



TRANSFORMATION + ACCOMMODATION



HERMAN HERTZBERGER
2016

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Based on a lecture at the University of Sevilla for the conference
“Obsolence and Renovation - 20th Century Housing in the New Millenium”

Herman Hertzberger
December 2015



The future of architecture depends on its competence to be transformed. Transformation is the new condition for architecture. Abandoned buildings everywhere are asking for a new life, are challenging us and (in many cases) gradually decreasing the need to build new ones.

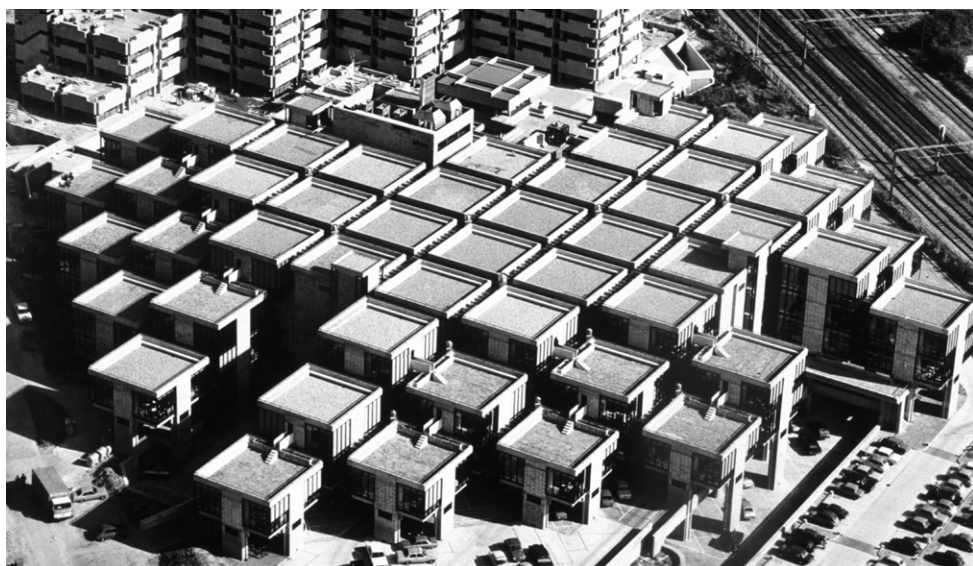
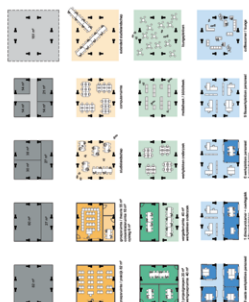
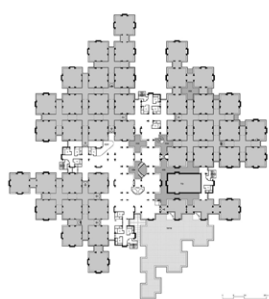
There are basically two types of buildings, the first to which you could easily reassign a different duty and the second where you are constantly hampered by all sorts of architectural obstructions and the absence of structural clarity and generic quality.

Special forms do not issue from preconceived programmes and whenever they are developed as autonomous space units, they lend themselves to housing different programmes.

If architects would keep this in mind, and given the condition of our instable and fluid modern society with its rapid change, they would also change their design attitude, focusing on less specific and more basic organization.

Change, whether we like it or not, is a property of everything we make or have to contend with. We have no choice but to incorporate it as a basic component in our deliberations and consciously keep one step ahead of it.

The notion that buildings are objects complete in all their parts, with a final form expressing a static condition and clearly circumscribed entity, has long been at odds with today's dynamic culture of democracy, where decisions are a concerted effort, as are the urgent calls for change. Only buildings designed so they can not just weather expansion, shrinkage and general changes in duty, use and identity but are prepared and, in the conceptual sense, programmed for it, can be rated sustainable to a reasonable degree.



Centraal Beheer - Apeldoorn

We are going to have to regard our buildings less as completed products and more as work in progress where each successive stage is the onset of a permanent nascent state. This marks the end of final outward appearances. To ensure that this process enacted over time retains a degree of consistency and to rule out an unpredictable mishmash of ad hoc solutions, we need an ordering theme that is able to stand the test of time.

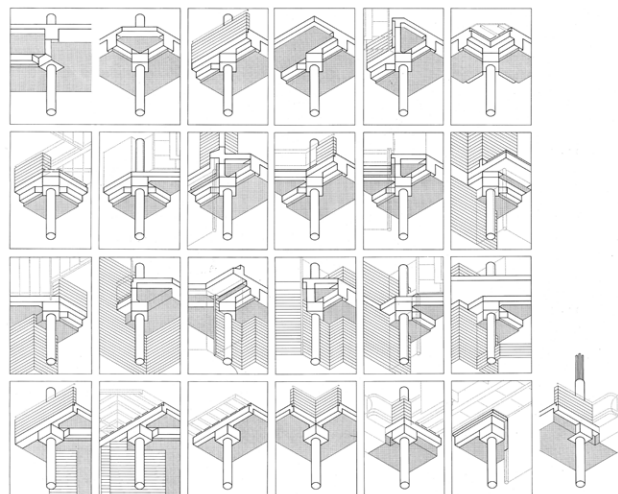
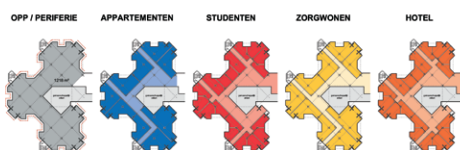
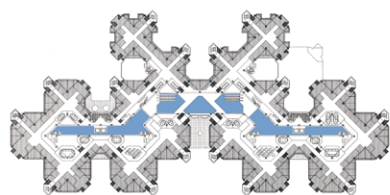
We have to focus on a principal spatial theme for our building order; that theme is structure, the idea governing the design and a constant that is to sustain the building's fundamental characteristics. The important thing is to make space with the longest possible useful life, this way leaving room for the shorter term with its welter of changing insights and interests.



The “Centraal Beheer” building, once designed as an office, is now abandoned and waiting for new inhabitants. Since there turned out to be a demand for educational space as well as housing, particularly for students, and also for the elderly, we sought to determine the extent to which this would fit in the existing construction. It was obvious at first sight that the space might be appropriate for educational purposes but would face more difficulties in the case of housing.

In fact for housing you need an extended periphery whereas this building has a lot of internal space, though lit by means of skylights.

However, eliminating and thus sacrificing some ‘towers’ from the centre and thus creating inner courts, could be a considerable improvement. In this way we managed to find the right balance between peripheral and internal space.



Ministry of Social Welfare - The Hague

The building for the Ministry of Social Welfare, as well as the “Centraal Beheer” building, fell victim to the same tendency to reduce the office space, of which there exists an overall surplus of 7,500,000 square metres in the Netherlands alone, whereas there is an increasingly serious lack of (cheap) housing, not least as a consequence of the influx of refugees. Unlike “Centraal Beheer” this building has an extremely largely extended periphery, consequently making it eminently appropriate for habitation.

Facing the current global dimension of migration of people around the world, all looking for safe and stable places, we might consider suitability for habitation as a general criteria for all building projects.

Translating structuralism into architecture gives us ideas on how to arrive at buildings that, influenced by different applications and circumstances, can be adapted without losing their characteristic qualities in the process, remaining true to themselves and as a result becoming not only more sustainable but also more democratic.

This is demonstrated in the simplest way by amphitheatres. After these oval structures – built by the Romans throughout their empire as a kind of prototype stadium – had lost their original duty, many were adapted and applied in accordance with their particular circumstances.

The amphitheatre of Arles was used as a fortress in the Middle Ages; then it was filled in with buildings and was inhabited as a town until the nineteenth century. The amphitheatre of Lucca was absorbed by the town and at the same time kept open as a public square. Within the nameless urban fabric the oval space is a landmark, it lends its name and identification to the surroundings.



Arles



Lucca

The two amphitheatres, constructed for the same purpose, assumed different roles under changed circumstances. Each took on the colour of the new environment which absorbed it and which was absorbed by it, the environment in its turn also being coloured by the ancient structure in its centre. Not only were they thus taken for granted in their new form as an integral part of the urban fabric, they also provided that urban fabric with an identity. The oval structure and the surroundings proved, in both cases, capable of transforming each other. These ovals represent an archetypal form – in this case that of the enclosed space, an interior, a large room which can serve as work-place, playground, public square and place to live. The original function is forgotten, but the amphitheatre-shape retains its relevance because it is so suggestive as to offer opportunities for constant renewal.

These amphitheatres succeed in maintaining their identity as enclosed spaces, while their content is subject to change. The same form could therefore temporarily assume different appearances under changing circumstances, without the structure itself essentially changing. Besides, the Arles example – now that this arena has been restored to its original state – shows that this kind of process of transformation is basically reversible. A more convincing instance of ‘competence’ and ‘performance’ in architecture is hard to imagine. And the fact that these two amphitheatres are not identical only underscores the polemic quality of the situation: for just as the autonomy of the oval form is emphasized by the process of transformation, so the form as ‘archetype’ imposes itself almost inescapably. It is certainly not true that there is always one specific form that fits one specific purpose. So there are forms which not only permit various interpretations, but which can actually evoke these interpretations under changing circumstances. So you could say that the variety of solutions must



Arles



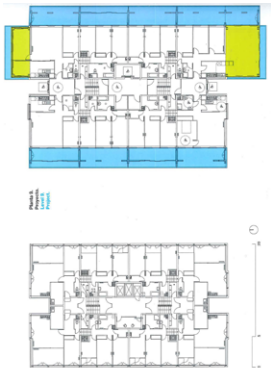
Fujian - China



Fujian - China



Transformation of tower block Paris - Lacaton & Vasal



have been contained in the form as inherent propositions.

The literal great weight of the construction, which gives these amphitheatres an aspect of permanence, almost as if they had evolved naturally, makes this a particularly strong example and difficult to improve upon as a theme. In addition, the enduring and inclusive ring is, as it were, a dish or bowl unequivocally separating an inner world from that outside.

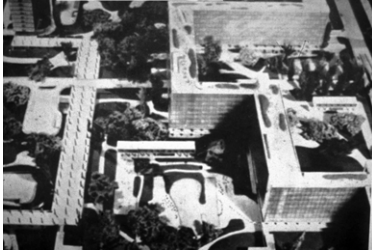
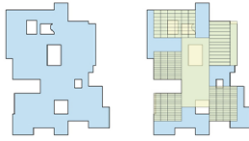
There are more examples of such all-embracing structures, if less elementary perhaps, such as the unique ring-shaped buildings found exclusively in Fujian in South China, particularly around Jongding. Each of these fortress-like residential buildings, which occur sometimes individually, sometimes in groups, constitutes a complete self-contained residential village. They are inhabited by communities of entire families of Hakkas (strangers) who migrated to this region from the north looking for better living conditions. In these bastions of buildings they could protect and defend themselves against onslaughts and often lengthy sieges.

So we keep seeing a distinction between a relatively structured, inclusive, containing part and an unstructured part created and pencilled in by circumstance and transformable to suit any new situation.

The French architects Lacaton & Vassal designed fascinating proposals for upgrading outdated housing schemes by means of adding a new built zone, resulting in an amelioration of climatological conditions and at the same time as an extension of so many square metres of floor area, since today we are asking for a higher standard than at the time the building was erected.



Twikkell College - Hengelc



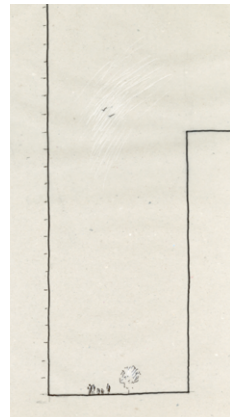
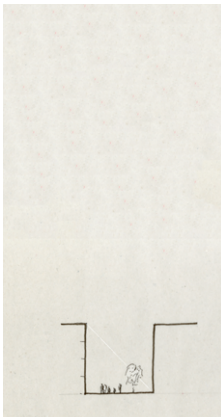
La Ville Radieuse - Le Corbusier 1924



Unité d'habitation - Le Corbusier 1952



South Korea



For what was supposed to be a new school building for secondary education, the Twickel College Hengelo, we managed to preserve most of the existing construction. In fact it became an extensive conversion using all remaining constructive parts and only adding a large double-height central space and new facades. Instead of discarding the old steel columns and laminated wooden beams, they are all integrated in the new building. The left-over wooden beams were transformed into benches.

Urbanism in the twentieth century degraded into merely autonomous buildings, thus losing the cohesion cities used to have. Streets were sacrificed for traffic and green as a symbol for sound air and sound life. The result is distance between people and destruction of social coherence. Even when designed in such an innovating way as was the Unité of Le Corbusier in Marseille, it could not prevent people from being stored, with the living units isolated from each other, in a magnificent construction, however without streets and with beautiful though somewhat dark corridors, and in fact a painful specimen of the idea of streets like corridors that modern architects despised and detested.

Who invented high freestanding towers for habitation where children (more than 50% of the population) are alienated from the outside world and prevented from meeting each other outside school or only at official playgrounds: detached and fenced reservations? It is an environment lacking adventure, nature and freedom.



Siena



Dubrovnik



Paris



Amsterdam



Haarlemmer Houttuinen - Amsterdam



Nias

The environmental public space is where people live together (except for their virtual connections) and needs to have the right proportions to absorb everybody and make you feel at home. Therefore the idea of street seems crucial. It should be proportioned in a way as to serve as a common living room and be able to house communal events of any kind, such as meeting, eating and (why not?) praying together.

Today cars take over the streets and leave only the narrowest of pavements for strolling and for the children to play. But look what happens when sewers are renewed: this transforms the street into a large playground. As the French during their revolution of May 1968, taking paving stones from the street to throw at the police, used to say: “dessous les pavées la plage” (the beach is under the pavement).

Given back to the children it establishes an idea of social coherence as a fresh start, learning how to cope and get along with each other instead of gaming on the soft couch in the living room.



Fragment of The Little Street - Vermeer



In Between - Werner Haas

The seventeenth-century painting “The Little Street” by Vermeer (here only partially visible) apart from the glimpse of a backyard, which is very unusual since painting is usually supposed to show the more sublime subjects, focuses attention on a threshold zone as part of the entrance and, although private, is also inviting to passers-by and thus overlapping private and public. The crucial point here is the emphasis on matters of daily life, which can be considered a lesson for architects who usually see our environment from a distance rather than as the nearby reality.

The child sitting on the step in front of his house is sufficiently far away from his mother to feel independent, to sense the excitement and adventure of the great unknown.

Yet at the same time, sitting there on the step which is part of the street as well as of the home, he feels secure in the knowledge that his mother is nearby. The child feels at home and at the same time in the outside world. This duality exists thanks to the spatial quality of the threshold as a platform in its own right, a place where two worlds overlap, rather than a sharp demarcation.



Siena



Amsterdam



Apolloschools - Amsterdam



Omnibus School - Arnhem

It is not only monumental buildings in Italy that very often have a plinth around them for sitting on, as a transitional step to the street. This is an inviting gesture by means of which buildings become less unsailable and more friendly to people, touchable and less distant.

It should become a design principle: do everything you can to make architecture more approachable, more inviting. Appropriation of your surroundings also means that they offer an accommodation for the things around you that are part of your mental space. They are your external memory. Here, we are dealing with tangibility and intellectual grasp.

Concrete cubes in the street, meant to keep a zone for pedestrians free from traffic, unintentionally invite multiple use. Not only they turn out to be appropriate for seating, but also as tables and in a fundamental sense they are elementary devices that incite a reaction, and they make the street more suitable as a locus for pedestrians and thus more conducive to staying, having in places the ambience of a living room.

As a principle we have to provide habitable space between things, in other words conditions for informal staying wherever possible: you might call it an inside quality.

Actually this is about the difference between a flat glossy surface, which makes you move on, and a surface with the quality to contain, which invites you to settle if only for a short time.



School - Delft



School - Delft



New York

The block in the central space of the school, although it looks like an obstacle is rather an anchor point where children settle down for their activities. It became a central island for performances of any kind (for which it actually can be extended with wooden parts stored inside it) as well as, for instance, distribution of food during lunch. In fact this feature is going to be interpreted according to the occasion.

A sunken area in the hall of the kindergarten part is filled up with loose stools, which when taken out form a seating arrangement, directed inwards and thus facing one another.

Platform-block and sitting-hollow are not just opposites, they are complementary as well. The hollow is more introverted, the block is a safe place too but more outward-facing. A platform can be a plinth, a table, a pedestal, with something exultant about it; you're on show, at the centre, attracting all the attention. In the hollow, by contrast, you hide from view. Both attributes, platform-block and sitting-hollow (the same size in this case), focus the attention and are centres and assembly points for inciting shared activity. You can address bystanders from the platform and enjoy the intimacy of the hollow for a chat or to be read a story in a group.

Just as the sitting-hollow in the school is a minimal device of inside quality to, as it were, contain a small group of small people, so the Rockefeller Plaza in New York is basically doing the same for a very large number of people. Apparently the sunken place due to the protection of its pavements arouses a feeling of togetherness and forms a strong contrast with the turbulence of the big city around it.



Castelvittorio



Rio de Janeiro



New York



Paris

Although it seems from the picture that the whole of this rather narrow inner court in Rio de Janeiro is sacrificed to football mania, and ground floor backyards seem to be squeezed to a minimum behind a closed wall, you feel the presence of communal cohesion, here enclosed or rather embraced by the built fabric.

The central square in the mountain village of Castelvittorio (Italy) has acquired a certain theatricality due to its periphery, which consists of a number of terrace-shaped locations. The villagers gather here, certainly when pallone games are held and they can cheer on their local heroes. This is the city as theatre, the space par excellence to express the living community.

Anyone wishing to visit the library of Columbia University in New York must climb the broad stairway that, intentionally or not, expresses the elevated status of the knowledge stored there. Up to now, the function of the architecture is obvious. But it becomes ambiguous when the same stairway is also used for a speech and thus takes on the function of grandstand, while the listeners turn their backs on the library. Apparently the stairway is a form that is interpretable; in different situations it can fulfill a different role, even one that contrasts completely with the one for which it was originally intended. This is therefore an example of interpretability as a result of the capacity of this form to assume other significances.

The street is to be considered the extended living room of the urban inhabitants, and in that sense we cannot leave its accommodating quality to accidental gaps in the overriding fuss of modern life. We have to understand the human dimension and its conditions.



School - Oegstgeest

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