

# Thinking through Building The Eindhoven School

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In December 1988, the exhibition “The Eindhoven School: The Modern Past” opened at deSingel in Antwerp. Presenting the work of twenty-three architecture graduates from TU Eindhoven (TU/e), this exhibition signaled the emergence of a new type of architecture in the Netherlands. However, unlike the Chicago or the Amsterdam School, the Eindhoven School was not presented on the basis of formal similarities. Instead, it was described as “a constellation of diverse attitudes which range[d] from Han Westerlaken’s high tech to the refinement of Jo Coenen and the intellectualism of [Wiel] Arets and [Wim] Van den Bergh,” but also included the work of John Körmeling, Sjoerd Soeters, René van Zuuk, Martien Jansen, Gert-Jan Willemsse, Johan Kappetein, Jos van Eldonk, and Bert Dirrix.<sup>1</sup>

The plurality of the work presented in the Eindhoven School exhibition attempted to capture the unique architectural and educational ethos of TU/e’s Faculty of Architecture throughout the 1980s. Most notably, it was claimed that “unlike usually customary in the Dutch architectural tradition, in Eindhoven there was very little concern for functionalist and modernist dogmatic puritanism.”<sup>2</sup> As such, “in contrast to the [Delft] modernists, for whom the modern ha[d] become merely a matter of routine, [in Eindhoven,] the modern imp[li]e[d] a critical reaction to the past, a past in which architecture [did] not allow itself to be reduced to a meaningless fixity in time.”<sup>3</sup> With such approach to history and modernity, the radical new architecture brewing in Eindhoven not only occupied a unique position within Dutch architecture culture, but also shared the intellectual ambitions of the period’s leading international debates. For these TU/e graduates, architecture was more than what was dictated by the pragmatics of function or the aesthetics of form. Architecture was poetry, in which varying layers of meaning were carefully—and individually—developed through quotes and metaphors, references and analogies. Only through the construction of such layered meaning(s), could architecture fulfil its potential and purposefully engage with the human condition.

Throughout their studies, these young architects had been immersed in an alternative way of teaching (or, at least, alternative within the Netherlands). Their design studios did not focus solely on the development of practical expertise, that is, on the development of “typological, tectonic, compositional or technological” skills, but also on how those skills should be instrumentalized in formulating a purposeful social, political and cultural engagement.<sup>4</sup> It was in the combination of the material act of building and the intellectual act of thinking, in the combination of practice and theory, that architecture could be elevated beyond construction and, effectively, fulfil its societal responsibilities. Architecture was perceived as a way of thinking through building.

While such approach to architecture may seem trivial today, in the context of a (fairly) recent Dutch technical university in the 1980s, this proposition was just as radical as it was unexpected.<sup>5</sup> However, TU/e’s lack of tradition or experience in teaching architecture became perhaps its biggest advantage. Unlike, for example, TU Delft, in Eindhoven there were no existing preconceptions on how architecture should be taught, which not only allowed for a ‘radical’ new approach to the practice of teaching, but also for



Figure 1. installation view *The Eindhoven School: The Modern Past*, deSingel, 1988 (Het Nieuwe Instituut archives, Rotterdam)

greater freedom between the intellectual approaches and the material designs of its students.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the formal diversity of the Eindhoven School's designs, there was a common attitude towards architectural discourse that could be clearly identified among their proposals. This was no coincidence. A greater historical and theoretical awareness had been developed among TU/e's Faculty of Architecture since 1973, when the chair of Architecture History and Theory (in Dutch, *Architectuur, Geschiedenis en Theorie*, also commonly known as AGT) was first established with the appointment of Geert Bekaert. The prolific Belgian architectural critic (and public intellectual), forcefully championed architecture as a distinctive human endeavor which, by being grounded in reality, was uniquely capable of societal and cultural engagement in a substantial way. For Bekaert, architecture was the "only meaningful existential project," since it combined thinking and acting.<sup>7</sup> Despite Bekaert's aloof guidance, his intellectual presence had an immediate effect on the student body, who even considered Bekaert's signature on their diploma to be "a stamp marking their position in the world of architecture," one in which discourse and practice made architecture a critical apparatus for reflecting on—and engaging with—the world around them.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 16 years of Bekaert's tenure at TU/e, the combination of academic and practical knowledge, became the device through which AGT attempted to achieve its professed intent of an architectural education based on criticality and construction, creativity and craft, individuality and social consciousness. Therefore, supported

by Gerard van Zeijl, Joost Meuwissen and others, AGT organized a multitude of activities that indelibly fostered greater attention to history and theory in architectural work. Furthermore, the relation between thinking and building was to be explored in both directions. Only through theory and history could architectural practice arise to its potential of societal conscience, but also only through architectural practice could theory and history have any meaningful impact.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as part of TU/e's architectural education—and often in combination with design studios—the chair organized several lectures, colloquia and seminars with notable foreign invited speakers (such as Giancarlo de Carlo, Charles Jencks, Dennis Sharp, Bob van Reeth, Ricardo Bofill, Rob and Leon Krier as well as Peter Eisenman).

AGT also devised new architectural journals and curated exhibitions. Combined, these activities crafted an intellectual climate for architectural education in Eindhoven which was not only reflected in the rich variety of ideas and opinions presented in their students' work, but also provided a gateway to international architectural discourse—clearly of an eclectic, postmodern flavor—at a time when Dutch architecture was still experiencing a self-imposed exile.<sup>10</sup>

The diversity of designs was inevitably influenced by the diversity of design assignments proposed by AGT. If, for example, the 1980 studio "The Language of Architecture" aimed to investigate "the existence of a formal logic of architecture" from "the concrete starting point of a building" proposal, and thus translate abstract theory into an architectural design, the 1983 studio "World City Eindhoven" solicited the design of high-rise buildings (and corresponding urban

structures) to question the relevance of “three major paradigms in the architecture of our century,” and thus, as a way to advance theory through design.<sup>11</sup> Other studios attempted to awake history by positing the applicability of historical ideas to the present context, from the 1982 “Catholic Buildings” to the 1986 “Durand, Leçons d’Architecture.” Ultimately, while all AGT design assignments explored—and attempted “to operationalize”—the relation between practice, theory and history, their diversity aimed to also reflect the heterogeneity of contemporary society.<sup>12</sup> These studios provided the space for a broader understanding of architecture, one that could benefit from the cross-pollination of architecture with engineering and other artistic disciplines. The new Eindhoven architect was not to be an engineer with some understanding of architectural design, but rather a humanist architect with a critical stance developed through both practice and discourse.

The combination between practice and discourse championed by AGT became the basis for the emergence of a radical new architecture, of high order, in Eindhoven. Therefore, while some were doubtful of certain theoretical claims maintained by the Eindhoven School exhibition, the quality of the work presented was beyond reproach. From Sjoerd Soeter’s design for Circustheater in Zandvoort (with its immediately recognizable set of five giant built flags) to Martien Jansen’s project for the renovation and redesign of a former hospital to accommodate the Museum Boerhaave in Leiden, the quality and sophistication of the architecture on display was widely praised. Beyond Soeters and Jansen, the formal diversity of the Eindhoven School was presented in Antwerp through the work of different generations of TU/e graduates, namely Rudy Uytendhaak, Jo Coenen, Wiel Arets, Wim van der Bergh, Jos van Eldonk, Jeroen van de Ven, Joost Ahlmann, Peter van Hulten, Anette Marx, Ady Steketeer, Han Westelaken, Frank and Paul Wintermans, René van Zuuk, Ralph Brodrück and Tony Goossens.

The formal diversity of the presented work was deliberate. An architectural-political claim that underlined the importance of pluralism, individuality, and cultural openness in architectural practice and education, but also how those ideas could be the basis for original and successful architecture practices. More important than the forms themselves, was the way they were reached and what they attempted to express. This represented not so much a rejection of form, but rather a predominance of meaning over form, in which architectural form operates as a medium for the immediacy of meaning, for communicating a content, a mood, a character.<sup>13</sup>

Wider recognition of Eindhoven’s unique contribution to (Dutch) architecture culture was also expressed both nationally and internationally. If in the Netherlands, the importance of the “Eindhoven School” practice and discourse was signaled by invitations to several of its “members” to participate in the first edition of the Biennale of Young Dutch Architects in 1983 (namely, John Körmeling, Sjoerd Soeters, Jo Coenen, Martien Jansen, Frank and Paul Wintermans) and three Rotterdam-Maaskant Prize recipients in four years (John Körmeling in 1985 and Wiel Arets in 1989 being awarded the Young Architects Rotterdam-Maaskant Prize and Geert Bekaert the Rotterdam-Maaskant Prize in 1988), internationally it was most



**Figure 2.** seminar *Classical, Baroque, Modern*, TU Eindhoven, 1976 (Het Nieuwe Instituut archives, Rotterdam)

clearly articulated through Jo Coenen’s invitation to participate in the first Venice Biennale, “The Presence of the Past,” in 1980.

Ultimately, however, the greatest recognition of Eindhoven’s exceptional architecture—in which history and theory fostered and embedded deeper meaning into architectural forms—was the award of the most important architectural commission in the Netherlands of the 1980s to Jo Coenen, namely the new building for the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in Rotterdam in 1989. It stood as an architectural device that attempted to reveal the genius loci of the site, and with it, the new depth of Dutch architectural thought.

Despite all the praises directed at the Eindhoven School (or its members) thirty years ago, the NAi building stands today as a singular reminder of the Eindhoven’s School position at the forefront of Dutch architectural discussion in the 1980s. It remains as an intriguing built artifact signaling the memory of a particular moment in Dutch architecture culture that has been all but lost. While it could be easy to dismiss that what the Eindhoven School identified thirty years ago was a simple aberrant moment for an otherwise unstoppable march of Dutch modernism towards its renowned SuperDutch expression, a closer look reveals how “The Eindhoven School” exhibition (and the teaching of practice that it represented) may have been the most significant, yet overlooked, moment in



Dutch architecture history. While the historiography of Dutch architecture has (correctly) identified Rem Koolhaas' Delft symposium "How Modern is Dutch Architecture?" in 1990 and the Dutch entry to the 5th Venice Biennale "Modernism Without Dogma" in 1991 as significant moments in questioning modern architecture's position within Dutch practice and, inevitably, for the emergence of a Super Dutch generation of architects, it has (yet) failed to recognize how these events were directly responding to the questions posed by the "Eindhoven School" exhibition in 1988, particularly the need to break down dogmas of both modernity and history in Dutch architecture.<sup>14</sup>

While both the Eindhoven School's label and exhibition were originally constructed to articulate the results of a particular time when some Eindhoven faculty "dealt with students in a very free manner," their work nevertheless revealed the crucial role of the practice of teaching architectural design. Specifically, how new approaches to teaching can lead to new impulses and new ideas in architecture with wide-reaching effects (even if those have been somewhat forgotten today). Most importantly, however, the Eindhoven School shows us how crucial it is for architectural education to stimulate thinking and acting, creating a thinker space for all forms of inquiries, where architecture can respond, once again, to its cultural, societal, and political responsibilities. That is, how education should stimulate architecture to be thinking through building.

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## Notes

1. Hans Ibelings, "Twintig Architecten Gepresenteerd Als de Eindhovense School," *NRC Handelsblad*, December 23, 1988, deSingel archive.
2. Joris Molenaar, "Architectuur, Vrijheid en Individualiteit: De Eindhovense School in Antwerpen [exhibition review]," *Archis*, 1989, 5.
3. Gerard van Zeijl, "Opening van de Tentoonstelling: 'De Eindhovense School, Het Moderne Verleden,'" December 14, 1988, 2, Geert Bekaert Archive, Univ of Ghent.
4. Johan De Walsche and Richard Blythe, "Practice of Teaching | Teaching of Practice: The Teacher's Hunch" (2019 ACSA/ EAAE Teachers Conference, 2018).
5. TU Eindhoven was originally established in 1956 as the *Technische Hogeschool Eindhoven*. For more on TU/e's history see Joep Huiskamp's many publications
6. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Saskia Kloosterboer, "No History as History, No Theory as Theory: A Conversation with Geert Bekaert," *Hunch: The Berlage Institute Report*, no. 4 (2001): 40.
7. Christophe Van Gerrewey, "A Chance of Survival. Introduction," in *Rooted in the Real: Writings on Architecture*, Vlees & Beton 87 (Gent: WZW editions and productions, 2011), 13.
8. For the occasion of Geert Bekaert's farewell address at TU/e in 1989, a group of his former students presented him an image (and accompanying text) to uniquely celebrate his legacy

at the university. This was a utopian project where the users of the university's main building had taken over and transformed the building into a final *casa novissima* (in reference to the first Venice Biennale). Jos van Eldonk, "40 Squares / Casa Novissima," 1989.

9. Gerard van Zeijl, "Projecten Bij de Vleet," in *VIII Jaar AGT: Projectwek 1980-88* (Eindhoven, 1988), 13.
10. The Dutch self-imposed architectural exile was perhaps best captured by Hans van Dijk's comment on how the Netherlands had become "the Cuba of modern architecture" as it relied on an understanding of architecture that was mostly based on what he dubbed "school teacher modernism," in which the teachings of modern architecture was passed between teachers and students, primarily at TU Delft, shutting out any form of architectural debate. See Hans van Dijk, "Het Onderwijzersmodernisme," in *Hoe Modern Is de Nederlandse Architectuur?*, ed. Rem Koolhaas (010 Publishers, 1990).
11. Sectie Architectuurgeschiedenis en Theorie, *VIII Jaar AGT: Projectwek 1980-88* (Eindhoven, 1988), 162, 192.
12. Zeijl, "Projecten Bij de Vleet," 13.
13. Zeijl, "Opening van de Tentoonstelling: 'De Eindhovense School, Het Moderne Verleden.'"
14. Rem Koolhaas, ed., *Hoe Modern Is de Nederlandse Architectuur?* (010 Publishers, 1990); Hans Ibelings, *Modernism Without Dogma: Architects of a Younger Generation in the Netherlands*, trans. John Kirkpatrick (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1991).