, an elevation of the poor to middle class standards is suggested through providing access to previously out of reach conveniences.

There was certainly a paternalistic aspect to this project of imposing middle class values on the poor. As the city's temperance movement dovetailed with Social Democratic politics, planners pointed to giving worker's new access to banking as a way to discourage alcoholism, the idea being they would deposit their paychecks rather than spend them at taverns. Inherent in the idea of raising the dignity of the poor, and endowing them with amenities and services that had been considered the domain of higher classes, was a goal of reforming their character and restructuring society. The planning of the development around a school, too, emphasized the

importance of education in reshaping workers' lives. In keeping with nineteenth century traditions of social reform, education was seen as a crucial tool in this endeavor. Thinkers like Robert Owen had initially posited "that the governing powers of all countries should establish rational plans for the education and general formation of characters of their subjects". With *Het Schip*, De Klerk sought to implement this "character formation" through design, updating nineteenth century reformism via a twentieth century avant-garde sensibility.

The building's living units expressed similar concerns with the character and social health of individual residents. Apartments were not lavish –there is a definite emphasis on economy and efficiency in the modest sized rooms. Yet the interiors too seek to impart a sense of dignity and self-worth. The kitchens are clean and elegant in their simplicity, while still featuring some decorative details in the tiling. (It is worth noting, too, that many of the architects of the Amsterdam School created designs for furniture and kitchenware). Many of the units' doors and windows feature stylized designs, which are simple yet unique and attractive. Plentiful natural light and access to the outdoors, whether in the form of gardens or balconies, are omnipresent. Units also featured a living room centered around a stove, epitomizing the integrity of the family unit and middle class values. De Klerk designed the units according to 18 unique floorplans, again rejecting the standardization of industrial workers' housing. Again, these decisions reflect a concern with valorizing residents' individuality and giving them a sense of ownership over their homes.



The architectural form of *Het Schip* might be said to be more radical than the reformist political project it embodied, but its egalitarian ideals, and its emphasis on services and quality of life for workers and the poor, inarguably provided real benefits to residents. Upon De Klerk's death in 1923 one tenant wrote a letter to the socialist newspaper *Het Volk*, which underlines, if not the success of the project for residents, at least the focal point it served for the socialist cause:

"He has departed, the builder of our houses. How shall we workers' wives remember this unflagging workman for what he has done for our husbands and children? It is as if every brick calls out: Come all workers, and rest from your labours in the homes that await you. Is not the Spaarndammerplein a fairy tale dreamt of as a child, as something we children never had?" (Groenendijk and Vollaard)

The project's paternalism isn't unproblematic, but the planners of the Eigen Haard complex sought to invest residents with an unprecedented level of ownership and identification in their housing. Despite preserving middle class values of family and hard work as models for the working class, the project also had a significant communal aspect. Residents shared space and services and were encouraged by the design to create a shared social life in taking ownership of their community.

Ultimately the project, while avant-garde, was based in ideas of continuity rather than rupture. The Social Democratic utopia *Het Schip* sought to embody was not so much radical break with the past, but an alchemical transformation of traditional elements into new forms of social life -looking simultaneously backwards and

forwards. The building's form underscores various aspects of this continuity. While it differentiated itself in the urban landscape with its idiosyncratic appearance, and situated itself as a landmark through its unique local vocabulary, it also maintained material and formal continuity with Amsterdam's built environment. It established a continuity with vernacular forms of traditional Dutch village life, using organic motifs and imagery, (windmills, the vocabulary of the cottage), to evoke a holistic idea of social life that bridged the spatial and historical ruptures of industrialization and rapid urbanization. Continuity, here, signals wholeness, and imagines a future where human sociality is not disjointed by the ruptures of the class system and economic inequality. *Het Schip* poses a new vision of modern urban life characterized by organic sociality and nourishing stability, and which finds its basis in the foundation of egalitarian collectivity.

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## Images



A. Post Office exterior and turret.



B. Western side and steeple.



C. Northern side and school.



D. Decorative sculpture, Hildo Krop





E. Red House, William Morris and Philip Webb



F. Post office interior

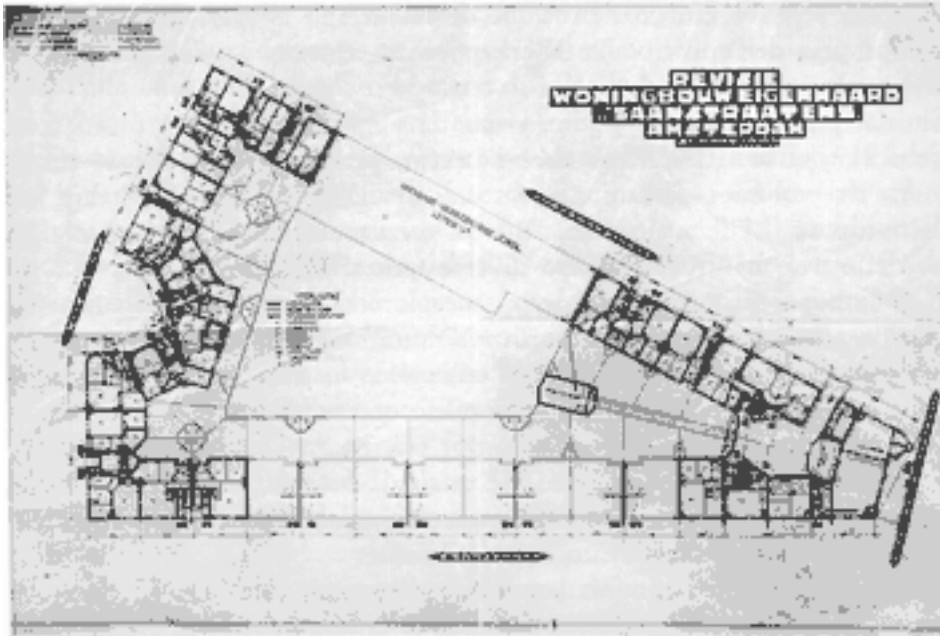




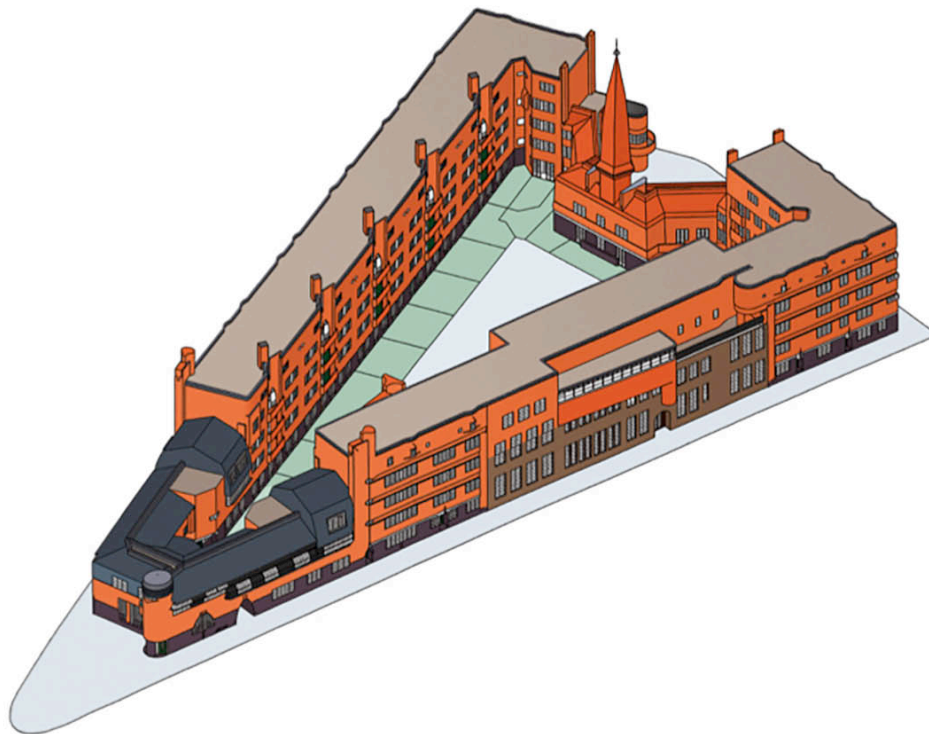
G. Post office window



H. Aerial View of Spaarndammersbuurt, Het Schip is the triangular block adjacent to railroad.



I. De Klerk's plan



J. Modern rendering of the block by Museum Het Schip.