

# *The Architect as Creator of the Cité in Christiaan Weijts's Euforie*

Albert Gielen

Already in the nineteenth century novelists like Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) and Stendhal (1783–1842) wrote about the city, respectively in *Illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions*, 1837) and *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*, 1830). These urban novelists revelled in the ways a city can crush the hopes of young citizens who move from the country to the city.<sup>1</sup> Later, the protagonist was no longer the person who perished in the city, but the one who (co-)designed the city. There are several novels with an architect or an urban designer as the protagonist. Well-known examples are *De man zonder ziekte* (*The Man Without Illness*) written by Arnon Grunberg (1971) and published in 2012, *The Fountainhead* (1943) by Ayn Rand (1905–1982) and *A városlapító* (*The City Builder*) by György Konrád (1933–2019), written in 1969–1973 but published in 1992. Novels with an architect or urban planner as the protagonist can be regarded as a form of artist's novel and can be characterized as a genre in which introspection and reflection are important structural features, the purpose of which is to relive and understand the present through the past. This means that the artist was not (only) an outsider but (also) an important member of the community, “developing his talents with the sole objective of serving

<sup>1</sup> Sennett, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

society”.<sup>2</sup> Peter V. Zima describes in *Der europäische Künstlerroman. Von der romantischen Utopie zur postmodernen Parodie* (The European Artist’s Novel. From the Romantic Utopia to Postmodern Parody, 2008) the changing role of the artist in novels from the Romantic period, late modernism and postmodernism from parallel processes of secularization, social differentiation, ideological fragmentation and commercialization through which art receives less and less appreciation and is pushed towards the edges of society<sup>3</sup>. Herbert Marcuse already noted a *Zwiespalt*, a dissension between Idea and Reality, between Art and Life, Subject and Object. In an artist’s novel, the artist tries to resolve this dissension and finds a new unity. As a human being, the artist must try to function in reality as it presents itself to him. As an artist, he longs for the realization of an idea, but his empire of ideas is far from reality. The result is that he sees the smallness and the emptiness of life. The artist should attempt to solve this dichotomy.<sup>4</sup> The next step is set when the artist is confronted with civil society and becomes a critical authority. Social criticism, therefore, becomes an essential feature, according to Theodor W. Adorno’s definition of ‘*Der Artist als Statthalter*’.<sup>5</sup> The artist as the critical substitute is the base and source of social criticism by late modern writers. Disappointed by the revolutionary fervor of the proletariat like that of the student movement, only art remains as a critical instance, according to Marcuse and Adorno: art as the governor of real life. But art cannot affect that and because of the developments in scientific and technological welfare, state art loses its revolutionary appeal.<sup>6</sup>

The position of the artist within society and his role within the novel makes the artist, in Weijs’ case the architect, an authority in criticizing some developments in urban design and in trying to find a solution for present day problems concerning the city. The architect and urbanist as a character can lead to a discourse with which a critical look at various current or dominant architectural ideas can be presented.

<sup>2</sup> Seret, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Zima, Peter V., *Der europäische Künstlerroman. Von der romantischen Utopie zur postmodernen Parodie*, Tübingen–Basel, A. Francke, 2008, p. XI.

<sup>4</sup> Marcuse, Herbert, “Der deutsche Künstlerroman”. In: *Der deutsche Künstlerroman. Frühe Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno in Zima, Peter V., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

To reconstruct the narrator's criticism of design practices, I use the study by Richard Sennett. A few years after Weijts' novel, Sennett published *Building and Dwelling. Ethics for the City* (2018) in which he seeks to connect how cities are built to how people live in them. Central to his analysis is the distinction he makes between *ville* and *cit  *.<sup>7</sup> The difference means big and small—*ville* referred to the overall city, *cit  * is a particular place. *Ville* is the built, the physical, *cit  * the lived, a kind of consciousness, how people want to live collectively, the mental.<sup>8</sup> Or, as the title says, building versus dwelling, although there should be no contradiction.

*Ville* and *cit  * should fit together seamlessly, because the way people want to live should be expressed in how cities are built,<sup>9</sup> but that seems an unattainable ideal. As a professor at MIT, Sennett cooperates with The Media Lab, also in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to develop a system of how to fit *ville* and *cit  * together. The solution can be found in opening up the city. "Open" implies a system for fitting together the old, the curious, the possible'.<sup>10</sup> Like life, the city has to be 'open'. As a consequence, the city becomes multi-layered, and avoids monoculture. An open city would tolerate differences and promote equality. The planner's and architect's role would be to encourage complexity and to create an interactive, synergetic *ville* greater than the sum of its parts, whose clear structure would orient people.<sup>11</sup> The making of places is best achieved through architecture without architects, because there is by definition a mismatch between the ways people currently do things and the ways they might do them.<sup>12</sup> Sennett agrees with urban studies activist Jane Jacobs (1916–2006) who did not dispute the worth of urban design itself, 'but asserted that urban forms emerged slowly and incrementally, following the lessons of use and experience'.<sup>13</sup>

This leads to the question of where criticism exactly lies in *Euforie*, towards whom or what is it oriented, what solutions can be found and

<sup>7</sup> Sennett, Richard, *Building and Dwelling. Ethics for the City*. London, Allen Lane–Penguin, 2018, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1, 2, 242.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8–9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13–14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

how do they relate to Sennett's analysis? More specifically, how do the *cité* (local) and the *ville* (urban), building and dwelling, relate to each other? 'The holy grail of urban design is to create places which have a particular character', states Sennett.<sup>14</sup> But what does the main character, an architect, see as the holy grail? Here lies an even greater dilemma for urbanism: how to create a connection with the past—a past whose passing one might regret—without turning the city into a museum.

## The story

Johannes Vermeer is the main character of the novel and we look at the events in the novel through his eyes. Vermeer was born in The Hague, where he still lives. There, he went to the Stedelijk Gymnasium (Municipal Gymnasium), where he met Isa Verstuijven, the object of his unrequited love. After the gymnasium, he started studying at the Technische Universiteit (Technical University) in Delft. He is currently married with Celine, the daughter of a lawyer in Voorburg. They have one daughter, Anne. Vermeer is more or less as old as Weijts himself. In a court scene, a judge verifies his personal details allowing us to discover that Vermeer was born on October 29, 1976 in Leiden. This is indeed the same birth year as Weijts's. It is therefore plausible that Vermeer is around 36 years old.<sup>15</sup>

On July 6, probably around 2010, architect Johannes Vermeer is driving a van in The Hague before being stopped by a motorcycle policeman who commands him to follow. They travel to the center of The Hague, to Spui and Grote Markt. Al Qaeda has committed a bomb attack on a tram tunnel and an underground car park. Vermeer assists in transporting the wounded to the hospital. Afterwards he does not tell anyone that he has saved lives. Soon the municipality of the Hague organizes a design competition for the redevelopment of the affected area as well as the Sixth July monument which will serve to commemorate the 43 victims.

The story of the design competition is interrupted by flashbacks about Vermeer's time in high school with special attention to his

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>15</sup> Weijts, Christiaan, *Euforie*. Utrecht/Amsterdam, Antwerpen, De Arbeiderspers, 2012, p. 357.

childhood sweetheart who remains unattainable and who is at the end the source of his architectural ideas, gained during a school trip to Rome and Florence. The love story will play no role in the article.

Johannes Vermeer takes part in the contest with his two partners. Their Hague-based architectural office is named LVE Architects after the first letters of their surnames: Olivier Liebach specializes in materials and constructions; Johannes Vermeer is the ideas man and the actual designer; Kasper Eijvogel arranges contracts, provides funding and maintains public relations. Vermeer shares his surname with a famous Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), perhaps because of the famous painting *Gezicht op Delft* (View of Delft, 1660–1661), the city where the three partners have studied at the Technical University. Moreover, architect Vermeer greatly admires the light on the painting. After LVE, like other architects, have submitted their design, they appear to be among the final four contenders but the winner is to be selected by a referendum. The four entries are further proposed in the TV program *Zoeklicht* (Searchlight). When the associates of LVE are interviewed near the place where the attack was committed, Vermeer is recognized by one of the victims (Rambo) whom he helped to transport to the hospital.<sup>16</sup> Only then he tells his partners about his “heroic action”.

They force him to go public with his “heroic action” in order to increase their chances of winning the competition. After many protests he does, with his wife being furious with him as a result because he did not talk with her about his action. This escalates, causing Vermeer, separated from his wife and daughter, to start living in one of the cottages he designed for the holiday park Klein Elysium near the coast. At this point, it is important to note that Vermeer’s wife Celine is a meteorologist who works in television as a weather girl. Something about the weather is mentioned twice in the novel and can be mentioned here as related to some of the novel’s themes that will be examined later on.

Het weer stopt nooit. [...], trekt zich niets aan van menselijke actualiteit, en bestond dan ook al vijf miljard jaar voordat de eerste primaten verschenen.

And later on:

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136–137.

Welbeschouwd is het weer ook het enige domein dat we nooit in onze greep hebben gekregen.

Thinking about what Le Corbusier wrote: “It is the grip of man upon nature”, as mentioned above, we can imagine why Vermeer calls this naïve. The weather functions as a metaphor that supports the significance of the novel. Human behaviour, very much like weather, cannot be planned.

Another consequence is that nobody believes Vermeer and he is bad-mouthed by the other entrants who accuse him of cheating. Thanks to an old college friend, he obtains security camera pictures proving he actually was in the tram tunnel and rescued the wounded in the rubble, but the images are not immediately shown publicly. He shows them later under pressure from his colleagues. Meanwhile, Vermeer is becoming less satisfied with the design LVE has submitted.

The turmoil around whether Vermeer actually assisted in the rescue and his doubt about his design for the monument escalates when tax authorities invade the architecture office and the associates are arrested on suspicion of money laundering and document forgery. Vermeer does not know anything about this and is released soon. LVE Architects is dissolved, though, and there is a new design contest. Isa Verstuijven, his first love and schoolmate, lived during their school years in the alternative circuit and in a squat. Years after high school, Vermeer finds her again because she is working with biological and climate-neutral materials and offers self-repairing concrete via the internet. When she brings him information about it, he approaches her in an obtrusive sexual way.<sup>17</sup> Only when he does not use the concrete in the first design, despite his promises, a gulf grows between them. Nevertheless, it leads to Vermeer’s second design, *Euforie*, being submitted anonymously by Isa’s materials consultancy and wins the competition.<sup>18</sup>

## The LVE design for the competition

The municipality of The Hague stipulates that the refurbished area should consist of a mix of shops, traffic, recreation and a memorial

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296–297.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

for the 43 dead, to be converted by LVE into a castle-like complex. According to Vermeer, the design is:

een rond plein, met winkels en etalages aan de rand, die zowel naar beneden in de tunnel doorlopen als de hoogte ingaat. [...] De vorm gaat inderdaad terug op de middeleeuwse vestingmuur, maar het belangrijkste gebeurt wat mij betreft in de omloop, bovenin. Dat is een elliptische weergang, met spectaculaire uitzichten over de stad.<sup>19</sup>

Vermeer accentuates the great importance of the cantilevered parapet with battlements and machicolation (an overhanging stone gallery with openings for missiles to be shot) for aesthetic reasons, but also because it is considered a monument to the 43 victims. He sees it as a salve for the wounded city.<sup>20</sup> Not everyone shares that vision, as partner Eijsvogel says about the parapet: 'Boven in die mooie wéérgang van jullie zit helemaal niks waar je als ondernemer iets aan hebt. Daar zit alleen uitzicht'.<sup>21</sup> This illustrates the contradiction between commerce and a memorial to the dead. A few pages later, it has become an oval shaped building, according to the description:

Het ontwerp is een ovaalvormig plein, te betreden onder bogen door, die een rond gebouw dragen dat de hoogte ingaat, en waar zich spiraalsgewijs een pad langs de verschillende winkels omhoog slingert. Helemaal bovenin hangt, ogenschijnlijk zwevend, maar door een transparante ring verbonden aan die winkeltoren, een weergang met een spectaculair uitzicht over de stad door drieënveertig smalle ramen of schietgaten, elk met de naam van een slachtoffer eronder.<sup>22</sup>

This description of the building reminds one of the Tower of Babel in the way Pieter Brueghel de Oude (ca. 1525–1569) depicted it twice. In the following year, in February, five months before the referendum,

<sup>19</sup> "a circular piazza, with shops and shop windows on the edge, which both extend down into the tunnel as well as go up to the height. [...] The form actually goes back to the medieval ramparts, but the most important aspect for me is the top. This is an elliptical wall-walk, with spectacular views over the city." *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> "Above in that beautiful parapet of yours is nothing that one as an entrepreneur can do anything with. There's only the view." *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> "The design is an oval piazza, to be entered under the arches carrying a round building which goes up to the height, and where a spiral path along the various stores bends. At the top, you see a seemingly floating wall-walk, which is however attached to the shop tower by a transparent ring, with a spectacular view of the city through forty-three narrow windows or loopholes, each with the name of a victim underneath." *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Vermeer begins to have doubts about his design. The only thing with which he is satisfied is the machicolation because it is located right in the city and rises far above it.<sup>23</sup> More important than the appearance of the design are the thoughts behind it. The first design of Vermeer for the competition is according to the kind of personal and softened principle of 'form follows function': he studies the environment in which a project is to be built, he immerses himself in the list of requirements, functions, soil conditions, the composition of the population and all that inevitably leads to a form, a design.<sup>24</sup>

Vermeer sees designing as solving a puzzle for which there is no solution. This results in a building which is only a success when it goes through a transformation. Vermeer means that the building grows on its own, it frees itself from the architect's original idea. The essential role of the end-users starts to frustrate him. Architecture is not acting to improve the world. He is no longer satisfied with the way his predecessors have been working for a long time, because they determined how the users should use or should behave in the buildings or parts of the city.

## The architects and their conceptions

Vermeer mentions and comments on, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, a large number of architects and urban planners. Below are the names which Vermeer most often mentions or on which he comments in more detail. The reason why Vermeer discusses these people is because it is impossible to escape their completed buildings:

We wonen in andermans gedachten, wandelen door fantasieën van derden, werken in verzinsels van nog weer anderen. Al het gebouwde is bedacht, van de stoepranden tot de omrastering van een sportveld. Waar normale stervelingen hun spinsels nog privé weten te houden, dringen de bouwers hun binnenwerelden op. Dat is geen bijkomstigheid van hun vak, het is er het wezenskenmerk van.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> "We live in someone else's mind, walking through fantasies of others, works and fabrications of yet someone else again. All that's built is created, from the pavement edges to the paling of a sports field. Where ordinary mortals are privately managed to



Vermeer assumes that architecture is not the same as global improvement:

Als hij de hoogdravende traktaten leest van Berlage en zijn tijdgenoten, dan kan hij het niet helpen altijd iets te voelen tussen plaatsvervangende schaamte en spot.<sup>26</sup>

Berlage and his contemporaries have visions of new worlds, ideal societies, or the end of war or class differences. Based on this view and on his appreciation, Vermeer divides the architects and urban planners into two groups—on the one hand functionalists or modernists, on the other artists.<sup>27</sup> He bases the distinction on their way of designing and on the extent to which they determine the behaviour of people in relation to their use of what has been built. I will follow this division:

**Modernists:**

H.P. Berlage

Le Corbusier

Walter Gropius

Richard Meier

Rem Koolhaas

Léon Krier

**Artists:**

Giorgio Vasari

Étienne-Louis Boullée

Antoni Gaudí

Before taking a closer look at the individual architects, the design concepts in general will be introduced. The core problems addressed by the urbanists of the beginning of the twentieth century are linked to the evolution of the industrial city since the nineteenth century.

---

keep their concoctions, the builders reduce their inner worlds. That is no coincidence of their profession, it is the hallmark of it." *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>26</sup> "When he reads the grandiloquent tracts of Berlage and his contemporaries, he always cannot help but feel something between vicarious shame and mockery." *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> The term 'modernists' is problematic. In architecture books, the terms usually used are *The International Style* or *Functionalism*, or in the Netherlands *Het Nieuwe Bouwen* (Building New), but none is satisfactory. Reyner Banham therefore devised *The Machine Age Architecture*, which in itself is correct. Banham, Reyner, *Theory & Design in the First Machine Age*, Cambridge, Mit Press, 1960. Weijts gives no precise indication which gives me the opportunity to use *modernists* here (Banham, Reyner, *Theory & Design in the First Machine Age*, Cambridge, Mit Press, 1960). Curtis considers "modern architecture" as "an invention of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was conceived in reaction to the supposed chaos and eclecticism of the various earlier nineteenth-century revivals of historical forms." Curtis, William J.R., *Modern Architecture since 1900*, London, Phaidon Press, 1996, p. 11.

Developments such as mechanization, new means of transportation and production had transformed the city uncontrollably. Population increased enormously during this process. As stated by William J.R. Curtis in *Modern Architecture since 1900*: 'The result was a slum landscape of factories, tenements, and grimy streets without decent communal or private amenities'.<sup>28</sup> The larger scale of buildings (e.g. skyscrapers) and the new type of buildings (e.g. railway stations), combined with land speculations changed the social order and the character of the city.

In order to solve these problems, various ideas arose, such as a utopian vision consisting of 'a sort of perfect balance of forces between individual desires and social expectations'. This dream led to 'a natural co-operation untrammelled by the irrelevancies of previous social contracts that was carried through in the fantasy of an ideal collective palace: a *'phalanstère'*'.<sup>29</sup> Other urban proposals consisted of strengthening the status quo. The boulevards in Paris designed by Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809–1891) serve as an example. Ebenezer Howard developed the model of the garden city in his book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898). A contemporary adaptation of baroque design concepts is that of Camillo Sitte (1843–1903) written down in *Der Städtebau nach seinem künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (1899, City Planning according to Artistic Principles), who advocated for urban expansion and modifications that better suit the earlier city. Most of these theories can be recognized in different variants by the architects referred to by Vermeer.

H.P. Berlage (1856–1934) was a nineteenth century rationalist but also a transitional figure who paved the way to functionalism. According to Curtis, the Dutchman Berlage is 'a sort of father-figure of modern architecture' in the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup> His architectural views were concerned with 'the problem of genuine modern style, which he spoke of in terms of clear proportions, planar walls, the direct expression of material and the primacy of space'.<sup>31</sup> For Berlage the essentials of architecture were space-creation (for him architecture is the boundary

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

of space defined in a rational and useful way, which is the opposite of nineteenth century representative architecture) and the relationship of masses (placement, dimensions and relationships between the various building parts), but also a fair use of brick and construction – the viewer could see how the building continued to stand upright. A famous example is his *Beurs van Berlage* (1897–1904, Amsterdam Stock Exchange). For his urbanism he planned that the system of canals in Amsterdam would not continue as a way for the city to expand. Outside the fortification walls there was a nineteenth century pell-mell. Curtis writes:

Berlage brought order to the chaos with the help of grand avenues defining major pieces of massive and substantial character; these were in turn penetrated by secondary systems of roads and quiet squares containing shops, schools, and public institutions.<sup>32</sup>

For the expansion of Amsterdam, Berlage designed different versions of *Plan Zuid* (New South) in the years 1902–1920. Most alluring is the existing Y-shaped part of the street plan which consists of Vrijheidslaan, Churchillaan and Rooseveltlaan with facades in the style of the Amsterdam School. At the intersection of the Y rose the first high building (twelve floors) in the Netherlands. The purpose of Berlage to mix different income groups failed. Especially the upper middle class and the elite settled there. It is important here to distinguish Berlage's city plan from the architectural interpretation by the Amsterdam School. Berlage, although important for many architectural directions, is certainly not an Amsterdam School architect. Vermeer turns against Berlage, the urban planner, because the plan leaves no room for residents to design their own surroundings. Vincent van Rossem summarizes it as follows: Berlage saw the city not only as a solution to the housing problem: 'de stad is niet alleen een nuttig bouwwerk, maar ook een kunstwerk'.<sup>33</sup> Besides that, Berlage designed in a sober and rational style, while the Amsterdam School style was largely influenced by expressionism, with round forms, towers, ornamental

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>33</sup> "the city is not only a useful building, but also a work of art". Rossem, Vincent van, 1988. 'Berlage: beschouwingen over stedenbouw 1892–1914.' In: *Hendrik Petrus Berlage. Het complete werk*. Alphen aan de Rijn, Atrium 1988. p. 57.

spires, decorative windows and doors, and high roofs covered with tiles that extend to the walls. Vermeer does not comment on that.

The Swiss–French Le Corbusier (1887–1965) is a revolutionary who in several magazine articles which were later gathered in a book titled *Vers une architecture* (1923, *Toward an architecture*), claimed that mankind finally comes to architecture. To him, engineering objects such as grain silos, factories, ships and airplanes were an example of “clear and distinct articulation of volumes and surfaces; ships and aeroplanes for their rigorous expression of function”.<sup>34</sup> For him the architecture of the new era lies in the transformation of images such as ships and airplanes into art and architecture. Dwellings became a “machine for living in”, meaning a house “whose functions had been examined from the ground floor up and stripped to the essentials”.<sup>35</sup> Housing should be as efficient as a machine. This way of living could be realized in a concrete house that consisted of a white box on stilts with a flat roof, planar, rectangular windows of an industrial kind and a high living-room with a huge studio window. The dwellings were mass-producible.

Le Corbusier also had revolutionary plans for urban development, presented as *Ville Radieuse* (1930s, *Radiant City*). It was to be a continuation of the forms of a new machine-age civilization he had proposed. With *Ville Radieuse* he created his ideal city:

The Ville Radieuse as a whole was highly centralized and densely populated, yet most of its surface was given over to zones of leisure – parks, playing-fields, etc. Following his earlier principles, Le Corbusier also created broad roads to facilitate the rapid passage of traffic to and from the countryside and from place to place within the city; pedestrians were able to circulate on separate levels; and the traditional ‘corridor street’ was completely destroyed.<sup>36</sup>

In his study *The City of To-Morrow and its Planning* (*Urbanisme*, 1924) Le Corbusier writes that the city also has to be efficient: “A TOWN is a tool. [...] They are not worthy of the age; they are no longer worthy of us. A city! It is the grip of man upon nature”.<sup>37</sup> Although the plan was never realized as such, it manifested considerable influence on other

---

<sup>34</sup> Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>37</sup> Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and its Planning*, New York, Dover Publications, [s.a.], p. XXI.

architects. In 1933, Le Corbusier was a guest at the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux de l'Architecture Moderne*), presenting his plan. The members of CIAM accepted the proposal for functional zoning of city plans, with green belts between the areas reserved for different functions: dwelling, recreation, work and transport.

Walter Gropius (1883–1969) from Germany claimed that the spirit of modern times required its own expression in a new style. The years 1922 and 1923 were crucial in Germany and France because of the new orientation to the Bauhaus (initially pursuing an expressionist style) and in Gropius's thinking and designing.<sup>38</sup> When the Dutchman Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) visited Bauhaus in Weimar, he introduced De Stijl which influenced the new Bauhaus aesthetics. The new style was based on basic forms of circles, spheres, rectangles, cubes, triangles and pyramids. Machines were also very important for Gropius but in a different way than in the case of Le Corbusier. His students “should both learn about the design of types for mass production, and seek to design forms which crystallized the values of a mechanized epoch”.<sup>39</sup> Mechanization, repetition and multiplication thus formed a condition to which Vermeer would respond later.

The American Richard Meier (1934), as opposed to pioneers like Le Corbusier and Gropius, grew up in a time when modern architecture was a *fait accompli*. He revives the forms of the early modernists, for example by using vertical and horizontal layering in houses. His buildings are mostly white and without ornamentation. Curtis writes about this neo-modernist:

Meier established a signature style that was characterized by layers of wall planes and transparencies, fractured structural grids, interpenetrating ramps, and spaces of varying luminosity.<sup>40</sup>

Rem Koolhaas (1944) from the Netherlands writes in *Delirious New York* (1978) at the end of his book, in the appendix named ‘A Fictional Conclusion’ that:

The Metropolis strives to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man, so that it absolutely coincides with his

<sup>38</sup> Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 664.

desires. The Metropolis is an addictive machine, from which there is no escape, unless it offers that, too...<sup>41</sup>

Koolhaas shows that Manhattan generated its own metropolitan urbanism and that is a *Culture of Congestion*. New York, especially Manhattan, has been the most rational, efficient and utilitarian pursuit of the irrational with the skyscraper as a self-contained universe. In the appendix he presents a series of projects that announce the second phase of *Manhattanism*. The skyscraper as a vertical city where the main means of transport is the elevator. This makes it possible to think about *cross-programming* which introduces unexpected functions in room programs, such as running tracks in skyscrapers. For his design *Seattle Central Library* (2003) Koolhaas unsuccessfully proposed the inclusion of hospital units for the homeless. There is not a single specific function associated with a specific site in Koolhaas's vision.

The architectural conceptions of the Luxembourgish architect Léon Krier (1964) are already demonstrated by a significant book title: *The Reconstruction of the European City* (1978). The modernists had little interest in the street in the same way the street was of little importance in Koolhaas's designs with his skyscrapers because the street was actually thought inside the buildings. During a congress for the New Urbanism (1993) where Krier was a prominent member, the following assumptions were promoted:

The neighbourhoods should promote a high level of local democracy and community responsibility, and be comprised of a diversity of residents, which is promoted by the provision of a full range of housing types and civic facilities. Recognition should be given to refining traditional continuities in terms of the urban form and design, often adapting historical precedents in terms of architectural style.<sup>42</sup>

The neighbourhoods should be organized in compact, mixed use, walkable, identifiable and linked by mass transit. Public spaces and the public realm should be given priority.

In summary, the plans of the mentioned architects and urban planners contain designs and views that are characterized by a lack of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Koolhaas, Rem, *Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1994, p. 293.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson-Fawcett, Michelle, "Leon Krier and the organic revival within urban policy and practice", *Planning Perspectives*, n° 13, 1998, p. 167–194.

necessary empathy to estimate behaviour in the urban environment, or by the desire that people behave in a way that is not realistic. This is not done out of malice, but because of the idea that society is “makeable”.

The first architect Vermeer calls an artist is the Italian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the well-known inventor and writer of the genre of the encyclopaedia of artists' biographies with his *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (1550, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects) and was also a painter and an architect. In the latter capacity, he designed for instance the *Palazzo degli Uffizi* (begun in 1560) in Florence, commissioned by Duke Cosimo I de' Medici. Intended to house Grand Ducal offices, it garnered particular admiration for the loggia. Nikolaus Pevsner writes:

It consists of two tall wings along a long narrow courtyard. The formal elements are familiar to us: lack of clear gradation of storeys, uniformity coupled with heretical detail, long elegant, and fragile brackets below double pilasters which are no pilasters at all, and so on. What must be emphasized is the finishing accent of the composition towards the River Arno. Here a loggia, open in a spacious Venetian window on the ground floor and originally also a colonnade on the upper floor, replaces the solid wall.<sup>43</sup>

Related to the Loggia he also designed what became famous as the *Vasari Corridor*, also called the ‘Crosstown Expressway’ or the ‘Secret Passageway of the Medicis’. The Vasari Corridor connects the Palazzo Vecchio with Palazzo Pitti by a maze of corridors, council chambers, and dungeons. The primary reason for its construction was to allow members of the Medici to travel safely from their home in the Palazzo Pitti to the government city state, the Palazzo Vecchio. The Grand Duke Cosimo I avoided walking among the commoners of Florence. Michael Dennis describes the corridor as a Renaissance intervention into ‘the fundamentally medieval fabric of central Florence’. Despite the opposition, the corridor is a success for two reasons:

Namely, it preserves and adapts to the existing context (apparently only one house was destroyed for its construction), and it operates simultaneously on several different scales, from that of the individual, using the Corridor (originally decorated with portraits of famous

<sup>43</sup> Pevsner, Nikolaus, *An Outline of European Architecture*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 223–225.

artists), to the larger scale of the fabric through which it passes. The resultant ambiguities allow for multiple interpretation of the Corridor's various sections.<sup>44</sup>

The amendments and insertions were made by Vasari with care and respect for the existing buildings.

The Frenchman Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799) is not of interest as a practicing architect. His interest in architectural history is determined by his theoretical writings and his drawings which were intended to accompany his lectures and publications. This allowed him to use his imagination freely. John Summerson writes about these drawings: 'His designs begin with classical compositions of impossible size but in due course he begins to strip away the classical attributes and present us with naked geometrical masses in dramatic relationships'.<sup>45</sup> The *Cenotaph for Sir Isaac Newton* (1784) is a good example:

In Boullée's drawings the Neo-classical imagination soars into a world of unbuildable abstractions. He believed that architecture should be based on "nature", and "nature" in an architectural context meant, for him, geometrical forms.<sup>46</sup>

The *Cenotaph* consists of a sphere of 500 ft (152.4 m) diameter, belted with cypress avenues. Pevsner adds to this:

Boullée in the comments to his pictures pleads for a felt not a reasoned architecture, for character, grandeur, magic. Practical needs worried him little.<sup>47</sup>

The early work of the Spaniard Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) had a neo-Gothic character and was inspired by the Middle Ages. But after the turn of the century emerges his highly personal style. Curtis sums it up as:

The richness of Gaudí's art lies in the reconciliation of the fantastic and the practical, the subjective and the scientific, the spiritual and the material. His forms were never arbitrary, but rooted in structural

---

<sup>44</sup> Dennis, Michael, "The Uffizi: Museum as Urban Design", *Perspecta*, n° 16, 1980, p. 62–72, p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Summerson, John, *The Architecture of the Eighteenth Century*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>47</sup> Pevsner, *op. cit.*, p. 369.



principles and in an elaborate private world of social and emblematic meanings.<sup>48</sup>

The Gothic architecture varied considerably from region to region and from period to period. While trying to find a Catalan regional style, Gaudí also had to react

poetically, not to say mystically, to the hedonistic Mediterranean landscape and vegetation, as well as to the maritime character and traditions of Barcelona.<sup>49</sup>

Gaudí adapted his design largely to the environment. In addition he used vegetable stems and natural forms for his designs.

In summary, the architects and urban planners that Vermeer sees as artists are those who make great use of the existing environment that has been created over the years, or who can design what they want because the designs are not built anyway, or who have a strong connection with the past and nature. Vermeer speaks appreciatively about Gaudí, but says nothing about the Amsterdam School, although the core of their designs are nature and its organic forms, craftsmanship and traditional materials. But they were also open to modernity, embracing new techniques and production processes.

## Vermeer's architectural criticism

Through his profession as an architect, Vermeer is not only involved in his built environment, he is also a critical observer: 'Meestal doorkruist hij steden met een sloopkogel. Hij renoveert de boel in gedachten. Het gaat vanzelf'.<sup>50</sup>

When he is entering The Hague by van, what follows is not only a kind of itinerary but also a commentary on the appearance of the city:

Eerst is er, boven het tramstation, dat plein dat maar geen plein wil worden, en dan stuit je op stapelblokken die sinds de jaren zestig de stad zijn binnengemarcheerd. Allemaal angstvallig trouw aan Bauhaus' en Le Corbusiers verbod op versiering en meer algemeen op alle manifestaties van schoonheid. Aan het Spui culmineert dat allemaal in het steriele witte

<sup>48</sup> Curtis, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> "Usually he crosses cities with a wrecking ball. He renovates things in his mind. It goes without saying." Weijts, Christiaan, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

stadhuiscomplex van Richard Meier, de radicale Le Corbusierepigoon, die nog steeds af en toe iemand stuurt die controleert of de ambtenaren er wel uit bijkleurende witte mokken drinken. Het IJspaleis. Vermeer kan zich niet herinneren ooit in die omgeving te zijn geweest zonder zich schrap te zetten tegen akelige wind. Passanten werpen elkaar haastige blikken van medelijden toe boven hun dichtgetrokken jaskragen. Veel ambtenaren leggen dit traject twee keer per dag af, en zitten tussendoor achter hun pc's in die torens. Gevolg: depressies, burn-outs en allerlei fysieke 'klachten'.<sup>51</sup>

His dislike of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier is evident. Bare architecture has banished beauty because of the lack of ornamentation. This is what he says about the city hall of The Hague. Vermeer is certainly correct when he says that this architecture has no pediments, columns, pilasters and scrolls. But modern architects have a different understanding of ornamentation. They seek it in the arrangement and size of the volumes, they use the placement of windows and balconies, but also the use of different materials as an ornament. Functionalist architecture features integrated ornamentation. The disappearance of the street with street walls in the traditional sense he abhors. Creating pleasant squares is a serious problem for which the Dutch modernists had no solution.

Als hij de hoogdravende traktaten leest van Berlage en zijn tijdgenoten, dan kan hij het niet helpen altijd iets te voelen tussen plaatsvervangende schaamte en spot. Allemaal gaven ze zich over aan visioenen van werelden, ideale samenlevingen of het einde van oorlogen en/of klassenverschillen. Het kon niet op. Het klonk allemaal nogal—en dat contrasteert met hun vakkundigheid als ingenieurs—*puberaal*. Je hoeft maar een paar zinnen uit geschriften van mannen als Berlage, Gropius of Le Corbusier te lezen om te zien dat ze van een tomeloze naïviteit getuigen, die niet alléén valt toe te schrijven aan de pech dat wij hun

---

<sup>51</sup> "First, there is above the tram station that piazza that will not be a piazza, and then you come upon stacking blocks which have marched into the city since the sixties. All scrupulously faithful to the Bauhaus's and Le Corbusier's bans on ornamentation and more generally on all manifestations of beauty. On Spui, this all culminates in the sterile white city hall complex designed by Richard Meier, the radical Le Corbusier epigone, who still occasionally sends someone to check whether officials there drink from matching white mugs. The Ice Palace. Vermeer cannot remember ever having been in that environment without bracing himself against a nasty wind. Passers-by throw each another hasty glances of compassion far beyond their tightly drawn coat-collars. Many officials cover this process twice a day, and in between sit behind their PCs in those towers. The result: depression, burn-outs and various physical 'symptoms.' *Ibid.*, p. 11.

utopia's uitsluitend nog kunnen waarnemen door de rookwalmen van de jaren direct erna.<sup>52</sup>

In this quote Vermeer suggests that architects and urbanists believe they can influence society with their designs. This contradicts the earlier statement about the users of architecture getting depressed and suffering from burnouts. When he was seventeen years old he still believed that architecture could affect the people and address deeper spiritual layers. Later, during a school trip to Rome, Vermeer discovered that visitors of Roman temples and Catholic churches recalled spiritual values – secular building should also reflect these ambitions according to Vermeer. But he discovers that the reality is flatter as well as simpler, because they drew more interest in a kitchen island or a jacuzzi.

Vermeer has already expressed his negative views about Meier in an earlier quote concerning the town hall in The Hague. The presentation of submitted designs takes place here. Upon entering, Vermeer gives the following description of the complex:

Het atrium van het Haagse stadhuis heeft dezelfde afmetingen als het San Marcoplein in Venetië—4500 vierkante meter—en daarmee houden alle overeenkomsten meteen op. Alles wat eventueel kan verwijzen naar plezier of welbehagen is hier onder het brute functionalistische regime van Richard Meier weggevaagd. Iedere ornamentiek is streng verboden. Wie kleur aanbrengt, riskeert zijn baan.<sup>53</sup>

Vermeer conceives the *Ice palace* as totalitarian architecture, because the individual is not important, and totalitarian architecture can only lead to totalitarian ideas.

<sup>52</sup> “When he reads the grandiloquent tracts of Berlage and his contemporaries, he cannot help but feel always something between vicarious shame and mockery. All of them surrendered to visions of worlds, ideal societies or to end wars and/or class differences. It cannot go on. It all sounded—which contrasts with their skills as engineers—adolescent. You only to read have a few sentences from the writings of men like Berlage, Gropius or Le Corbusier to see that they bear witness to a boundless naivety, which not only is attributable to the bad luck that we exclusively can perceive through their utopia's smelled smoke from the years immediately after.” *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> “The atrium of The Hague City Hall has the same measurements as the Piazza San Marco in Venice—4,500 square meters—and with that, all the similarities immediately come to an end. Everything that could possibly refer to pleasure or delight here is wiped under the brutal regime of functionalist Richard Meier. Ornamentation is strictly prohibited. Whoever applies colour is risking his job.” *Ibid.*, p. 304–305.

Vermeer assesses the designs of Koolhaas as ‘bloedeloze bedenkers’.<sup>54</sup> By that he means that after they are built the designs do not function in the same way as on the drawing board. His criticism focuses on the tram tunnel designed by Koolhaas, where he rescues the victims:

“Ze noemen het niet voor niets de Zwemtunnel of de Tramtanic.”  
Tijdens de bouw is de tunnel al eens vol water komen te staan. En ook later bleven er schimmels groeien en lekten de muren.<sup>55</sup>

Architects who mainly want to conceive sensational forms often neglect the practical requirements of the buildings, or they are so complicated that they cannot meet those requirements.

Initially Vermeer believed that architecture affects urban activity, social mentalities, and atmospheres. However, he also saw that it often went wrong. Even those buildings that worked according to the insights of New Urbanism, an example being the 78-meter high *Muzentoren* with a *Masterplan* for the surrounding area (1993–2001) of Léon Krier:

Wonen en winkelen, paupers en notabelen, singles en gezinnetjes, blanken en zwarten: flikker ze allemaal bij elkaar en *flatsj!* de staaftmixer erop. Eenmaal gerealiseerd blijkt zo’n gebied helaas nog sterieler en ziellozer dan de maquettes en computerpresentaties al deden vrezen.<sup>56</sup>

Vermeer believes that builders have to adapt their genius to the classical virtue of temperance and self-control which a Roman architect, engineer and theorist Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (80–70 BC–15 BC) in *De Architectura* describes as *temperantia*.

Along with Olivier, he was fascinated by Boullée, they named their own dinner club after him. Olivier is disappointed that there are so few realized works of this architect. Vermeer on the other hand sees a realized building as secondary, as an annoying by-product of the evolution of architecture in the development of architectural ideas. Vermeer poses a rhetorical question:

---

<sup>54</sup> “bloodless fictions”, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> “They don’t call it the Swim Tunnel or the Tramtanic for nothing.” During the construction the tunnel was already filled with water. And mould continued to grow, and the walls were leaking, too. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>56</sup> “Living and shopping, paupers and notables, singles and families, whites and blacks: put them all together and *flatsj!* turn on the blender. Once realized, such an area unfortunately appears to be even more sterile and soulless than the models and computer presentations already made one fear.” *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Wat denk je, zou hij daar de energie voor hebben gehad als al die krankzinnige bedenksels van hem echt uitgevoerd moesten worden? Dan zou hij zich met het bouwproces moeten hebben bemoeien, had hij non-stop in de clinch gelegen met magistraten en aannemers. Bovendien had hij z'n werken moeten aanpassen aan de eisen van z'n klanten. Nu hebben we tenminste de zúivere Boullée.<sup>57</sup>

LVE also designs more than it builds, but they are forced to do so because they get very few commissions. As a student during a study trip, Vermeer discovered the corridor which Vasari designed for the Medicis

tussen de gebouwen door, in de lucht, ver weg van gepeupel en moordluchtige vijanden. Vasari had het zo uitgekiend dat elke raam een schilderij maakte van de stad, die zo uit nieuwe hoeken was te zien. De les van Vasari: het kozijn als lijst.<sup>58</sup>

Vermeer's comments on the modernists and artists clearly show what he opposes. Before discussing what Vermeer regards as a solution to his displeasure in the following paragraph, here is a brief overview of what he fulminates against. According to Vermeer, architects overestimate themselves because they think they can control people's behaviour. Architects and urban planners determine where certain facilities, such as schools and hospitals, are situated, and consequently they determine people's actions. Vermeer sees the city hall of The Hague as the ultimate example. The role of users remains difficult to determine; architects cannot organize the lives of the inhabitants completely. It is partly logical in case of large populations and large projects which require much planning, but human behaviour is difficult to predict. This is illustrated by a metaphor while Vermeer lives at Klein Elysium, the holiday park he designed. He sees that the visitors do not follow the path, but use shortcuts, known as elephant paths or desire lines. Urban initiatives rely on a naïve faith in the power of a well-ordered

<sup>57</sup> "What do you think, would he have had the energy for all those crazy inventions of his when they really had to be done? Then he would have to interfere with the process, he had to be nonstop at loggerheads with judges and contractors. Moreover, he had to adapt his work to the demands of its customers. Now we have at least the pure Boullée." *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>58</sup> "between the buildings, in the air, away from mobs and murderous enemies. Vasari was so sophisticated that each window was a picture of the city, which was seen as if from new angles. The lesson of Vasari: the window—frame as a frame", *Ibid.*, p. 141.

environment to reunite man, nature and the machine in an unalienated harmony, says Curtis.<sup>59</sup>

Another problem arises from conflicting demands that the architect must face. Municipal regulations, safety, construction possibilities, residents' demands, commercial stakeholders—the cue of people involved in a project is almost endless. Just like the desire to design from the location in which the project must be realized, plus the connection with the past and especially the desire to design as if the design had grown from nature, he would also like to design free of external influences. A design that arises from itself, in relation to nature. In this view, the criticism of modernist architects, that is to say about the “makeability” of society, extends to the regulations concerning building practice. Many parties with conflicting interests are involved in the design. For example, the requirements regarding safety, the carefree use of a building can get in the way or hinder the interests of financiers. An architect like Boullée was not hindered in his designs by these kinds of requirements. The distinction which Vermeer makes between modernists and artists is related to the prevention and resolution of such problems.

Sennett analyzed various architects on which Vermeer is so critical. Le Corbusier started from a *tabula rasa*:

His idea of rupturing the past was to erase it, to flatten it and build over it, so that the urban dweller would lose any sense of what was there before.<sup>60</sup>

He denies the *cité* for the sake of the *ville*. The fact that the environment is not grown in time, there is no context and for Sennett this is what makes it a closed city. His comments on Haussmann are similar. By hiding the huge mass of labourers in the houses behind the boulevards he created “festerling quarters”.<sup>61</sup> The boulevards were mainly designed as a traffic network and that has a big disadvantage: “The faster you move, the less aware you are of the particulations of the environment”.<sup>62</sup> It is the same as with Le Corbusier—he also denies the *cité* for the sake of the *ville*.

---

<sup>59</sup> Curtis, William J.R., *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>60</sup> Sennett, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Both Vermeer and Sennett see the top-down master-planning and masterminding as a major drawback. Architects and urban planners plan the behaviour of residents and users, but that behaviour cannot be predicted and certainly cannot be forced. The consequences are, on the one hand, dissatisfied users and, on the other, buildings that are a failure in the eyes of the public. Vermeer and Sennett are looking for solutions and new directions.

## Vermeer's second design: *Euforie* (Euphoria)

Het moet toch mogelijk zijn om flatgebouwen te ontwerpen die niet op ladekasten lijken, overheidsgebouwen die niet op Oost-Duitse leest zijn geschoeid, wijken die niet als serieblokken uit verpakkingen rollen om 'leefgebieden' te vullen—stedenbouw kortom, die je niet meteen de stuipen op het lijf jaagt, die zich een ander doel stelt dan je dat mengsel van misselijkheid en ongerustheid te bezorgen dat je gewoonlijk in ziekenhuizen overvalt.<sup>63</sup>

What is the alternative? What is possible? Step by step he comes to the new design for the cité in the heart of The Hague. *Euforie* is the result of a new way of designing for Vermeer, in which the shapes from nature are decisive. He sees an architect as an engineer and a visual artist. The contemporary problem in architecture is that the balance between the two is disturbed:

Tegenwoordig zijn Nederlandse architecten bijna altijd uitsluitend als ingenieur geschoold. De beeldende kunst doen ze er gewoon eventjes bij, heel anders dan bij mannen als Gaudí of Étienne-Louis Boullée.<sup>64</sup>

Twice Vermeer shows his vision of the city and he does it against the background of modernists: "De stad is een organisme, met een eigen

<sup>63</sup> "It must nevertheless be possible to design buildings to which not resemble dressers, government buildings not forged on an East German anvil, districts not as a series of blocks made out of packing rolls to fill 'habitat'—in short, urban development which doesn't immediately scare the wits out of you, which sets a different goal than to cause you a mixture of nausea and anxiety which usually ambushes you in a hospital." Weijts, Christiaan, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>64</sup> "Dutch architects are nowadays almost always exclusively trained as engineers. They only deal with visual art a side issue, an attitude quite different from that of men like Gaudí or Étienne-Louis Boullée." *Ibid.*, p. 269.

stofwisseling, hartslag, ademhaling.”<sup>65</sup> And: “De stad is geen machine, maar een organisme”.<sup>66</sup> When the protagonist talks about the positives of architecture, what it should be and the solutions for the future of building and dwelling, he brings it into relation with the word organic. For example, he calls “organische verhoudingen” as in

Zaak is dat je je vernieuwingsdrift tempert, dat je je schikt naar bescheiden maten, organische verhoudingen, vriendelijke, natuurlijke niet al te uitgesproken kleuren en vormen.<sup>67</sup>

Architecture must follow social reality “op een organische manier”.<sup>68</sup>

Vermeer’s second design is titled *Euforie* (Euphoria). This design is made due to the principles he reveals in his lectures containing that technique and logic are less important than intuition and instinct.<sup>69</sup> He designs it while he lives by the sea in the holiday park. During his walks along the beach, he experiences the cloudy skies, the waves, the dunes and the changing form of the beach caused by wind and waves. He sees stranded marine animals there, such as shells. He bases *Euforie* on all these organic forms. The project has to grow in a natural way out of the surroundings of the sea, although it is intended for a city centre. His interest in his surroundings grows and he decides on several days at different times to take pictures of the estuaries, creeks and lakes. Every time they look different but they always have the same effect: they remind him of the lines in the work of Egon Schiele (1890–1918) and Henri Matisse (1869–1954).<sup>70</sup> He hangs the pictures he made in his cottage and tries to apply the images in his design on his computer:

Ineens staat het plein voor hem op het scherm, onontkoombaar, en op alle manieren juist. Hij voelt het openbloeien. Het knispert, schalt, stroomt, stráált. Hij hapt naar adem. Meteen begrijpt hij ook dat de bestrating niet plat kan zijn, maar lichtjes hol moet zijn, als een schelp.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> “The city is an organism with its own metabolism, heart rate, respiration.” *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>66</sup> “The city is not a machine but an organism.” *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>67</sup> “organic relationship” and “It is important that you temper your innovative drive, you conform to modest dimensions, organic relationships, friendly, natural and not too bright colors and shapes.” *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>68</sup> “in an organic way.” *Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>71</sup> “Suddenly, the piazza stood in front of him on the screen, inevitable, and correct in every way. He feels it flourish. It rustles, echoes, flows, beams. He gasps for breath.



But his design is not finished yet. When he gets drunk on the beach – his wife has let him know she will not come back – he sees the design at once in front of his eyes:

Het ronde gebouw [van het eerste ontwerp] is vervangen door een grote, opstaande schelpvorm met monumentale allure. In het centrum golft een gordijnachtige kloof, waar daglicht invalt. [...] Het plein—gevormd door de daken van die winkels—moet dit glinsterende patroon van slierten maanlicht op zeewater krijgen, begrijpt hij nu.<sup>72</sup>

Regarding the shell shape, the painter Johannes Vermeer should not remain unmentioned. During the designing process, Vermeer hangs three prints on the walls: *Het melkmeisje* (ca. 1658–1661, The Milkmaid), *Brieflezend meisje bij het venster* (ca. 1662–1668, Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window) and *Allegorie op de schilderkunst* (ca. 1662–1668, The Allegory of Painting). Although he is no admirer of Vermeer's paintings, he is, while designing, sensitive to the "handeling [...] die in stilte en introversie verricht wordt". The motion has come to a standstill:

De melkkan wordt *voortdurend* door het melkmeisje leeggegoten. De brieflezende vrouw leest *voortdurend* haar brief. De schilder, ziet hij, legde *stilstaande* beweging vast.

What Vermeer wants to achieve is the rest, serenity and intimacy which he believes the modernists lack. That can be recognized in the Euphoria design: "de organische schelpvormen [...], de verstilde beweging".<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to make a short observation concerning the name Vermeer. The protagonist hangs three paintings of Johannes Vermeer on the walls of his holiday house and the Dutch painter's life was narrowly linked to the town of Delft, even though the novel's protagonist does not hang the most well-known work *Gezicht op Delft* (View of Delft,

---

Immediately he also understands that the pavement cannot be flat but slightly concave, like a shell." *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>72</sup> "The round building [of the first design] has been replaced by a large, upright shell shape with a monumental allure. In the centre, a curtain-like chasm wobbles letting in the day-light. [...] The piazza—formed by the roofs of those shops—should respect this pattern of shimmering moonlight streaks on seawater, he understands now." *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>73</sup> "act [...] carried out in silence and introversion" and "The milk jug is *constantly* emptied by the milkmaid. The letter reading woman reads her letter *constantly*. The painter, he sees, records a *stationary* motion." And "organic shell form [...], the stilled movement." *Ibid.*, p. 392.

1660–1661). Delft is also the town where the three partners of LVE studied and became friends. It is the town that formed both Vermeers as artists. More specifically, Delft at the time of the painting conformed to Vermeer's organic design concepts excellently. It is an organically grown city with a mixture of different activities: a harbour, a church, shops, a blacksmith, a school, etc. One can walk through Delft as easily as through Italian towns.

When he is more or less finishing his design, the raid in LVE follows and the architects' cooperation is coming to an end. He decides only to give lectures and later to edit them into a book:

Alleen nog vrij te zijn, zonder in de clinch te gaan met magistraten en aannemers. Zonder alles aan te moeten passen aan de eisen van z'n klanten.<sup>74</sup>

Vermeer also wants to become a theoretical architect like Boullée.

## Some thoughts

Vermeer appears as an opponent of the method of urban design in which the behaviour of the users is pre-conceived behind the drawing board. A problem of which Sennett himself was well-aware:

In urban planning, when things do what they are not supposed to do—for example, when people neglect one bus stop and overcrowd a nearby one a hundred metres away—the master-planner, with his maps of population/transit distribution so precise, so reasonable, may think the master plan failed, whereas if he thought like a farmer he would know that this is how colonization works: like the weather, there is something unforeseen and not entirely controllable at work.<sup>75</sup>

However, a certain amount of planning is inevitable. Vermeer thinks that regarding his second design—*Euforie*, that can be interpreted as *cité*—the solution can be found in using open and nature-based forms. He therefore has sympathy for organic architecture. That is not a new direction in the history of architecture, as published already in 1939 by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) in *An Organic*

---

<sup>74</sup> "Just to be free, without going into the clinch with magistrates and contractors. Without having to adjust everything to the needs of its customers. He wants to focus only on a theoretical level dealing with architecture." *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>75</sup> Sennett, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

*Architecture*. In his collected lectures he coined the concept of organic architecture, which refers to the use of organic or live materials to create architectural forms. The natural growth of the environment and the adaption of architecture to the environment:

Organic architecture is a philosophy of architecture which promotes harmony between human habitation and the natural world through design approaches so sympathetic and well integrated with its site those buildings, furnishings, and surroundings become part of an unified, interrelated composition.<sup>76</sup>

Wright's most famous example is the house *Fallingwater* (1935) which he designed in rural southwestern Pennsylvania and which is built over a waterfall. Vermeer also uses water in his design. Firstly, he was inspired by the sea; secondly, he wants to incorporate the small river De Haagse Beek that runs from Kijkduin to the center of The Hague in his design.

Vermeer's interest does not lay just in organic architecture, but in organic urbanism as well. Organic Urbanism is a reaction against New Urbanism, which implied that planners determine where you live and where you work. In contrast, Organic Urbanism works according to people's preferences: "It protects, preserves, and nurtures the city, allowing the creativity of individuals and neighborhoods to shape the direction of the city".<sup>77</sup> It's a more spontaneous growing process, as opposed to what the planners behind the drawing board think. To emphasize organic, Douglas Newby compares it to a garden:

*Organic Urbanism* approaches the city like a garden. There is an understanding that the evolution of buildings and uses should evolve rather than being plowed under and planted like an industrial farm. In a garden that is nurtured, one might plant a sapling with sun-loving plants around it. Once the tree grows, one might plant, shade-tolerant flowers under the tree. There is a natural ebb and flow of decay, rejuvenation, and new construction in an organic city. Neighborhoods fall in and out of favor, creating opportunities for those of all incomes.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Star, Stran, 2019, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334398009\\_Organic\\_Architecture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334398009_Organic_Architecture)>.

<sup>77</sup> Newby, Douglas, 2019, <<https://www.newgeography.com/content/006446-organic-urbanism-cure-new-urbanism>>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Like organic planners, Vermeer wants the city to be pleasant. During the interview for the TV program, Kasper does most of the talking. To explain their design for the competition, he asks: ‘Why do we find it so enjoyable to go to small Mediterranean towns on vacation?’ Vermeer answers in his head:

Italiaanse steden als Lucca, Siena of Perugia lijken organisch gegroeid te zijn, met adembenemende zichtlijnen, doorkijkjes en pleinen. Zonder dat hier een blauwdruk en vergaderingen aan vooraf zijn gegaan, beantwoorden ze op een heel kalme, intuïtieve manier aan wat pas eeuwen later wetmatigheid werd: dat je om de paar honderd meter een bocht moet hebben, met een nieuw uitzicht.<sup>79</sup>

This insight is not new. In fact, it was already formulated by Camillo Sitte in his *Der Städtebau nach seinem künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, although he did not present it as organic. Vermeer believes that technique and logic are less conclusive than intuition and instinct. Designing begins with intuition.

Vermeer’s observations and thoughts come close to the analysis that Sennett made. Not only does Sennett, like Vermeer, see that human behaviour is difficult to include in urban planning, he also recognizes that there is a need for some planning and that it is difficult to make suitable designs for it. According to Sennett the solution can be found in a more open form between areas. They can be separated in two ways: by a more open, porous or a hard edge. Therefore, he distinguishes between the edges in borders and boundaries. The difference between borders and boundaries, is that the first are porous edges, boundaries are not.<sup>80</sup> The boundary is an edge where things end. The border is an edge where different groups interact. The example Sennett gives is the shoreline of a lake or a sea, where “organisms find and feed off other organisms.”<sup>81</sup> A building is porous “when there is an open flow between the inside and outside”.<sup>82</sup> The porousness of a place makes it possible

---

<sup>79</sup> Italian cities like Lucca, Siena and Perugia seem organically grown, with breath-taking sight-lines, vistas and piazzas. Without being preceded by blueprints or meetings, they respond in a very calm, intuitive way to what centuries later became a law: every few hundred meters you have to reach a bend opening up a new view. Weijts, Christiaan, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>80</sup> Sennett, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

that people do many different things at the same time.<sup>83</sup> The modern city is dominated by the closed boundary.

The same occurs with buildings. Therefore Sennett asks if it is possible or even a necessity to make a form incomplete on purpose, by design, rather than provide a finished dwelling.<sup>84</sup> As an example, Sennett refers to the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena (1967) who considers the shell as an incomplete building type. This means that it offers a basic shape that the user can convert, supplement or fill in according to his own needs. Similarly, open spaces can function like shells.<sup>85</sup> Concerning master-planning he advises a 'minimum specification of how form relates to function'.<sup>86</sup> The shell form appears also in Vermeer's design for *Euforie*, not as an incomplete form, but as a form that grows out of the needs and habits of visitors and inhabitants of this *cit  *. Although Vermeer is more open to the users of it, he is still planning, more than Sennett who only gives a basic form which the users can develop in the way they want.

## Conclusion

In *Euforie*, Johannes Vermeer lays bare his conceptions of architecture and, in so doing, transforms this artist's (or architect's) novel into an open critique of 'modernist' city designers' conception of urban planning. More specifically, the whole novel can be seen as a critique of the very Dutch concept of *maakbaarheid* ("makeability" or social engineering) of society. Vermeer opposes the idea of modernity as the "machines' era" since it supposes human beings are programmable. This is the opposite of what he sees as ideal when he gives Italian cities as an example. Lucca, Siena or Perugia seem to have grown organically; they are cities which grew in a spontaneous way and according to the wishes of individual citizens. It is not possible for planners behind the drawing board to imagine in advance what will prove useful for citizens. The spontaneous growth of a city guarantees a form of urban development in which the link with the past must be preserved. In *Euforie*, this is

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

evident because Vermeer has to make a design for a place where people died, so the place is also a memorial. When it comes to how to connect *cit  * and *ville*, as defined by Richard Sennett, the organic approach is presented as the best. Vermeer's interest, therefore, does not simply lie in organic architecture, but in overall organic urbanism as well, which he conceives as a more spontaneous growing process. In other words, Vermeer believes that technique and logic are less conclusive than instinct. Designing begins with intuition. It is not by accident that the protagonist shares a name with the famous 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer with whom he also shares a link to the town of Delft, one of the few Dutch cities that, like many Italian cities celebrated by the novel's protagonist, has preserved most of its original organic and spontaneous character.