Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven, editors
Aldo van Eyck: Writings
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“Aldo van Eyck to me is a significant architect. He’s more than significant, he’s a great architectural mind who has had little opportunity,” said Louis I. Kahn in a 1972 interview. Kahn first met van Eyck at the 1959 Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) meeting at Otterlo, the Netherlands, and recalled that van Eyck “made a speech about the meaning of a threshold just before you enter a room. It was magnificent, because through this, you could build a whole architecture.” In Kahn’s two statements, we may discern the outline of van Eyck’s importance to twentieth-century architecture and the dual paths of his influence. At the time of Kahn’s interview, van Eyck had, in fact, realized only a small number of buildings, including the Municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam of 1955–60, the Roman Catholic Church in The Hague of 1964–69, and over seven hundred children’s playgrounds in the city of Amsterdam, built starting in 1947. On the other hand, van Eyck’s writings and lectures, published here in collected form for the first time, have had a profound impact far beyond that of his modest number of major built works.

Today, Aldo van Eyck (1918–99) is increasingly recognized as one of the most important and influential of the second generation of modern architects. His work and writings criticize what he felt to be the fundamental social, cultural, and experiential failures of mid-twentieth-century mainstream modernism. He proposed an architecture and urbanism far more engaged in the everyday lives of the people that inhabit it, which he achieved by regrounding modern architecture in the accomplishments of early modernism in all the arts; reconnecting modern architecture to the spatial history of non-Western and archaic cultures; and radically redefining the progress-dominated and technologically determined intentions of modern architecture—which he summarized as “space and time”—in the humanist, localized, and experiential terms of “place and occasion” (1.50).

Van Eyck was one of the principal founders of Team 10, a group of architects that broke away from CIAM in the 1950s and articulated a more humane, holistic, historically informed, and contextually sensitive vision of modern architecture and urbanism. In this, van Eyck was arguably the leading figure in the constructive criticism and fundamentally redirection of mid-twentieth-century modernism, which he believed had become an international style, universally applied without respect to history, human nature, context, climate, culture, or building traditions. During the last three decades of his life, van Eyck applied similar criticisms to postmodern historicism and deconstructivism, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to replace modernism as the dominant international styles. Van Eyck felt these were characterized, perhaps to an even greater degree than modernism, by the same unconscionable irresponsibility toward the people who inhabited architecture.

Each chapter of Aldo van Eyck: Writings is insightfully introduced by Vincent Ligtelijn, editor of Aldo van Eyck: Works, the authorized catalog of van Eyck’s architectural designs, and by Francis Strauven, author of Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of Relativity, an “architectural biography” that, in this writer’s view, is one of the best books on architecture, period. Aldo van Eyck: Writings is composed of two volumes; the first, entitled The Child, The City and The Artist, was written in 1961–62 but remained unpublished until now. This unparalleled contribution to modern architectural and urban theory is both a summary of van Eyck’s thinking on architecture to this date, including writings from his time as editor of the Dutch architectural journal Forum, starting in 1959, as well as responses to the ideas and designs of those he taught with in the United States during this period—most notably Louis Kahn, whom he taught with at the University of Pennsylvania in the spring of 1960, and Fumihiko Maki, whom he taught with at Washington University in St. Louis in the fall and winter of 1961–62. The editors have organized the second and larger volume, Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947–1998, into thematic chapters rather than by strict chronology. Both volumes are extensively illustrated, so that the reader easily follows van Eyck’s descriptions and arguments.

In his earliest writings, which were prepared for and presented at the CIAM 6 meeting at in 1947, van Eyck argued for the critical importance to modern architecture of what he called our inheritance from the avant-garde in all the modern arts, and for a rededication to the liberative avant-garde agenda rather than the narrowly defined, reductive postwar functionalism that he felt was moving toward making architecture around the world essentially the same. During the period 1938–46, when he lived in Zurich, van Eyck had been intro-
duced to the work of the avant-garde by Carola Giedion-Welcker, wife of CIAM founder Sigfried Giedion and one of the very first art historians to engage the work of the avant-garde. Van Eyck was deeply influenced by Giedion-Welcker’s belief that the primary aim of modern art is to rediscover the essential, particularly the essential nature of humankind, and that this required the engagement and resolution of paradoxical concepts—what van Eyck later called the “twin phenomena.” Through “CW,” as she was known to her friends, van Eyck met and came to know the work of artists Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Alberto Giacometti, Kurt Schwitters, Constantin Brancusi, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Robert Delaunay, Antoine Pevsner, Georges Vantongerloo, George Braque, and Fernand Léger, the writers André Breton, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, the composer Arnold Schoenberg, the philosopher Henri Bergson, and especially the Swiss painter Richard Paul Lohse.

Lohse’s paintings, which van Eyck was among the first to publish, employed the vertical and horizontal right-angle grid as an ordering device, using color and rhythm to construct diagonal spatial tensions and rotational volumes within the strictly orthogonal geometry—an order van Eyck called “harmony in motion.” Van Eyck believed that the paintings of Lohse held direct implications for architecture and urban design, and from them he evolved his concept of “the aesthetics of number,” where the twin phenomena of many/few, large/small, whole/part, and collective/individual could be simultaneously engaged in a design, rather than emphasizing one over the other. Yet, in addition to his involvement with both De Stijl and Concrete art, van Eyck was also deeply influenced by surrealism, particularly the works of Miró and Arp. In characterizing the work of Arp he first articulated his concept of “what is constant and constantly changing” (2:49)—fusing the timeless and the contemporary—a concept he would soon engage in his own architecture and urban design. Finally, van Eyck was among the first to publish and organize exhibitions of the works of the CoBrA group, which included Karel Appel, Pierre Corneille, Shinkichi Tajiri, and Constant (Nieuwenhuys), who later designed the radical urban proposal “New Babylon.”

It was with members of CoBrA that van Eyck initiated his lifelong explorations of archaic cultures, particularly those of the Saharan desert, the Dogon villages in Western Africa, and the Zuñi and pueblo villages of the American Southwest. In his writings on these studies, van Eyck identifies the combination of environmentally adapted building and cosmology, which places man at the center of an ecological cycle of life, with specific responsibilities to maintain a balance as the key attribute of these archaic cultures. Refusing to use the term “primitive,” van Eyck argued at CIAM 9 in 1953 that people throughout time had the same mental capacities as we possess today, and that we have far more in common with ancient and archaic cultures than modern architects appeared to believe.

Arguing against what he called modern architects’ generally “deterministic” pattern of thinking, van Eyck wrote:

The time has come to gather the old into the new; to rediscover the archaic qualities of human nature—I mean the timeless ones. . . . Architecture implies a constant rediscovery of constant qualities translated into space. Man is always and everywhere essentially the same. . . . Modern architects have been harping continually on what is different in our time to such an extent that even they have lost touch with what is not different, what is always essentially the same. This grave mistake was not made by the poets, painters and sculptors. On the contrary, they never narrowed down experience; they enlarged and intensified it.

Van Eyck called for history to be understood as a living, timeless tradition, perceived through human experience: “We meet ourselves everywhere in all places and ages” (2:202–3).

The first issue of Forum to be edited by van Eyck opened with a call for the design of “an environment in which [modern man] is able to live with dignity and assure survival without losing his identity” (2:223). In the over twenty issues he edited, van Eyck proposed that contemporary design be directed toward “the shape of the in-between,” and the recognition of the relevance of elementary forms and structures of archaic habitation: “the vernacular of the heart”; the aesthetics of number (the twin phenomena of small/large, individual/collective, few/many); the sense of “right size” and human scale; “the interior of time,” an argument for the primacy of the interior experience, even in the design of urban spaces; and the fusion of all these concepts in a configurative design method, the overall intention of which was the construction of “architecture as built homecoming” (1:62).

In 1960, following the ending of CIAM, Team 10 initiated a series of group meetings, which lasted until 1977. Team 10 included as participants, in addition to van Eyck, Jacob Bakema, Alison and Peter Smithson, John Voelker, George Candilis, Giancarlo da Carlo, Ralph Erskine, Shadrach Woods, Amancio Guedes, José Coderch, and Stefan Wewerka, among others. In 1962 Alison Smithson assembled the Team 10 Primer, which she revised and republished in its definitive edition in 1968, followed in 1991 by transcriptions of discussions entitled Team 10 Meetings.3 Until recently, the books have served as the only sources on Team 10, and yet, in reading van Eyck’s writings, a very different picture of the group emerges.4 One realizes the degree to which Smithson’s editing of the primer has largely formed our perception of this critically important evolution of modern architecture. If Team 10 may be characterized as the conscience of CIAM—and, by extension, of the modern movement in architecture for the third quarter of the twentieth century—then these writings make clear the extent to which van Eyck was the conscience of Team 10. As Kenneth Frampton has noted, “From the begin-
ning van Eyck was to address himself to a whole set of issues which most of the members of Team 10 were scarcely capable of formulating. . . . No other member seemed to be able to attack the alienating abstraction of modern architecture on such fundamental grounds.”

During the last three decades of his life, van Eyck came to question the assumption that the modern movement was past, and that we had entered a period that could be called “postmodern.” Van Eyck instead believed that it was not modernism as a whole but architecture itself that required thoughtful redefinition and reengagement. More recently, van Eyck has been characterized as one of the most important representatives of “the other tradition of modern architecture,” those modern architects whose work was determined not by universal formal styles, technical or functional formula, or purely conceptual theories, but rather by the everyday lives and experiences of those who inhabit architecture. Yet van Eyck was also one of the only architects of his generation to question whether contemporary culture and society were not themselves becoming disconnected from the concepts of modern life that had inspired the early modernists in all the arts—the ideal that living and experiencing the places and occasions of the modern world should be as enriching, expanding, engaging, and liberating as humanly possible. Holding that good architecture has always been the counterform of society’s form, he asked, “If society has no form, how can architects build the counterform?” (2:325). Van Eyck’s deeply disquieting question, first asked shortly after the midpoint of the twentieth century, still haunts us today.

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Notes

Wendy Gamber
The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America

Betsy Klimasmith
At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850–1930

These two books answer the question, posed in the March 2006 JSAH by editor Nancy Stieber, how might architectural history inform the work of adjacent disciplines? On the one hand, the historian Wendy Gamber’s The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America hardly mentions physical buildings. On the other, literature specialist Betsy Klimasmith’s At Home in the City is fully invested in architecture’s representation in nineteenth-century American fiction.

Gamber’s book on boardinghouses is full of fascinating information about this type of dwelling practice in nineteenth-century America, making much use of primary material like newspaper advertisements and especially boarders’ diaries and letters. Bostonian Susan Brown recounts how her pleasant boarding experience led her to characterize her landlady and the other boarders as family. Brown went shopping or to church with one or another of them; she shared a bedroom with the landlady when the house had extra boarders. She taught a class in the boardinghouse and the boarders all attended parties and holiday celebrations together. Later, she became engaged to a fellow boarder, married him and returned to the boardinghouse to set up their life together. Before about 1840 boarding was a common way to live and accepted along with any other dwelling choice.

However, by the 1850s the ideal of “home” began to be framed as a cultural icon surrounded with sentiments promoting the privacy, moral values, and sanctity of the family. The various forms of dwelling that could be seen as diluting or working against these sentiments were demonized. Critics pointed out that when boardinghouse owners rented out their homes, they turned “every square inch into a commodity; boardinghouse keepers transgressed the imaginary border that separated home from marketplace” (42). Gamber’s aim as a historian is to explore the boundaries between “home and marketplace, boardinghouse and home” that landladies and their boarders had to negotiate (10).

Food, for instance, was a constant subject of humor in magazine columns and cartoons. Writers complained of being served “antediluvian pies” or “the fossil remains of an omnibus horse” (78). Landladies, always concerned to make money, skimmed on the quality of food and its quantity. Boardinghouse eats were contrasted to the “delectable meals” found in true homes, although the phrase “home cooking” was not common until the twentieth century (78). Along with meal preparation for their boarders, landladies and their employees also had to clean chambers, wash and iron linens, and sweep floors. The income from boarders allowed landladies to hire servants, and some thought this was ample reward, although hiring and training new servants when the old ones left was always a problem (126).

The lack of privacy in crowded boardinghouses always was foregrounded by critics; conversations passed easily through thin partitions. Moreover, boardinghouse sociability played out among strangers who acted parts instead of experiencing honest interactions. People gossiped about petty matters rather