



ANITA BLOM, SIMONE VERMAAT & BEN DE VRIES (EDS.)

POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION IN THE NETHERLANDS 1945-1965

THE FUTURE OF A BRIGHT AND BRUTAL HERITAGE

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This is a lovely book. Beautifully illustrated throughout, it is an English-language publication, compiling three earlier Dutch-language books about the reconstruction era in the Netherlands, in which the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands provided an overview of leading examples of post-war reconstruction and their historical context. Through a series of essays, this book aims both to document this historical period and to reflect on the subsequent consideration of this period as 'heritage'. In that sense it is quite polemical, arguing for extending the focus of heritage and for the importance of this period and its legacies in Dutch history and against the countervailing forces that might see such buildings as ugly and obsolete.

The book is organized into two principal parts. The first is an introduction to the reconstruction period in the Netherlands via a series of ten essays by a variety of contributors. Some of these essays are purely historical, others reflect upon current conservation issues. The second part looks at a selection of post-war reconstructions areas, listed buildings and monumental artworks, as defined by the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, drawing on a research project on the period, which commenced in 2001. This second part has been compiled by the book's editors, with additional inputs from colleagues. These two main sections are interspersed with photo essays and a timeline, all of which contribute to a handsome production.

For this reader, with limited knowledge of the Netherlands in the post-war period, part one provides much interesting context to this history of Dutch post-war urbanism, and indeed more. One of the characteristic features of the book is that it also considers rural development, art work and so on in a holistic survey of the evolution of the Dutch environment. Having said this, it is notable how certain key cases recur across different authors, especially the rebuilding of Rotterdam and Middelburg (although the latter is not one of the 30 reconstruction areas identified and listed in the second half of the book). This repetition is not necessarily a problem as we see these cases from a number

of different perspectives. The first essay by Ed Taverne sets the context for post-war Dutch reconstruction in a European country that suffered more physical destruction than any other with the exception of Germany. To this British reader, the role and significance of British examples in the formation of the specifically Dutch vision of the welfare state (the *welvaartsstaat* or 'prosperity state'), came as a surprise, with the 1942 Beveridge Report being a major influence. At the same time, it is evident that Dutch thought was self-consciously European, with a wish to escape the provincialism that had prevailed in the pre-war period.

Taverne also introduces us to the talismanic examples of the adapted-historical reconstruction of Middelburg and the modernism of Rotterdam. His contribution is followed by one of the most interesting essays in the book, a short contribution by the prematurely deceased Koos Bosma, who presents a different perspective on the reconstructions of Middelburg and Rotterdam. He unpicks the role of myth-making in urban planning and the way, for example, radical reconstruction was made to seem inevitable and discarded alternatives invisible in the implementation of ideas for re-planning developed before the war. Again, from a British perspective, this resonates with the re-planning of Coventry led by Donald Gibson. Bosma further discusses how new plans, rational, zoned and decentralized, were influenced by a fear of bombing and the atom bomb in particular. Subsequent chapters consider the development of spatial planning including water management (Anita Blom) and rural development and land consolidation (Bertram de Rooij and Jan van Rheenen).

A series of chapters engage with issues of the integration of art into post-war buildings and environments, including the introduction in 1951 of the far-sighted policy of 'a percentage for art' in public building commissions. Ben de Vries's essay discusses ideas of progress and optimism in post-war renewal, whereas Doreine van Hoogstraten presents a broad typological survey. This discussion is extended more thoroughly

still by Frans van Burkom and Yteke Spoelstra. In a book full of wonderful images, works of art by, among others, Willem Hussem and Karel Appel, leap out from the page with their vivid freshness. Simone Vermaat, in a departure from the general format of the book, looks at the use of percentage for art policies beyond the Netherlands. From a British perspective, where this principle came relatively late and has never been supported by legislation, it was a revelation to read about statutory schemes in various countries, including Sweden, France and the Netherlands. A later chapter by Simone Vermaat looks at the fate of public art as new waves of redevelopment occur – one extraordinary photograph shows the removal of a ceramic relief by Jacques van Rhijn from a block of the flats in The Hague, leaving a gaping hole in the building.

Frank Strolenberg and Albert Reinstra deal directly with the repurposing of post-war churches, now redundant for their original purpose. They comment how, on the one hand, church redundancy is a rising problem but, on the other, there is a long history of religious buildings being put to alternative uses in the Netherlands. In the UK some of the most contentious proposals for reuse have involved alcohol and gambling but casinos appear in their list of new uses. Post-war churches present particular issues in that they are often physically and socially embedded in residential neighbourhoods. The authors give a series of successful case studies of conversion to community uses; one of these is the remarkable Pniëlkerk in Amsterdam, although the – to this reader – somewhat shocking stipulation by the congregation that forebode conversion to purely commercial use or to a mosque is passed over without comment.

The second half of the book opens with an outline of the methodology used for the research project on the reconstruction era by the Cultural Heritage Agency, leading to a selection for preservation under the 1988 *Monumentenwet* (Heritage) Act and, indeed, to this book. Ultimately, 30 areas and 200 buildings were selected. Three types of area were identified: inner-city reconstruction areas; post-war urban expansion areas, and land development or consolidation areas. Slightly confusingly these are subsequently listed as reconstruction cores, residential areas and rural areas. The remainder of the book focuses on these areas and after a short general introduction looks at two

cases of each in some detail including, for example, Rotterdam City Centre East, Amsterdam Western Garden Cities and the Noordoostpolder. The systematic historical layering for each place has its amusements; the 1930 map for the Nagele area is simply a line on a blue square.

To put the book in a slightly wider context, it is interesting to consider how it compares with recountings of the post-war story in other countries. Obviously, it is a period that has been endlessly picked over and written from different perspectives. In the British context this includes, for example, the forensic histories compiled by John Gold (*The experience of modernism: modern architects and the future city 1928-1953*, 1997; *The Practice of Modernism: Modern architects and urban transformation, 1954-1972*, 2007), histories of architecture and development (e.g. N. Bullock, *Building the Post-War World: Modern architecture and reconstruction in Britain*, 2002), more personal reflections (e.g. B. Calder, *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism*, 2016), as well as growing literature specifically concerned with conservation of buildings from this period (e.g. S. Macdonald, *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Architecture*, 1996; S. Macdonald (ed.), *Preserving Post-War Heritage: The Care and Conservation of Mid-Twentieth Century Architecture* 2001; S. Macdonald, K. Normandin & B. Kindred (eds.), *Conservation of Modern Architecture*, 2007). However, for England the work of Elain Harwood is perhaps most comparable with *The Future of a Bright and Brutal Heritage*, through her monumental *Space, Hope and Brutalism, English Architecture 1945-1975* (2015), alongside the same author's *England's Post-war Listings* (2015), now in its third edition. *Post-War Reconstruction in the Netherlands* does not have the same attempt at comprehensiveness as Harwood's doorstep works but scores well in other respects. In particular, whilst Harwood does talk about planning and the wider context of post-war architecture, the Dutch publication is notably good in seeing post-war modernism in a more integrated fashion. It is a bit uneven, but the overwhelming feeling I get from this book and its lavish illustrations is a desire to get on my bike and start touring some compelling post-war environments.

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