

Review Article

## Architect of Nothingness: Frank van Klingeren's Open Architecture

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Among Frank van Klingeren's surprisingly diverse production, from newspaper and TV interviews, essays, and collages, to architectural design projects and even a movie script, his poem '*De sleutels van mijn tante*' (My Aunt's Keys) stands out for its creative and idiosyncratic criticism of the omnipresent (re)construction projects in the Netherlands which gave an all-important role of the architect while ignoring the needs of many participants of Dutch society:

daarop past na veel beven  
de plaats is niet zo goed  
en in het tegenlicht  
de laatste van de sleutels  
als tante werkelijk weet  
dat dit háár bus is  
en niet die van drie hoog  
...  
maar hoe is het met de huur  
kan ze die wel betalen?  
hij was wel niet zo duur  
zo omstreeks zestig ballen  
maar dat kan nu niet meer  
met al die vele deuren  
moest daar iets aan gebeuren  
er gaan twee honderd bij  
voor het huisje aan het IJ

(after lots of trembling fits/ the space is not that great/ and with sunlight in her face/ the last of the keys/ when auntie is certain/ that this is her postbox/ and not the one for three floors up/ .../ but

how about her rent/ can she still afford it?/ it wasn't that much/ about sixty guilders/ but that's no longer possible/ with those many doors/ something needs to change/ two hundred is added/ for the little house along the IJ).<sup>1</sup> This excerpt from the poem describes his elderly aunt facing the changes in her apartment complex after its renovation. Van Klingeren emphasises the uncomfortable reorganisation of the building as well as the subsequent increase of his aunt's rent. His critique is that such renovation projects are often initiated and designed without considering the varying needs and acknowledging the skills of different residents. His consideration of their agency places different users, their capacities, and their interaction at the forefront of architectural design.

Van Klingeren's concerns resonate with other architectural experiments of the time which have attracted scholarly attention in recent years and have been specifically theorised by architectural historian Esra Akcan in *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA 1984/87*.<sup>2</sup> Akcan critically investigates architectural practices of equality and democracy in the course of modernism by extending the Enlightenment notion of the invitation to include migrants and not-yet citizens in architectural processes. She identifies 'open architecture' as an architecture informed by ideals of 'flexibility and adaptability of form, collectivity and collaboration, multiplicity of meaning, democracy and plurality, open-source design, the expansion of human rights and social citizenship, and transnational

solidarity'.<sup>3</sup> According to Akcan, open architecture aims to achieve 'the translation of a new ethics of hospitality into architecture,' which requires going beyond a Kantian ethics of hospitality dependant on an invitation from the host and the hierarchically lower and passive position of the invitee. Rather, open architecture 'is predicated on the welcoming of a distinctly other mind or group of minds into the process of architectural design'.<sup>4</sup>

Akcan's welcoming of distinctly other minds suggests recognising the agency of the resident, including immigrants, 'guest workers', stateless people and asylum seekers, among others. For instance, she discusses the critical renovation or reconstruction projects as part of IBA 1984/87 in Berlin, which included the inhabitants in the design process through consistent communication. Importantly, some of these residents were guest worker Turkish families who did not have German citizenship and were faced with housing regulations that actively limited possible living locations and their access to housing. In this context, Akcan understands open architecture to expand human rights by going beyond the limits of citizenship and by practicing transnational solidarity premised on social citizenship and equal rights.<sup>5</sup>

A couple of years before these experiments by IBA, Van Klingereren also reconsidered the relationship between the architectural project and its residents or possible future users. While not fully embodying the transnational values essential to Akcan's open architecture, Van Klingereren's architectural practice can nevertheless be understood as aiming 'towards open architecture' in line with that of Akcan. It renegotiates the roles of the architect and the resident, not only to overcome the gap between the design and the various changing needs of its users, but also by placing his architecture in the service of building social relations and strong communities. For Van Klingereren, this required that others be welcomed in the development of a building throughout its life cycle, from its design and construction stage to its possible reconstruction.

To do so, Van Klingereren used his expert position as an architect to turn architecture and urban development into a public discussion. Apart from participating in a public awareness campaign around plans to drastically restructure Amsterdam's central Leidseplein area, Van Klingereren also aimed to involve a wider public in the discussion through numerous interviews and opinion pieces in national media, with guest appearances on TV shows, and by producing a movie script, poems, and protest collages. He further argued that the architect is part of a necessarily collaborative field of design. In the journal *Architecture, Formes + Fonctions*, Van Klingereren explains this idea as follows: 'It is quite obvious that the architect is the end of a string of scientists: futurologist, psychologist, medicine-man, planner, anthropologist, society-philosopher, and this calls for a multidiscipline [sic] approach of [sic] problems as well as architectural education.'<sup>6</sup> According to Van Klingereren the architect needs to be in conversation with, among others, the sociologist, the psychologist, the futurologist and the urban planner.<sup>7</sup> [Fig. 1]

The involvement of the public and other experts in Van Klingereren's architectural practice does not mean that every detail of his buildings was fully designed. Quite the opposite: Van Klingereren aimed for his buildings to remain 'unfinished', to leave space for people to adjust the building as they make use of it. This feature of Van Klingereren's practice is most fully developed in his two large-scale community centres. Commissioned by the municipality, Van Klingereren built the community centre De Meerpaal in Dronten during 1965–67. It was the first large-scale community centre designed by Van Klingereren and is representative of an era of experimental architectural design in the Netherlands made possible by the welfare state. In the architect's imagination, De Meerpaal was to function as an agora and, accordingly, was thought of as part of the plaza on which it was erected. To stress this connection between the enclosed and open spaces of the project, the shell of De Meerpaal was a steel and glass construction



Fig. 1: The exterior view of De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jaap Doeser. Copyright Roel Dijkstra Fotografie.

while its interior consisted of a large open space with unpolished surfaces which lent itself to be (re-) configured in different ways by its users. [Fig. 2]

According to various commentators, the large open space and the unpolished character of the building made De Meerpaal a popular meeting place. In an article published in 1969, Corin Hughes-Stanton wrote: 'this summer thousands of people watched an attention-gripping series of inter-country European competitions on television – not in their homes but in the Agora, spreading down and across from the cafe.' Noting the effects of the unfixed interior of the building, Hughes-Stanton also states that a

wide range of activities, both organised and unorganised, can take place in the Agora. ... There are no barriers between different areas: although the fixtures are as simple as possible, more equipment can be added, or taken away again, at a later date.<sup>8</sup>

Another commentary, also from 1969, was by the architectural theorist and critic Martin Pawley who wrote about De Meerpaal in the journal *Architectural Design*:

In fact checking off aspects of the Agora's supreme modernism I came up with the following list:

It is in a new town on reclaimed land  
A fresh start without cultural hangups  
It is 'functional'  
It is 'honest'  
Its planning is 'flexible'  
It is not only 'honest' but free from monumentality  
It is 'Democratic'  
It belongs to 'the people'  
It is 'user oriented'  
It is not 'fascist'  
It is designed for mixed media shows  
It is avant-garde  
It is built for 2000 AD  
It is OK<sup>9</sup>

Both commentaries point towards the user's centrality in Van Klingeren's design of De Meerpaal, celebrating the building's malleability and the active role of its users in determining the interior design. Hughes-Stanton comments on how people were able to configure the building with their own materials: 'It is a remarkable experience to see up to 3 000 people – farmers, shop assistants, and factory workers – bringing their own camp stools and sitting in the Agora outside the packed-out theatre to listen to a concert.'<sup>10</sup>

While these commentaries refer to De Meerpaal's flexible design, it would be a mistake to interpret the building only through the lens of the modern concept of flexibility. As Akcan points out, open architecture values, among other ideals, 'flexibility and adaptability of form, collectivity and collaboration.'<sup>11</sup> Using various historical examples, Akcan shows that in some cases these concepts are intimately connected, with the former two referring to the quality of form and the latter two to the quality of the design practice. For instance, due to its open plan, Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie can be (re)organised, but this flexibility remains within the architect's authority. In a contrasting example, the adaptable interior arrangement of the Rietveld-Schröder House was a result of the collaboration between Gerrit Rietveld and Truus Schröder-Schröder – the architect's authority was shared with the client from the initial phases of the design onwards.<sup>12</sup> However, both buildings already provide all elements with which their interior arrangements can be reorganised by its users or residents. Van Klingeren's use of flexibility and adaptability in De Meerpaal differs from these examples as he does not provide its users with a fully equipped building later to be reorganised. Instead, the architect chooses to design less.

This ideal of minimal design is developed in Van Klingeren's approach to unfinished architecture. Van Klingeren repeatedly emphasised the importance of an unfinished design to fully include people in the design and construction processes.

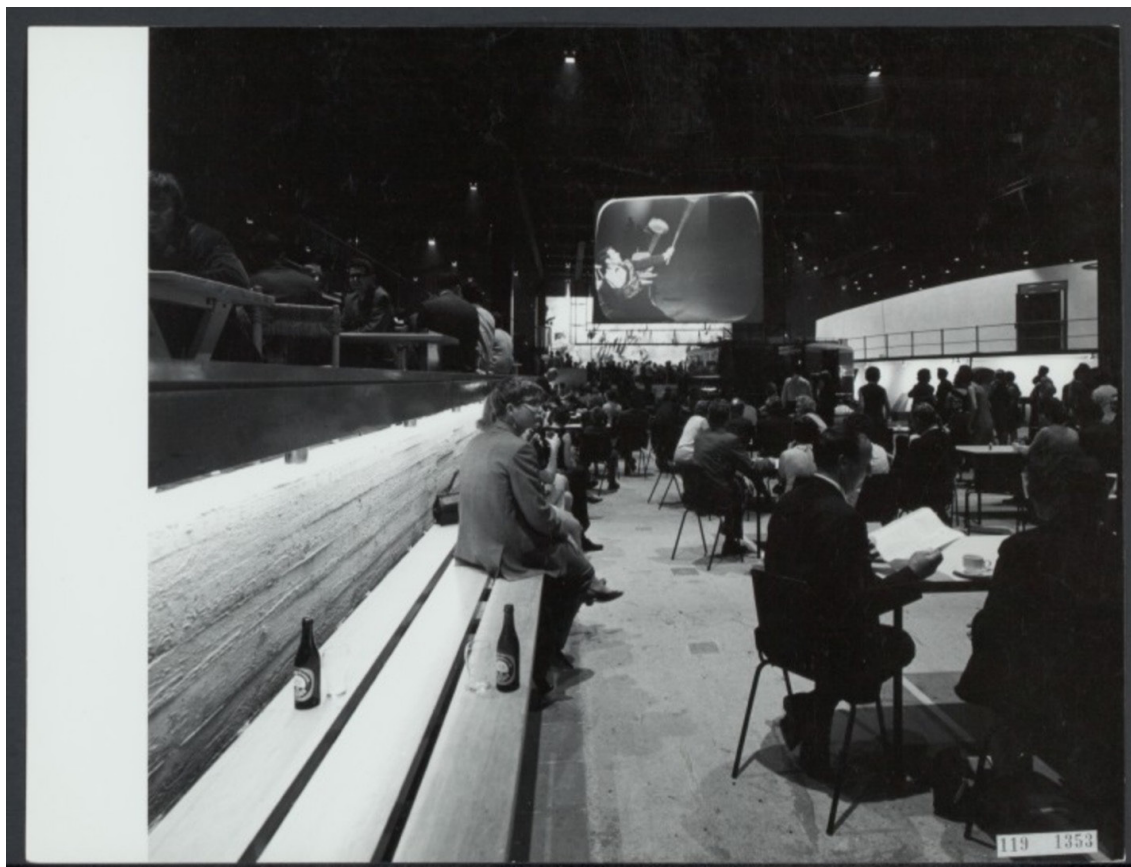


Fig. 2: The interior of De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jan Versnel. 2.24.10.02/ 119-1353. Fotocollectie Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst Eigen, Nationaal Archief Nederlands, copyright Maria Austria Instituut.

For instance, he urged architects to adopt imperfection, to welcome residents to co-determine the end product: 'You must dare to embrace imperfection, perfection is unaffordable... A kitchen is never good enough. Give people an unfinished house... You have to appeal to the skill and resourcefulness of the residents.'<sup>13</sup> By designing an unfinished building, Van Klíngeren hoped to include different types of public not only in the initial design or construction processes but also throughout the building's lifecycle.

Van Klíngeren's approach of unfinished architecture was taken even further in his second large community centre, Het Karregat, which opened in 1973 in the Herzenbroeken neighbourhood in Eindhoven. Like De Meerpaal, Het Karregat was designed as a multifunctional centre to provide various services to the newly built district. This time, Van Klíngeren designed a building that combined many different functions under one roof carried by repeated umbrella-shaped steel columns: schools for younger children, a library, an open area for gatherings, a paediatrician's office, a snack bar, a pub, an exhibition area and a shopping market. What made Het Karregat particularly experimental was Van Klíngeren's decision to design the building without any interior walls. Van Klíngeren had already experimented with such a wall-less design in De Meerpaal, where the theatre space was not completely shut off from the building's open interior space. This meant that other activities in De Meerpaal, which accommodated up to seven hundred people, would be audible and interfere with performances taking place in the theatre space. People inside and outside of the theatre had to respect each other and negotiate to attain the desired silence. [Fig. 3, 4] In Het Karregat, this idea of wall-less interior was developed further. Van Klíngeren thoroughly embraced the idea of a fully open plan and the friction that follows from it in his design of Het Karregat. As a journalist noted in 1981, the building's wall-less interior design resulted in the interaction between all its different functions:

the baker gives a lecture about bread in the classroom, the library's story reading session takes place in the kindergarten, the cafe functions as a detention space and waiting room for the doctor's office, biology classes take place amidst the patches of green in the neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the exchanges and collaboration among different users of the building, Van Klíngeren imagined that the absence of interior walls would create a visual and auditory nuisance for its users. Interestingly, and diverging from his colleagues at the time, Van Klíngeren did not wish for the unattainable total elimination of nuisance, nor did he hold the naïve belief that encounters would always be voluntary or easy. [Fig. 5] Instead, Van Klíngeren believed that his building

must function in such a way that everybody can enter and it must bring people in contact with each other. The 'un-compartmentalised-ness' (*onafgeslotenheid*) of all activities is a part of that. In particular, by deliberately allowing people to disturb each other a little, you give them a sense of belonging together.<sup>15</sup>

Van Klíngeren envisioned that this friction created by the building's wall-less design would have a productive and socialising effect, something he theorised as *de-clotting* (*ontklontering*). He thus saw an important role for architecture in its capacity to 'de-clot' society and create a more interwoven community than one which still carried traces of the pillarisation (*verzuiling*) system. Pillarisation divided Dutch society into groups or 'pillars' (*zuilen*) based on religious and ideological affinities from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s. The main pillars in the Netherlands were the Protestant, the Catholic, the socialist, and the liberal pillars, each of which had access to their own schools, radio and TV stations, newspapers, unions, sport clubs, and even grocery stores. Under this system, people of different pillars could exist side by side without much encounter. A product of these years, Van Klíngeren

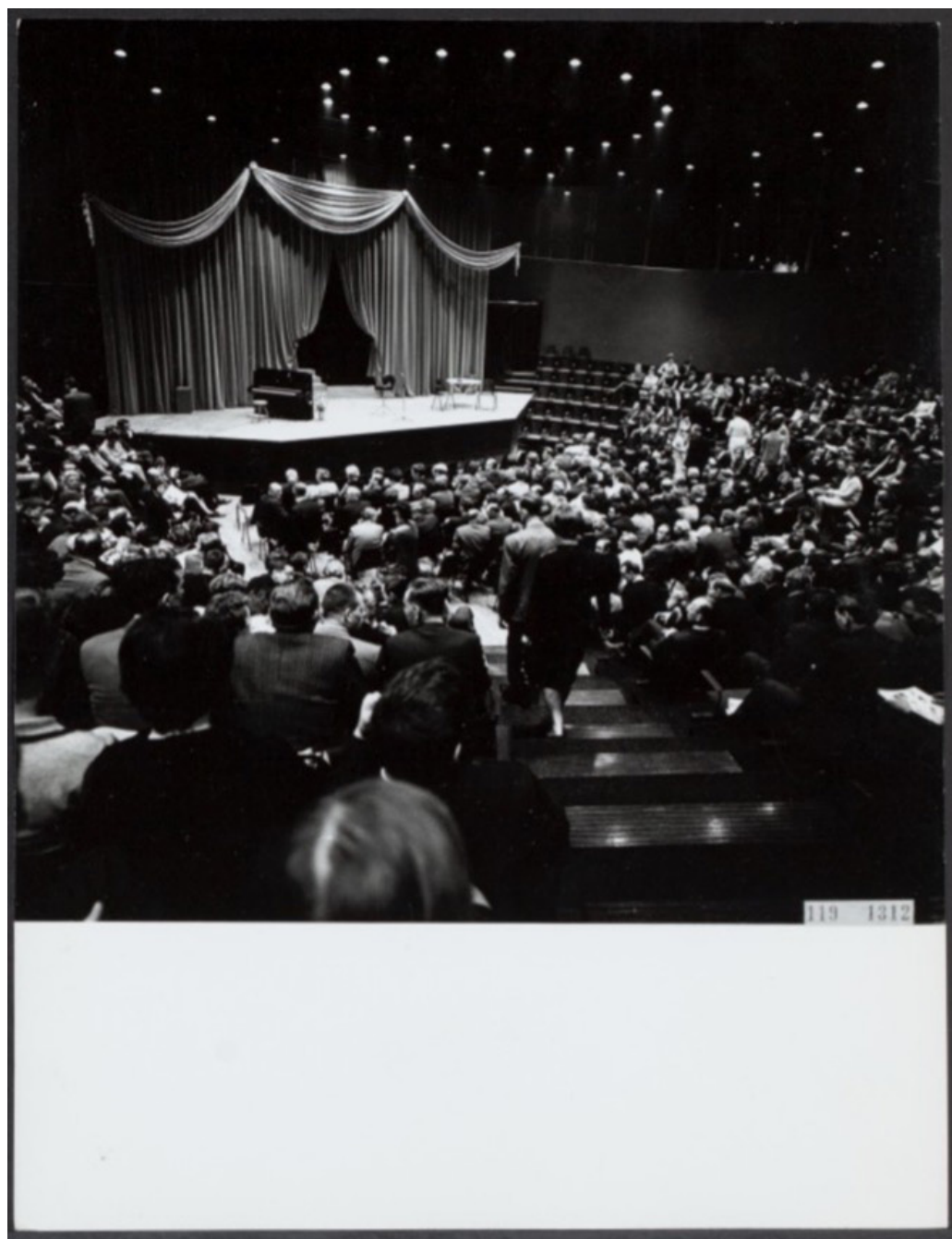


Fig. 3: An interior view of the theatre in De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jan Versnel. 2.24.10.2/119-1312. Source: Fotocollectie Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst Eigen, Nationaal Archief Nederlands, copyright Maria Austria Instituut.



Fig. 4: An exterior view of the theatre in De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jan Versnel. 2.24.10.2/119-1321. Source: Fotocollectie Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst Eigen, Nationaal Archief Nederlands, copyright Maria Austria Instituut.





Fig. 5: An early model of De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jan Versnel. MAI30789507987. Copyright Maria Austria Instituut.

aimed to open up Dutch society by ridding it of the remnants of pillarisation. Writing in the architectural journal *Bouw* in 1973, Van Klingereren discusses the idea of de-clotting in relation to Het Karregat:

We wanted to centre the social. Sometimes I call this 'de-clotting'. It refers to the struggle against the privatised, the preconditioned, and the asylum-like. In this case I would like to add: de-schooling. All of this is only possible through the empowerment and participation of the people. Participation requires that people can and want to speak up...One should not forget that most of us – more correctly: all of us – grow up weighed down by the established order, even aside from the fact that this established order is at the same time the law.<sup>16</sup>

Although stemming from a critique of the pillarisation system, de-clotting carries much wider implications for the architect, as it touches upon issues of sociality, experimental pedagogies, and privatisation. For Van Klingereren, his open architecture was thus a means to shake up the established order and generate new forms of sociality.

Van Klingereren's open architecture is characterised by producing open and unfinished structures: from a simple structure with unpolished surfaces in De Meerpaal to the total absence of interior walls in Het Karregat. Through these spatial approaches, he aimed at generating another kind of sociality and welcoming other people – both experts and the general public – into the various design phases of a building's life. However, his architecture also garnered complaints and critique. For instance, the celebrated Dutch poet and critic Gerrit Komrij ridiculed Van Klingereren's commitment to building less, especially in Het Karregat. In his collected essays, Komrij – calling Van Klingereren a 'builder of nothing' – turns the previously discussed commentaries by Hughes-Stanton and Peters upside down, writing that

the toddlers stole the buns from the baker's pastry case, the doctor noted down the thumping of carnival

music as his patients' heartbeat, in the evenings the bar clientele would urinate between the school desks, the students were anxious and the teachers were burnt out.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, there were concerns over the lack of suitable pedagogical material for the radically open schools and complaints from users of the building over the noise in Het Karregat. Moreover, the journalist Martin Ruyter called it 'a dangerous building', citing the communal life in Het Karregat as hazardous to family life in the district.<sup>18</sup> Eventually these criticisms led to various rounds of renovations, triumphantly commented upon by Ruyter. These renovation plans were bitterly criticised by Van Klingereren, who considered them fundamental alterations of the building's open design and accused his client of conservatism and cowardice: 'in the end, we still had to decide on too many details ... because our client could not fully embrace the philosophy they initially accepted.'<sup>19</sup>

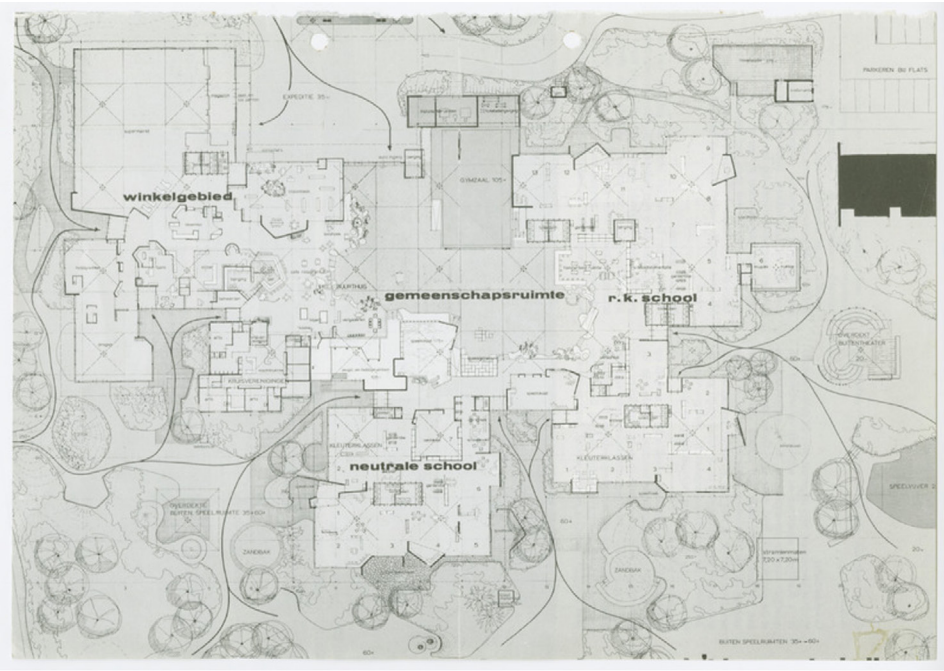
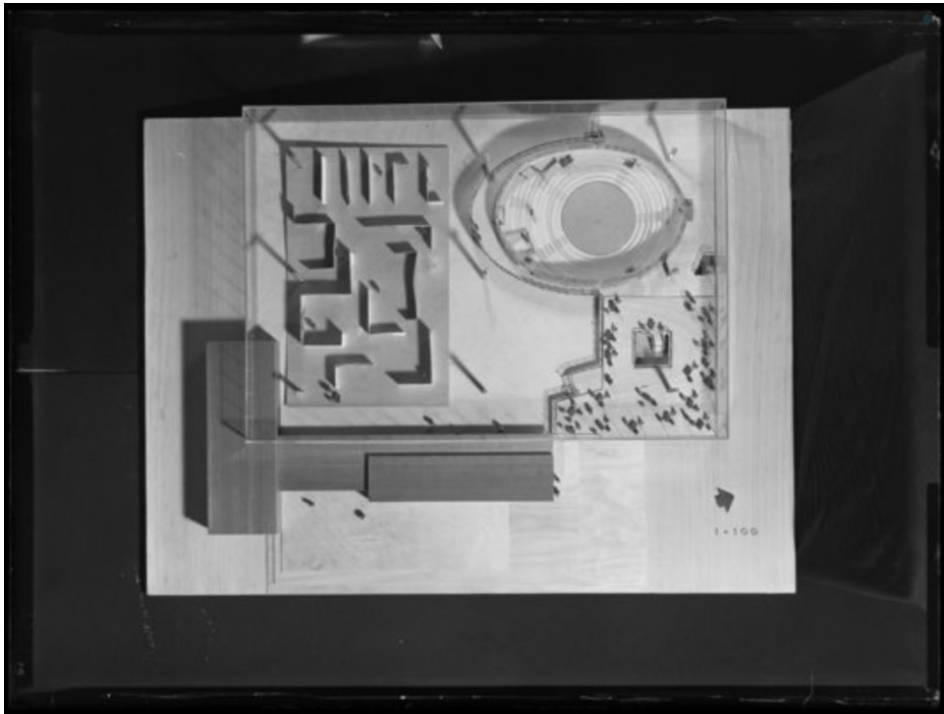


Fig. 6: An early model of De Meerpaal. Undated photo by Jan Versnel. MAI30789507987. Copyright Maria Austria Instituut.

Fig. 7: The plan of Het Karregat. Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Frank van Klingeren, KLIN.110510480, KLIN d12-2.

**Notes**

1. Frank van Klingeren, 'De sleutels van mijn tante', *Bouw* 37 (1982): 13; all of the translations from Dutch sources are my own.
2. IBA is the abbreviation of *Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin* or The International Building Exhibition in Berlin. Esra Akcan, *Open Architecture: Migration, Citizenship, and the Urban Renewal of Berlin-Kreuzberg by IBA 1984/87* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2018).
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. 'Frank van Klingeren', *Architecture, Formes + Fonctions* 16 (1971).
7. Marina van den Bergen and Piet Vollaard, *Hinder en Ontklontering: Architectuur en Maatschappij in het Werk van Frank van Klingeren* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2003), 9.
8. Corin Hughes-Stanton, 'Closed Environment for Living Space', *Design* 241 (1969): 44.
9. Martin Pawley, 'Agora', *Architectural Design* 6, no. 39 (1969): 360.
10. Hughes-Stanton, 44.
11. Akcan, *Open Architecture*, 10.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Quoted in Marina van den Bergen and Piet Vollaard, *Hinder en Ontklontering*, 119.
14. Edie Peters, 'Karregat-proef Teruggedraaid', *De Volkskrant*, 14 April 1981.
15. Piet van den Ende, 'De Magische Doos van Van Klingeren', *Het Parool*, 7 November 1967.
16. 'En Hoe Nu Verder? Een Interview met Frank van Klingeren', *Bouw* 52 (1973).
17. Gerrit Komrij, *Het Boze Oog* (Singel Uitgeverij, 1991), 146–47.
18. Martin Ruyter, 'Het Karregat is een Gevaarlijk Gebouw', *De Volkskrant*, 9 March 1974.
19. Martin Ruyter, 'Een Gebouw dat Uitnodigt tot Onrust', *De Volkskrant*, 15 January 1977; 'En Hoe Nu Verder? Een Interview met Frank van Klingeren', *Bouw* 52 (1973).

**Biography**

Ecem Sarıçayır is a PhD candidate in History of Architecture and Urban Development at Cornell University. Her dissertation analyses the history of art, architecture, and urbanism in the South Caucasus, focusing on the Russian colonial development and the various subsequent nation-state modernisation projects in the region. In parallel, she studies late modern and politically progressive Dutch architecture. Currently, she is a visiting doctoral fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin.