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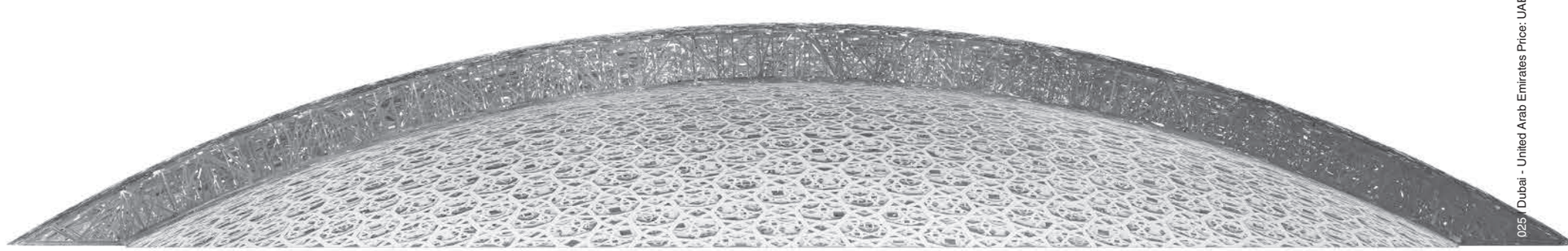

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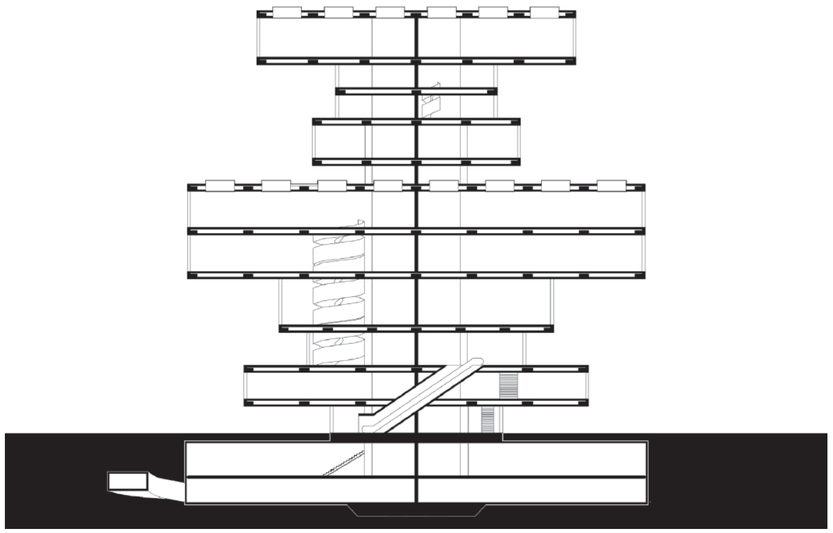

13. PERM Art Museum, Russia, by Valerio Olgiati, 2008

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6 C. Rowe, *Crisis of the Object: Predicament of Texture*, in *Collage City*, MIT Press, 1978, pp. 50-85.

the underlying critical message that had been formulated by the second generation. These architects have shown no preference for either the concepts of contained space or of the open plan.

Where do we stand today?

Up to now, I have been comparing museum plans that have mainly been organised horizontally. With the exception of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the examples shown so far are buildings of not more than two to three storeys. The closer we come to our time, however, the more frequently we will see museums, which have been designed on more than three storeys. Three problems have to be discussed here. The first two are practical problems which have to do with the circuit and the lighting of exhibitions. How does one achieve an unencumbered flow of movement through exhibition spaces when these have to be organised on the floors of a high-rise building? The Guggenheim provides an interesting solution, but for very valid reasons it has never proved a model for future development. One of the reasons is that the ramp, as an element mainly of movement, leaves little opportunity for anyone to break out of the stream of visitors moving down each at his or her own speed. The traditional enfilade by contrast, gives each visitor the opportunity to leave the main route of movement freely.

The second problem occurs especially when overhead daylight is required. Here there have been a few interesting solutions. One can be seen in Peter Zumthor's Art Museum in Bregenz (fig.11). The museum was designed as a daylight museum. On each floor Zumthor introduced ceiling spaces that are so high that natural light is able to penetrate into a large section of these spaces, giving the impression that all floors have natural overhead lighting. The Museum for Contemporary Art in New York (fig.12) by the Japanese architects SAANA provides another solution. The architects have shifted segments of the overall volume to allow natural overhead lighting on many floors. An equally interesting idea can be seen in Valerio Olgiati's competition entry for the PERM Art Museum (fig.13) in Russia (2008).

Now to the third problem, which has not yet found its adequate solution. Montgomery Schuyler, one of the most devoted apologists of the Chicago School, writing of the city in the nineties, noticed that its architectural expressions were twofold only «places of business and places of residence». The image of Chicago which remained in the mind he found to be «the sum of innumerable impressions made up exclusively of the skyscraper of the city and the dwellings of the suburbs. Not a church enters into it» he says «scarcely a public building enters into it […] Chicago has no more a Nouvel Opéra than it has a Notre Dame»[5].

Schuyler wrote this about the city of Chicago in the 1890s, with a wistful glance at European cities whose image had only begun to change a century earlier bringing back the public buildings that had been missing since Antiquity. Today, a little more than a century after Schuyler's observation, we are no longer in awe of cities whose architectural expression is twofold only, cities whose image is almost exclusively dominated by skyscrapers. To many Europeans this building type is still seen as a misfit, as it contradicts the concept of the European town in many ways. It is especially the skyscraper that has led to what Colin Rowe has called the "Crisis of the object: predicament of texture". «In no way do their façades designate any effective frontier between public and private»[6].

How do we recognise public functions once they have become absorbed by one ubiquitous building type that is traditionally associated with commerce? This uncomplicated social question must seem irrelevant to all those who have tried to emancipate the skyscraper from its commercial image by either foisting their personal idea of originality or a company's logo onto the shape of high-rise buildings. Even to them, however, it might seem strange that soon – in a not too distant future – we will once again be able to speak more about the absence of public functions in cities than of their presence.

Karl-Heinz Schmitz

This short essay is published in N. Di Battista, F. Izzo, A. Palffy (eds.), *Archivio Jodice: an archive of contemporary art in the historic centre of Naples*, Palffy Editions Niggli Publishers, Wien 2012.

1 H.P. Berlage, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, 1929-35
2 Le Corbusier, the "Mundaneum" of Geneva, 1929. To the left the "Musée mondial"

Berlage and the "democratisation of beauty"

The Gemeentemuseum of Den Haag (1919-1935) and the birth of the modern museum

A major part of the most important architectural production of the last decades has been the design of museums. While it is true that many of the greatest masters of the Twentieth century have dealt with this theme – we might mention Le Corbusier's spirals of the Twenties, the reverse one of Wright's Guggenheim in Manhattan, the perfect prism of Mies' *Neue Galerie* in Berlin and the seducing vaults of Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum – it is also true that *all* the protagonists of the contemporary scene, with no exception, have designed a museum, condensing within it their ideas on architecture. The list is quite long: from Piano to Gehry, from Hadid to Libeskind, from Koolhaas to Decq, from Chipperfield to Herzog & De Meuron. The reasons behind the phenomenon are many and widely known: mostly they are connected to the enormous investments that the big public commissioning, has made, in almost every city, for the creation of museums. These, mostly dedicated to contemporary art, have a very different character, meaning and role in comparison to the traditional museum, as it was codified in the early 19th century, which is traditionally anchored to its nature of precious stone box, erected to treasure works of art.

Present museums are much more than this. They are places of culture's conservation as well as of its "production". It is not without significance that the metaphor of Piano's Centre Pompidou (1971-77), which has constituted a turning point in this regard, has been that of the "factory" or "production" centre of intangible assets. Nowadays museums are a place of relations' condensation, both among citizens and between them and "foreigners", also through an open and dialectic connection with the contest in which they are set. As powerful attractors of a collective life, museums, much more than other objects of the contemporary city, are reference centres and meeting points and, inevitably, they are more and more entertainment places where even that ludic dimension - so far away from the traditional idea of a museum, but so intrinsic of consumer society – has its place. To collect, conserve, exhibit, entertain and stimulate new needs in order to arise new consumes and therefore more profits: the part reserved to *merchandising* – even in the spatial distribution of a museum – has extremely expanded compared to the one that, until just a few decades ago and not without a sense of decency, was confined to the traditional bookshop. Nowadays a museum is a big machine – sometimes an hypertrophic one – multifunctional and polisemic, with an extraordinary symbolic potential. For this reason it is perfectly inserted in political-institutional marketing logics by actors who relaunch a seducing self-image of modernity through the creation of museums, aiming to the creation or the strengthening of consensus.

The path that – apart from the aforementioned derivation – has led the museum to leave its role of sumptuous box devoted to sole conservation, has been long and complex, but it is perhaps possible to individuate in Europe one of its starting points, even though not still a real paradigm. That is the Municipal Museum (*Gemeentemuseum*) of Den Haag[1] which, apart from its intrinsic and objective architectonic quality, set the foundation for a reconsideration of >

3 Le Corbusier, Project of the Musée à croissance illimitée, 1939
4 F. Lloyd Wright, Guggenheim Museum, New York, ink drawing, september 1943
5 L. Mies van der Rohe, Neue Galerie. Berlin, 1962-68. Detail
6 L. Kahn, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, 1971-72
7 Berlage, Gemeentemuseum. First design. Main entrance, 1920
8 Berlage, Gemeentemuseum. First design. Second floor plan, 1920

museums not any more merely focused on the past. This experience couldn't have happened without the meeting of two minds and wills open to change: we are referring to the ones of Hendrik Enno van Gelder (1876-1960), the art historian that promoted the venture on behalf of the municipality, and the architect that gave it a form, Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934). The latter signed a work with which he marked in the best possible way his parable, which has been so important non just to Holland, but also to the Modern movement[2].
Van Gelder was a socialist intellectual who, after getting in touch with William Morris' ideas during his youth, was asked to order Den Haag's municipal archives. He therefore started fighting for a radical renewal of museums conception, operating both as a secretary of the "*Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond*" (from 1908 to 1913) – that in 1918 will publish the report *Over hervorming en beheer onzer musea* (On the Reform and Management of Our Museums) – and within the "*Rijkscommissie van advies inzake reorganisatie van het museumwezen hier te lande*" (State Advisory Commission on the Reorganisation of Museum Affairs in this Country), together with the art historian Frederik Schmidt-Degener. At the end of World War I, when Van Gelder was appointed head of the new Municipal Service for Arts and Sciences of Den Haag (instituted at the initiative of the influential socialist J. Juriaan Kok), he also started working at the idea of a new museum. This was intended to be a true modern museum, which – based on the ideas of Benjamin I. Gilman, author of *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (1918) and Alfred Lichtwark, director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle – considered the development of aesthetic sensitivity as a vehicle for the social promotion of everyone, especially of the youngest.
It intended to offer the widest possible range of formative opportunities: a real cultural and social cluster that would have hosted a big concert auditorium, venues for scientific, political and cultural congresses, laboratories, temporary exhibitions on the current tendencies, and places destined to rest, gathering and social relations.
To realise such an ambitious plan it was necessary the presence of an architect capable of managing complex programs, even with no significant previous typological references, and of embracing the progressive vision of art, culture and society. He should also have been willing to design in close collaboration with Van Gelder. This profile perfectly corresponded to Berlage's, who had just ended his experience for the Kröller Müller in Otterlo and therefore was perfectly conscious of the issues of modern museums designs. Berlage was at the peak of a career in which he had always oriented his work to a great civil liability, as well as to research and experimentation, with an attitude that brought him to embrace with intelligence and humility the important things that were emerging in the architectonic culture of the time – from Wright to the various articulations of the Modern Movement – calling himself into question many times. Berlage accepted the appointment in august 1919 and submitted design and model in the spring of 1920. The area was a great lot nearby Zorgvliet Park, a sort of irregular right trapezium whose base was on the Stadhouderslaan, that led from the historic centre to Scheveningen. Berlage chose to set the buildings along the entire perimeter, making space for a great court of water at the centre, arranging the complex on four main elements: the low and parallel porch on the west side of Stadhouderslaan, the main "C" shape block with the three branches of the galleries, each one dimensioned in order to accommodate the traditional succession of exhibition rooms and small courts; the independent building, dethatched and slightly inclined to the opposite side, with the domed foyer as a hinge of rotation; the mighty block rotated at 45° and at the front inserted in the north end of the porch on the Stadhouderslaan; and, at last, the body of water, dug and surrounded by an external path.
Berlage contested the idea of a "palace", that is of a one block building, and organised the requested multiple spaces with a wise assembly of blocks of different heights and dimensions, interconnected with offset grafts and rotations, but all within a regular grid based on a 3,50 m square module.
Even though the design included a pioneering reinforced concrete structure, the language used was, of course, that of the 1910s, hovering in a problematic balance (not without charm) between romantic suggestions (that referred to his Jachthuis Sint Hubertus for the Kröller-Müller family) and monumental solutions (as in the Pantheon of Humanity), while the profiles of the architectures played "mixing" by mirroring in the water. The design was approved by the Municipality in 1920, but raised contrasting opinions for its heterodoxy towards the traditional museum institutions and was halted due to economic reasons. In 1927, only because of the menace of Van Gelder resignations, Berlage obtained the permission for a new project, once again entrusted to him. He presented the new design in June 1929, allowing the signing of the procurement contract by the end of year.
This time the first design was completely upturned. Instead of placing the building along the perimeter of the lot, Berlage compacted the volumes in the centre, inscribing in a square a big C-shaped block, which on the east side was "closed" by a small element of connection so that it formed a rectangular court (20 x 40 mt.). Instead on the south-west corner there was the connection to the big block that hosted an articulated succession of atriums, hallways, receptions and the telescopic congress room. In the spaces distribution much attention was payed to fruition and fluidity of the routes. The ground floor was dedicated to minor arts, to which Van Gelder had dedicated many of his studies. Here were the cabinet of prints, the collections of coins, musical instruments, study rooms and libraries. In the upper floor the rooms with the collections dedicated to modern art, sculpture and history of the city did not succeeded each other in the traditional linear order, but were organised in four concentric annular gallery-routes. Moving from the inside to the outside these are: the route that goes along the court's perimeter; the succession of small spaces separated by short walls; the belt of main rooms enlighten by lightwells and, lastly, the outer one made of spaces closed to the outside and illuminated from above. These four "belts" are connected because this annular circulation is crossed by multiple cross-cuttings that make the spatial quality richer and the fruition much more free, inducing the visitors to pick more freely their own tour route and, eventually, to pleasantly "get lost" in the rooms.
As in other Berlage's architectures, every room has a different height based on precise functional reasons (in this case mostly due to lighting), with very advanced solutions for the time. The different resulting volumes are clearly distinguishable from the outside, composing a very varied stereometric image, though with no risk of fragmentation. Here the principle of *Eenheid in de Veelheid* (Unity in Plurality), that Berlage had elaborated since the design of Amsterdam Stock >

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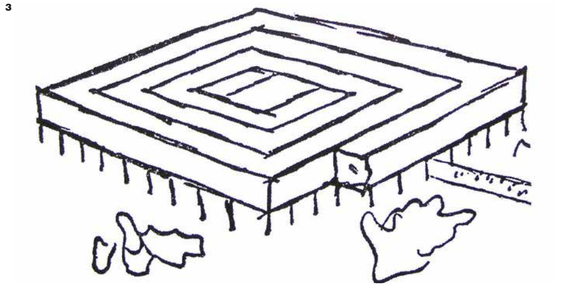

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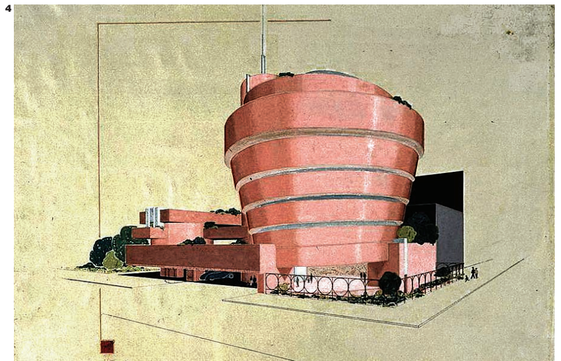

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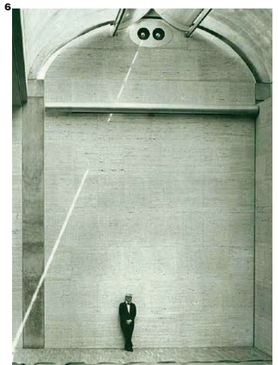

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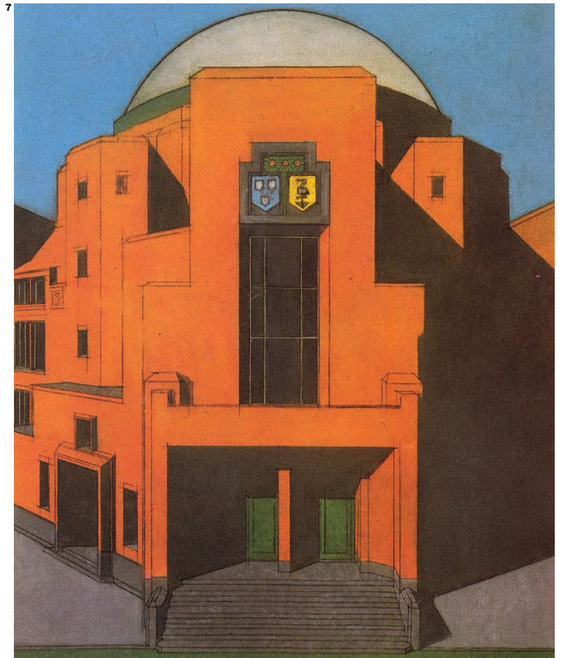

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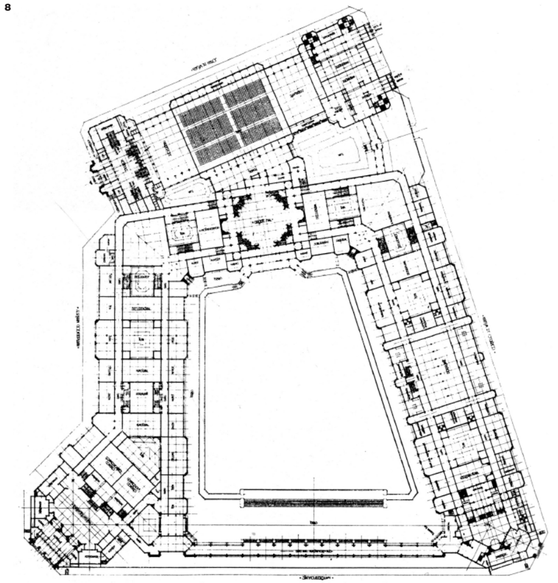

9 H. P. Berlage, Gemeentemuseum. First design. Prospective study of the central hall, 1920
10 H. P. Berlage, Gemeentemuseum. Second design Second floor plan, 1929
11 H. P. Berlage, Gemeentemuseum. Second design. Prospective study of an exhibition hall, 1929
12 Aerial view of the Gemeentemuseum by Berlage and of the Hilversum Town Hall by W. M. Dudok
13 H. P. Berlage, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag. Interior
14 H. P. Berlage, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag. Detail
15 H. P. Berlage, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag. The entrance block
16 H.P. Berlage, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag. Detail of an interior staircase's handrail

Exchange, finds a new declination thanks to the adoption – in this version too – of a 1,1 m square based geometric modular grid, which is also connected to the dimension of the bricks that Berlage chose for the coating of the concrete structure of the building. Four million bricks were used in the Geementemuseum coating: precisely the chromatic and material uniformity of the brick neutralises complexity, giving unity to architecture. This material refers to a typical Dutch ancient building tradition, but it demonstrates its ability of coexisting with contemporary design logics and expressive languages. After all, the game of square blocks made of tight surfaces and "cubic" geometries deliberately evokes both Wright's style, whose work had been introduced to Holland mainly by Berlage, and De Stijl's Neoplasticism, even though filtrated by the work of another Dutch: Willem M. Dudok, younger than Berlage but followed by him with great attention. Dudok was the one who, perhaps better than others, had been able to interpreter with originality Berlage's great lesson of assuming "tradition as a principle of progress". After all it is difficult to deny the existence of a precise connection between Hilversum Town Hall and Den Haag Geementemuseum, where, as it was stated: «the accentuation of the plastic articulation, the geometric-hierarchic space organisation, in the act of image restitution wisely transformed in interlockings and interpenetrations, […] the platforms, the external courts, the use of water mirrors send back to the suggestive vocabulary that Dudok successfully used in those years»[3]. In this last version the presence of water plays a very important role too. The distance between the building and the street is filled by a big rectangular pool that occupies the entire lot and the museum appears to the visitors approaching as magically suspended on water, forcing to a distance-look that allows to capture the game of the boxlike volumes. It also assumes symbolic meanings through the evocation of a purification necessary to enter into the realm of art and culture. As in a journey of initiation, from the full light of the external space one goes through a long access gallery over the water where the dim light of the hall, allunding to a foreknowledge state, leads to the "divine light" that the white interiors emanate. This is also the light of "truth", because inside the building the supporting structure in reinforced concrete is made visible. The presence of water certainly refers to Wright (and Dudok), but it is also an explicit reference and tribute to the monumental Binnenhof, the most important and fascinating building of ancient Den Haag that, in the same way, seems to emerge from the waters of the ancient Hofvijver, the charming reflecting pool that expert designers created from a boggy pond. This ability to produce a modern object while naturally inserting it in the history of the city, and of an entire culture, was pointed out by one of the finest European critics of the time, Edoardo Persico, to whom the building had «not to be judged with the parameter of rationalism, but with a subtle smartness in its mediation between the ancients and the moderns»[4]. A truly modern and influential building came out as a cultured and meditated dialectic operation between history and design, and Berlage's adventure ended in the most logic way by giving Den Haag an artwork of great civil value. However, the building works – which began in 1931 – only ended in May 1935 and the author couldn't attend its opening as just a few months earlier, while in Den Haag to monitor the works of his last masterpiece, he passed away.

Giovanni Menna

translation by Giovanna Russo Krauss

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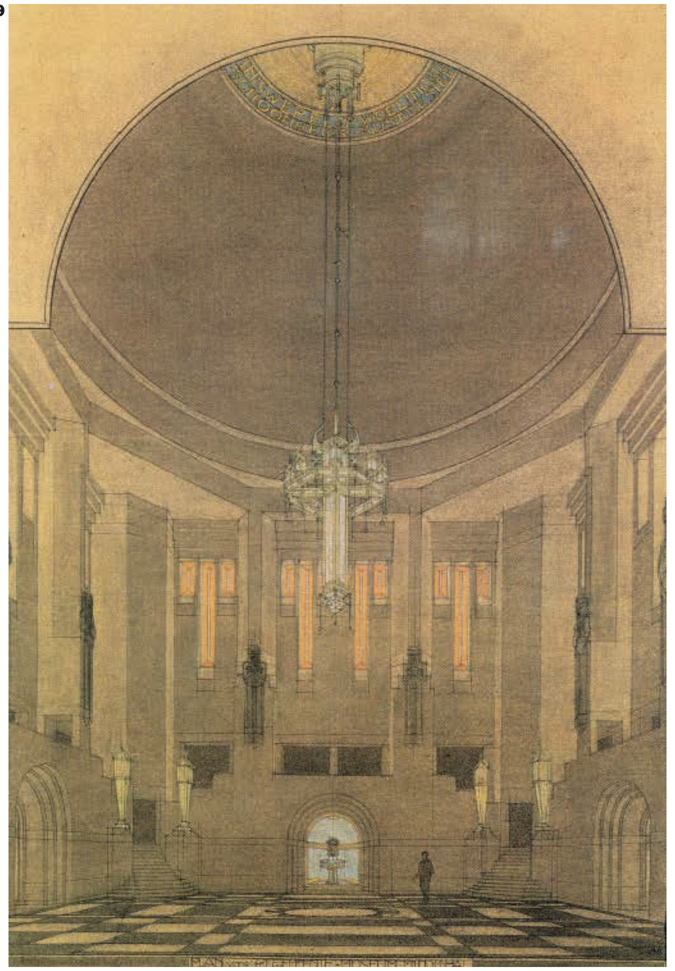

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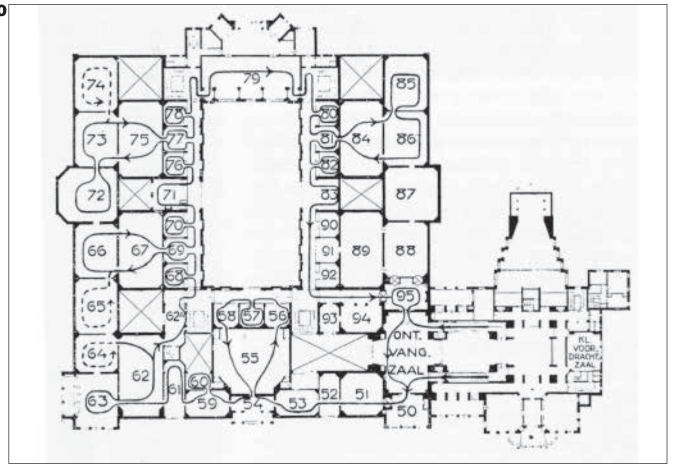

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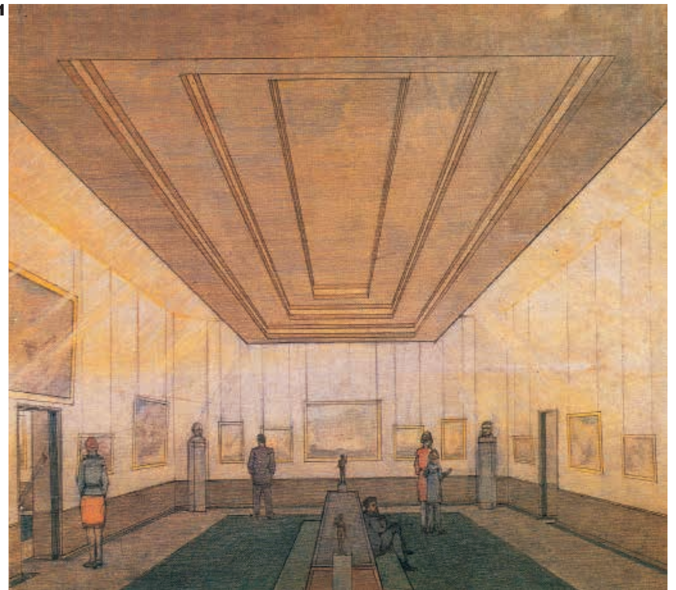

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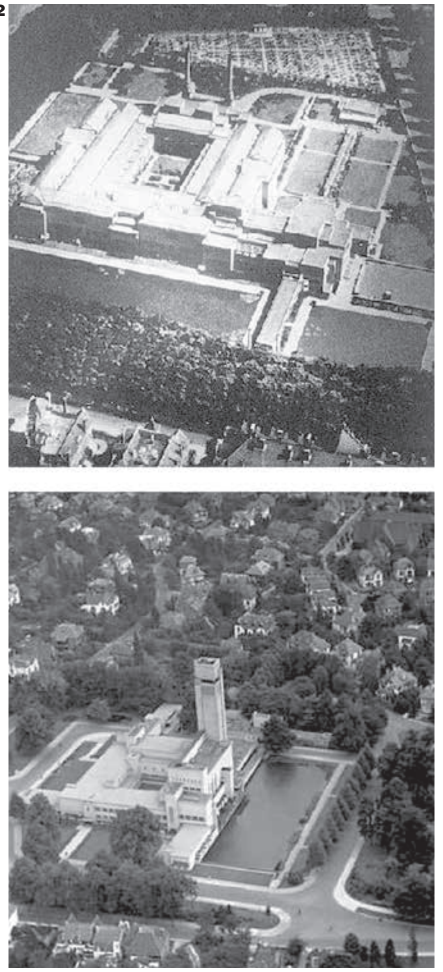

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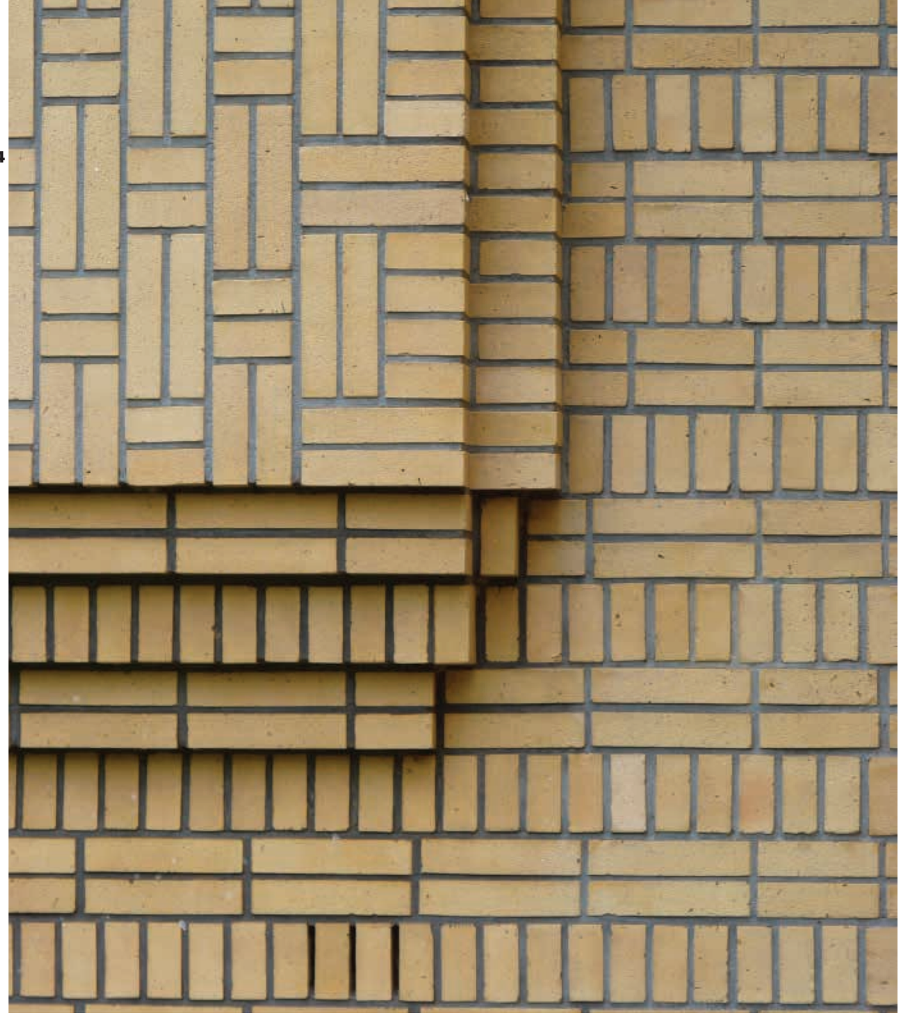

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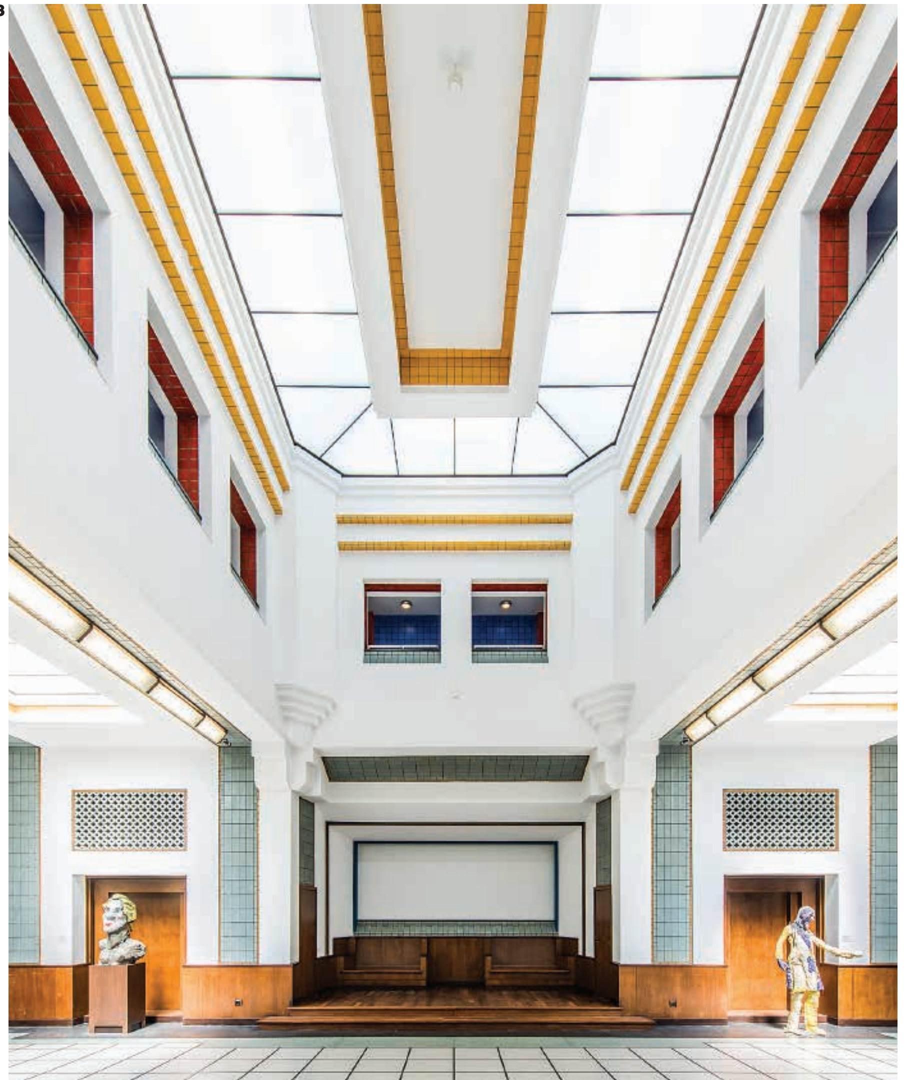

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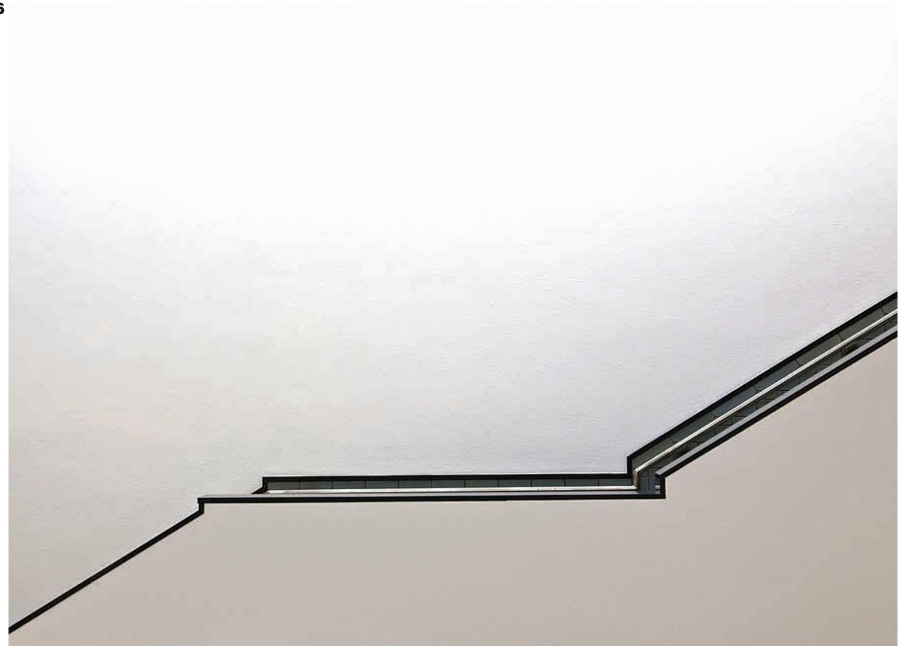

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