

The Forks -  
First lecture

*Republic of the Valley*



## FOR THE MOMENT I WILL REALISE THE IDEA OF THE CITY BLOCK AS THE 'HANDY SQUARE' THAT I DESCRIBED IN LECTURE XXII.



This was descended from a real project, that of Haverleij, near Eindhoven, in the Netherlands. The idea of marooning city-blocks like picturesque ruins in a park was a pleasing conceit. But there were, sadly, too many Architects in the large-scale Developers, Bouwfonds, for them to allow JOA direct access to their in-house sales team. We were not able to talk the sales-team through our concept so that they would understand that although the Handy-Square looked, at the small scale of initial drawings, like the mid-20C social housing, with open access decks, from which Bouwfonds themselves descended, the reality would be more like a monastery with an arcaded walk around an English garden square. Architects have always been a problem for JOA. Their self-fulfilling Modernist determination that the Future can only be born out of the corpse of the Past has been a main impediment on the 20C's ability to use 'Architecture' to solve the problems that their project of *L'Architecture Autre* can not.

*I will first 'draw' my idea of what a 'whole city' could be as a diagram. But my symbols for its parts will be 'realistic'. My basic city-block is derived from the 'Handy-Square'. So I draw its corner-towers and its double-volume 'hand-working ground' as a 'battered' Khumba-base.*

As proof of their mistake in keeping JOA away from the people who directly sold their huge output of dwellings, I bring evidence from their own country that was already in existence when they exercised their mistaken 'Modernist Architect's taboo'.

## It took JOA a long time to realise the little development of the Groenmarkt.

'Groenmarkt' means the 'greens', or Vegetable, Market. It is in the the oldest part of Den Haag.

*The Aesthetics Committee, staffed only by Architects, hated its Classical 'look'. They pleaded with JOA to 'do something in steel and glass'. They argued that "the light in Holland is quite different to that of England". In reply, I tried to persuade them that the Netherlands of old had big windows because, being so early devoted to the banking essential to the trade at which they were the most proficient in Europe, they had need for the kind of reputation for solid wealth that accompanies the giving and receiving of credit. The large windows were there so as to allow their fellow-citizens to see that very Dutch combination of spartan living together with the accumulation of costly furnishings and objets d'art that are the universal sign of a household devoted to sound business ethics.*

**The newspapers, when the design was finally passed by the Authorities, speculated, in a generally favourable review, that the "Architect might be on drugs". For a Dutchman to learn from the past, must he be narcotised?**

I had understood, when it came to be built, that it was the custom on Dutch projects (as it was in the USA), to allow the building contractor to make observations upon the technicalities. In the case of JOA's small building our Dutch Project Manager refused to allow it. His explanation was not that the technical details were perfect but that the building was so extraordinary that it was pointless to even try to 'rationalise' it.

JOA flew the short 'hop' across the Channel many times over these six years. But such was our Dutch Project-manager's 'fear and loathing' that he failed to make the reverse crossing even once - he never saw how JOA had built similar buildings, both larger and smaller, with great economy, many times over. He failed to grasp that JOA never used the 'plattenbau' method of construction so common all over Northern Europe - and Holland.



*Our addition, which is to the right, abutted directly upon the 17C Town Hall. The hugely vaster population of the City Administration had been removed to the Richard Meier replacement; in which so bright was the light reflected from his white enamelled steel walls that dark glasses had to be worn indoors. All that one could now do in the 17C interiors, with their stained glass armorial windows and black and white checkerboard floor, was to get married. But then the centres of all the old cities of Europe have now become a theatre in which the young briefly sport and mate, to soon revert to the bungalow suburbs from whence they must now come. Our addition was aimed for the other cult of adolescence: shopping.*



## JOA had always used, for 20 years, a light steel frame.

Especially was this so on a merely two storey structure. Steel goes up fast. Developers like that. I learned this in 1976 on a warehouse costing 110/sq. metre. Nor, as opposed to concrete, does steel shrink as it ages. But the main reason why JOA used steel was is that it allows us to erect, very early, the heavy precast pieces, the capitals and 'logs', that constitute our Entablature. We had learned, back in 1976, to put the roof on before the external walls. Doing this enables one to start, as early as possible, on the internal fit-out - usually the most complicated, and often the more costly, part of a new building.



The 'Working Order' seen from the inside is all usable space because steel is thin and strong. The brick cylinder was self-supporting for 25 metres on the Judge. Two storeys are nowhere near its strength limits.

Getting on with the interior early also allows the builder time to hand-lay the external walls. It takes them off the 'critical path' to the completion of the whole building. Making them of hand-laid brick also allows the builder to make up any slight discrepancies between the placing of his big, fixed, elements - like windows. Brickwork is easily 'stretched' dimensionally, by slightly increasing or decreasing the size of the wet mortar joints. It is all very convenient and it had all been known to JOA during twenty years of practice.



The Modernist is compelled, by his ontic pusillanimity, to reverse the physical logic of building. He makes his internal structural skeleton of 'heavy masonry' (ie. concrete) and his mutely lockjawed facade of useless glass. In our case this meant the internal duct-space was choked-off with superfluously huge concrete pillars. In the Judge a fitter could climb up the inside of a Robot-column of this size to service lights and gondolas.



'The Dutch Way'. Plattenbau over everything. The only JOA robot columns, in 23 years, that were useless for servicing from the interior! They were filled with pre-cast concrete! Ironically, it was this pre-cast, which no-one sees, that prevented the early erection of the JOA Entablature of blue logs, black caps, etc.. No Entablature = No Roof. No Roof = No Interior for six months. A failure of the builderly imagination - by the Project Manager.

It is possible to stand inside a light structural steel frame and bolt onto it a seven-ton pre-cast concrete Entablature that is hung from a crane outside it. But if one is separated from the object of one's attention by a wall of solid concrete, it becomes impossible to either see the chunk of concrete hanging from the crane-hook, or to reach through the wall to pull it onto its bolts. The Dutch Project Manager was secure in his foreknowledge of what constituted practical and cost-effective building. He knew, instinctively, that the Groenmarkt design was a mere folly. It was a multi-coloured 'Greek Temple', promoted by the millionaire owner of his Development Company, to grace his home town of Den Haag. So the Project-Manager ordered a standard Dutch 'plattenbau' box, and stuck JOA's 'architecture' onto it as an incomprehensively self-indulgent, 'merely-decorative', trimming.

The result was that, because the 6th Order Entablature could not be bolted from the inside onto its structural frame, its giant pre-cast pieces had to be put on after the elaborate polychrome glazed brick external walls were built. These walls were built with a splendidly craftsmanly precision. The bricklayers used stainless steel 'rods' engraved with the mortar widths of the course-heights. It took weeks and weeks. But the roof could not be begun until JOA's Entablature had been erected. The interior was delayed for six months in an 18-month build. It was the largest delay in JOA's entire career. It added 30% to build-time. It was a financial catastrophe for the Contractor, whose legal responsibility it had become. The Technical University of Delft made a study of our building. They concluded that the Architect should not be allowed to design without the input of the Contractor and Project Manager. They made other derogatory



*I was suspicious of the Marbra-Lys blue, when it arrived on site. It was too blue. I was right.*

remarks concerning Architects. It goes without saying that Delft never, once, in six years, asked to talk to anyone in JOA. Academics are fools when it comes to Practice.



Light and Matter coincide in a 'photolith', as I call JOA's architectural components. The logs of the 'floating raft' of the JOA Entablature, with its fluid spirals of airy foam, is coloured all the way through. But only one blue is fast.

If there is a novelty for which JOA are known it is the invention of the Robot Column, or the 'Working Order'. So careless was our Project Manager of the utility of this invention, let alone any symbolic quality it had from being an 'Architectural Order', that he showed no interest in using our giant 1.8M quatrefoil columns as service ducts. He allowed their interiors to be so filled-up with the concrete of his massive 'plattenbau' building-system that they were useless for vertical, or even horizontal, services. The internal Entablature of the Rotunda, which was planned to receive a colourful inscription, leading up to a circular printed ceiling, is now painted black in order to disguise the presence of surface-mounted, boxy, electric cable-ducts.

**DURING THE BUILD, THE SUPPLIER OF THE BIG PRE-CAST ELEMENTS USED A PIGMENT FOR THE BLUE CONCRETE THAT HE WAS EXPRESSLY BANNED FROM EMPLOYING. JOA HAVE KNOWN, SINCE 1984 THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE BLUE PIGMENT THAT IS COLOUR-FAST IN THE ALKALINE ENVIRONMENT OF CEMENT.**



**IT IS A COBALT BLUE MADE BY BAYER.**

Bayer's testing fields were a mere two-hour drive from Den Haag into Germany. This same pigment was specially imported 6,000 miles into College Station, where my blue concrete was cast in Texas. In Belgium, Marbra-Lys used pthalocyanine blue. The result is that all of the blue concrete, with or without white spirals, is now, ten years into the life of an 100-year monument, a dull, dull, grey.

*Ten years later all the blue concrete, with or without inlaid white spirals, is grey. Even the glossy black capitals, supposedly made of black concrete and then clear lacquered with xylene, was merely grey concrete painted black - which has now washed off.*

I designed, for the sake of economy, only one pre-cast element on the Rotunda which is 'curved-on-curved' work. When you want to impress a consultant with the depth of your Client's pocket, tell him he is not afraid of 'curved-on curved work. Everything else on the rotunda facade is straight when looked-down-on in plan. These are the big white arches. They are curved on elevation and curved on plan.





The previous picture, and this one, shows the big white arches.. Marbra-Lys cast the arches in two halves, with their faces laid flat on the floor. They come to a feeble point, when seen in 3-D, rather than a proper half-circle. The contract drawings showed the arch to be 'curved-on-curved work, rounded on plan. Again Marbra-Lys cheated, the Dutch Architects, INBO, ignored the fault and MAB did nothing. JOA were not even allowed to inspect the castings.

This inconvenienced Marbra-Lys. So they laid their two faces flat on the casting-bed when they chose to cast them in two halves. This made them into a series of straight lines when seen on plan. When erected in three-dimensions, these big white arches come to an inconclusive point that is neither Gothic, nor 'Roman'. They just look like the mistakes which they clearly were. Both of these severe transgressions had been clearly drawn and specified. Neither of them had been noticed by Inbo, MAB's Dutch Executive Architects.



I invented a little mural to go over the entrance to the underground Bicycle Park. My Dutch Project Manager redeemed himself by getting it made very nicely. The blue frame sets off the yellow star.

But, ten years on, Marbra-Lys's wretched pthalocyanine blue pigment has washed-out, as has their non-black black concrete. JOA's spec. was clear, and based on long experience. Who allowed the Bayer blue to be substituted?

Both of them were squalid, miserable little economies which meant that for JOA, at least, the appearance of the Groenmarkt was so deeply damaged that I refused to publish it in any serious journal. When they were discovered, one by one, JOA informed our excellent Client, a very amiable and civilised man who now lives in a castle on the French Riviera with his considerable collection of Modern Dutch Art. But the project was already very behind schedule and there was no possibility of any positive restitution. JOA just took our fee, what photos we could and left, knowing that JOA's first building on the 'Continent', because of this dismal lack of care, would probably be our last.



Imagine my surprise, then, when JOA received a call, ten years after the very jolly opening party, from the Firm of Sting, the tenant of the Rotunda itself, along with the whole upper floor of the Groenmarkt block. It was to tell me that **our little building**, which the Public had immediately nick-named the Snoeptrommel (meaning **Candy-Box**) had been built, at 1:15th scale, in a miniature city which contained a complete microcosm of everything the Dutch public thought of as quintessentially Dutch.

*I was to be invited over to unveil this miniature, along with the Mayor of Den Haag and other politicians. This 'City of Holland' was not at all like the twee little mini-village in Beconsfield, Britain, that merely played to our deathless insular myth of rustic bliss.*

*There was Schipol airport, with roaring jumbo-jets taxi-ing around. There was a football stadium with a shouting crowd. The Concert Hall played classical music through its windows. The giant, lock-gated, canals passed ships and the railways and trams whizzed around this city-collage of the concrete reality of the Netherlands. Everything lit up and night and there was a big, black-glass shiny monolith of some administrative slab block next to a moving-around building-site with cranes etc.*



*Madurodam was built, after WWII by the Maduro family to commemorate George Maduro who, born in Curacao, died in a Nazi labour camp. It reproduces all that is famous, loved and yet 'real and authentic' about the Dutch lifespace. Its profits go to charity. I found it intensely moving to have my Groenmarkt included within this Netherlandish Valhalla.*



*Looking the other way shows the more 20C side of Madurodam. The control tower of Schipol, with creaming Jumbo-jets, lies to the left with, behind it, moving bridges and the big canal cargo-ships. A mother and two children loom Gulliverishly.*

*As the leaflet said: "If you have only one day to see Holland, come to Madurodam".*

## So what was going on?

*I asked how my building had been chosen and was told that it was a combination of the Management of the miniature city-scape and the Politicians, who had judged the building 'beloved' enough to admit to this Vallhalla of the Dutch lifespace. I was enormously pleased. I had known that the Public liked my buildings in Houston, Cambridge, and London as much as my colleagues, especially the academic ones, hated their "Breaking of the Taboos of Modernism".*





The Mayor of Den Haag is a sixteen-year-old. He stands with his back to Marco van Muiswinkel, of 'Sting', who talks to Rima, my wife. I told him the 1:15-scale miniature was better-made than the original. How could he know I was not really joking? Its colours will be more 'fast'!

But I had never imagined that the same **clash of sentiments** would obtain, to an even far greater extent, on the Continent of Europe, that cradle of the **Modernity** I both admired yet had sought to reform. I was truly touched that Holland, one of the original founts of **Modernity**, had recognised that **JOA's work** was not just a regression to 'Hellenism' but stood for something new that was, at the same time, not destructively ignorant of history. And all this had been put into motion on a building that I regarded as almost irreparably damaged by a building culture which was so rigorously committed to an illiteracy that its leading Architects virtually led the world with their skill in avoiding any continuity with **Architecture** as it has been understood for the 9,000 years of its history.



Sting, the Tenant of the First Floor, bought-out all the Ground floor shops but one. So the polished concrete base, well-made by Marbra-Lys, was kept waxed and painted. It is at ground level, so they treat it as their own. It is now Sting's 'flagship' store in Holland..



My first question to MAB, the developers, was "do we need windows". I knew shops blocked them up above the Ground level. The answer was "No". Den Haag's city-planners did not agree to my proposal for Murals. So Sting just filled them with their 'house colour' - a red that, fortunately, worked well with my Groenmarkt palette.

The inclusion of JOA's Groenmarkt within the Dutch Valhalla that is **Madurodam** (for it also contains the Rietvelt-Schroder house) was for me a **signal** that it might really be possible to turn the rudderless juggernaut of a conceptually-bankrupt **Modernity**, and point it in the direction for which I argued. It proved that the **Public**, and its representative **Politicians**, still loved what it was that the medium of **Architecture** could do for them, even though **not much of it yet made much sense**.

**Architecture**, as **anciently understood** was, contrary to my profession's determination, **not (yet) dead**.

# IT LIVED-ON!

I have told the story of the Groenmarkt neither to chastise those who injured it, nor (though I am grateful to them), to publicly thank more than I have already, those who elevated it to its unexpectedly high status. My objective is to encourage those of my listeners who attend most closely to the contemporary fashions in what the Trade Press, with ever-increasing diffidence, still calls 'Architecture'.



For the evidence of my 55 years in this medium is that, for almost the whole of this time, those who run the Academies of Architecture have spent by far the better part of their, and their young charges, energies exploring an endless maze of blind alleys in the hope that they could escape from their proper task - which was to modernise the ancient medium so that it could be used, today and in the future, to solve many of the most pressing ecological, and political problems that face us today.

It is this failure to theorise Architecture in a way that 'works' for us now that is the broken foundation under the final collapse of Architecture, and consequent upon that, the continuing disaster of the inability to plan cities that marks the inhuman livespace left behind by the 20C. No alternative exists today but to propose new Architectural theories of radical clarity.

The 2009 Post-Graduate work at my alma mater, the Architectural Association school in London. Not one work, in the whole year's work by 600 students recalled the medium of Architecture. Only one bookshelf of its famed 'Triangle' Architectural Bookshop', sported texts on buildings older than the 20C. Not only was Architecture dead, but its History with it. One might christen this the Work of the Year 'MELTED-INTO-AIR' P.D. That is to say 'Post Digital'.

The Academies, pursuing the Counter-Formal and Contra-Functional Delights of 'Architecture Autre have "Melted Architecture into a Baudrillardian Air".  
**AGAINST THIS I OFFER THE 'CUBIC SOLIDITY' OF A HANDY-SQUARE'.**



The terminal iconic illiteracy of 21C Modernism can only conceive of the city-block as an iconically featureless 'box' from whose destruction-by-digitised blasting-away Mankind will win a new freedom. My listener may return to Lecture Twenty-Two to refresh a campaign-strategy that does not leave every new development strewn with structures uncannily akin to the aftermath of a massive terrorist attack! Death need not be the New Freedom!