

# City Policies and Avant-garde of Architects Rotterdam – an Example of Prewar Modern Architecture\*

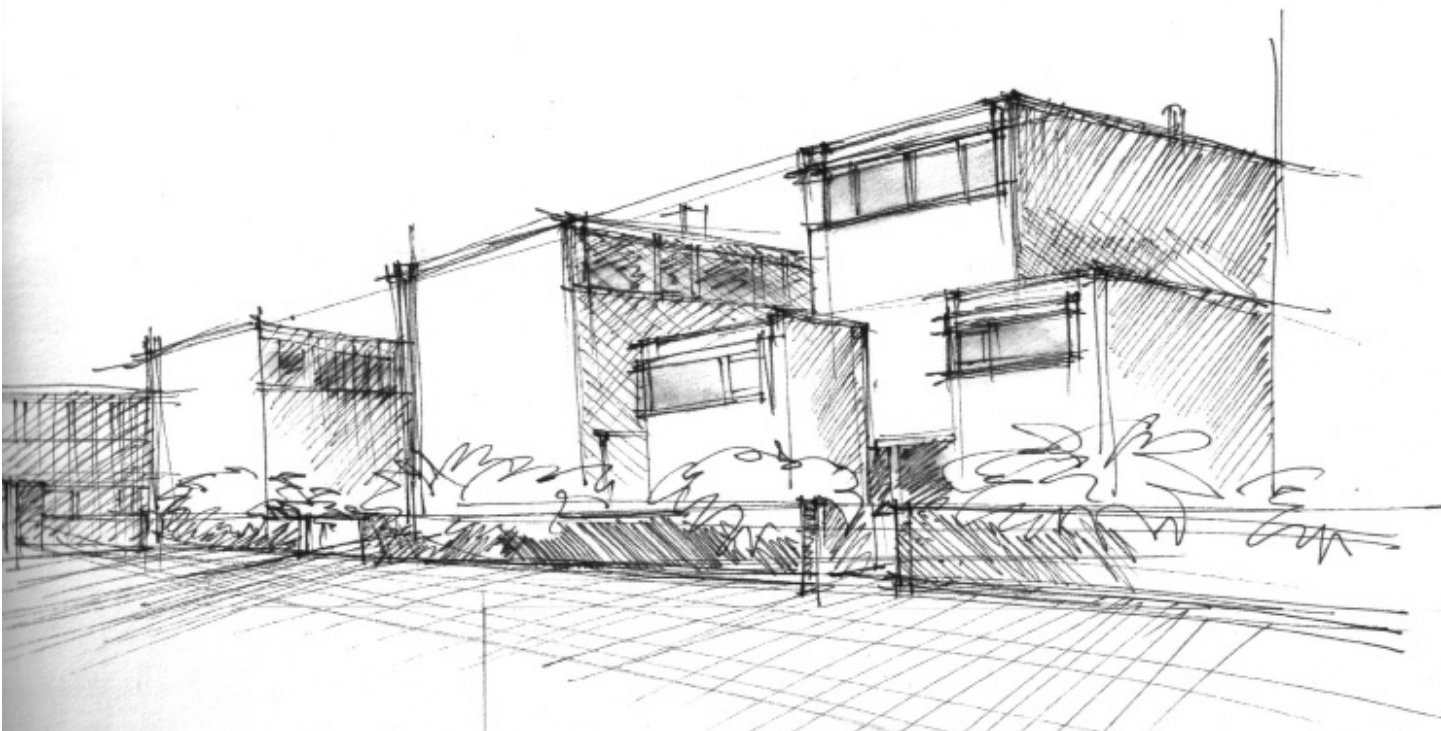
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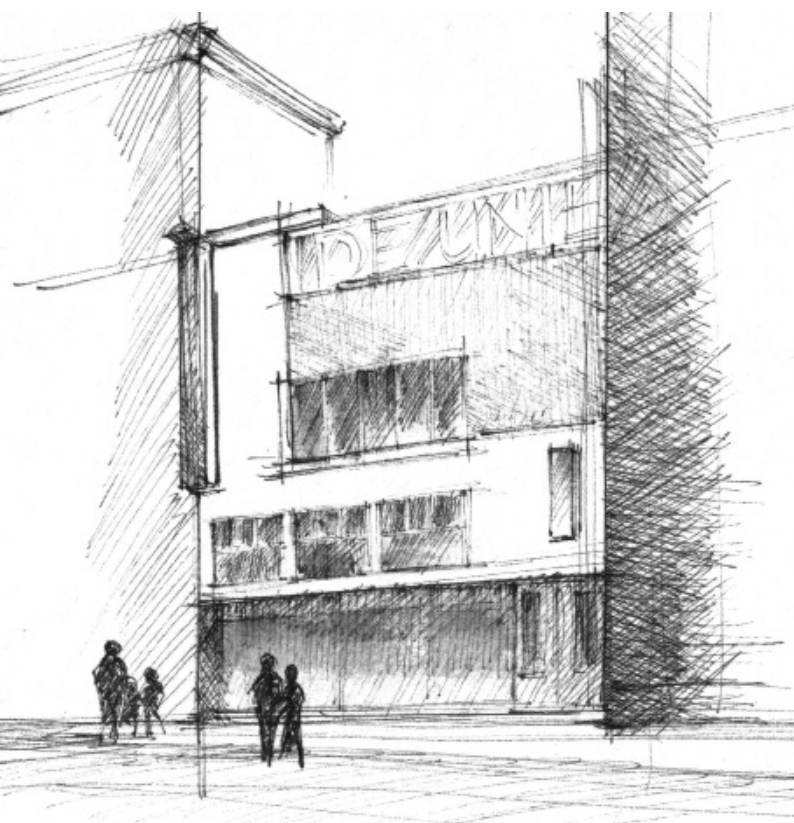
Rotterdam, the biggest port in Europe today, was severely affected by negative effects of the Industrial Revolution, the outburst of which in the Netherlands came only in the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, Rotterdam city council was reluctant to take the responsibilities that the federal government imposed on local authorities in municipal housing and hygiene. However, Rotterdam had some reform-minded entrepreneurs and the most avant-garde architects coming from the *De Stijl* group: Mart

Stam and J.J.P. Oud. The next generation of modernist architects, operating around the *De Opbouw* group, also propagated functionalism and considered it the architects' responsibility to solve housing problems. Rotterdam built its architectural image in opposition to the style of the *Amsterdam School*, perceived as traditionalistic; in the 1920s, complexes of working-class apartments were constructed - they are still regarded as showcase housing and are under preservation. Rotterdam seems to owe its precious 1920s heritage to a series of fortunate circumstances: the development of the port, national legislation, the ambitions of entrepreneurs and municipal officials and a group of outstanding and defiant architects.

\* This paper is partly based on the doctoral dissertation *Idea i realizacja osiedla społecznego w Polsce, Holandii i Belgii po Drugiej Wojnie Światowej* written at the Architecture Faculty of Warsaw University of Technology under Prof. Sławomir Gzell's guidance.

1. Kiefhoek housing estate. Architect: J.J.P. Oud, 1925. Demolished and reconstructed in 1989; drawing by the author





2. *Café De Unie*. Architect: J.J.P. Oud, 1924. Demolished in 1940, reconstructed in another location in 1985; drawing by the author

## Introduction

Rotterdam is a city associated with both prewar and postwar modernism (the Netherlands remained neutral during WWI). However, Rotterdam is first of all a port city, and therefore the tradition of industrial architecture, following the latest technical trends, is distinct there. It is also a city of constantly changing cityscape of ships, cranes, steam engines, docks and shipyards. However, Rotterdam has – in a way – always been a special Dutch city, mainly because the negative effects of the late-19th-century industrialisation were particularly strong here: a demographic boom, large numbers of rural migrants, terrible housing and sanitary conditions, land speculation.

All this resulted in a clash of two approaches to architecture, the city and housing before WWII: traditionalistic and modern.

## Modernisation struggling with traditionalism

The centre of Rotterdam is based on a triangle of the old town, redeveloped considerably in the 18th century and inhabited by the wealthy. The port has always been the main element of the city, constantly changing along with new needs and new technologies. In the 19th century, the city was gradually surrounded

by working-class housing districts – densely built-up estates created by profiteering housing societies – inhabited mainly by migrants from rural areas who came to work in the port and the industrial plants. The population doubled over the 1880 figure in 1900, reaching 330,000, and then again in 1939 (620,000 inhabitants).<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, per capita income in Rotterdam was the lowest of major Dutch cities, and international companies using Rotterdam's ports rarely invested their profits there. The city developed according to the 1883 plan, but it was private businessmen, owners and profiteers who had the most to say. On the one hand, the city was determined to make more affluent taxpayers stay, on the other, its legal instruments were too weak to enforce various hygienic recommendations<sup>2</sup>.

The opening of *Nieuwe Waterweg* in 1872 – a canal linking Rotterdam directly with the North Sea – spurred the port into further development. In the late 19th century the city crossed the Meuse River – modern docks were built on the southern bank of the river. In 1900, there were as many as 40,000 workers living in the South (*op Zuid*); they were mainly rural migrants from the provinces of Brabant, South Holland (Zuid-Holland) and Zeeland (Zeeland). The South had always been considered an inferior part of the city; it was said that "country bumpkins lived in the South" (*"op Zuid wonen boeren"*) and even long after WWII the left bank of the Meuse River was called "the village part of the city" (*"Boeren-zij"*) and its inhabitants "bumpkins"<sup>3</sup>. Apart from speculatively-priced, small and dark houses, two model garden districts were built on the left bank: *Heyplaat* and *Vreewijk*, spacious but traditional in terms of architecture and construction.

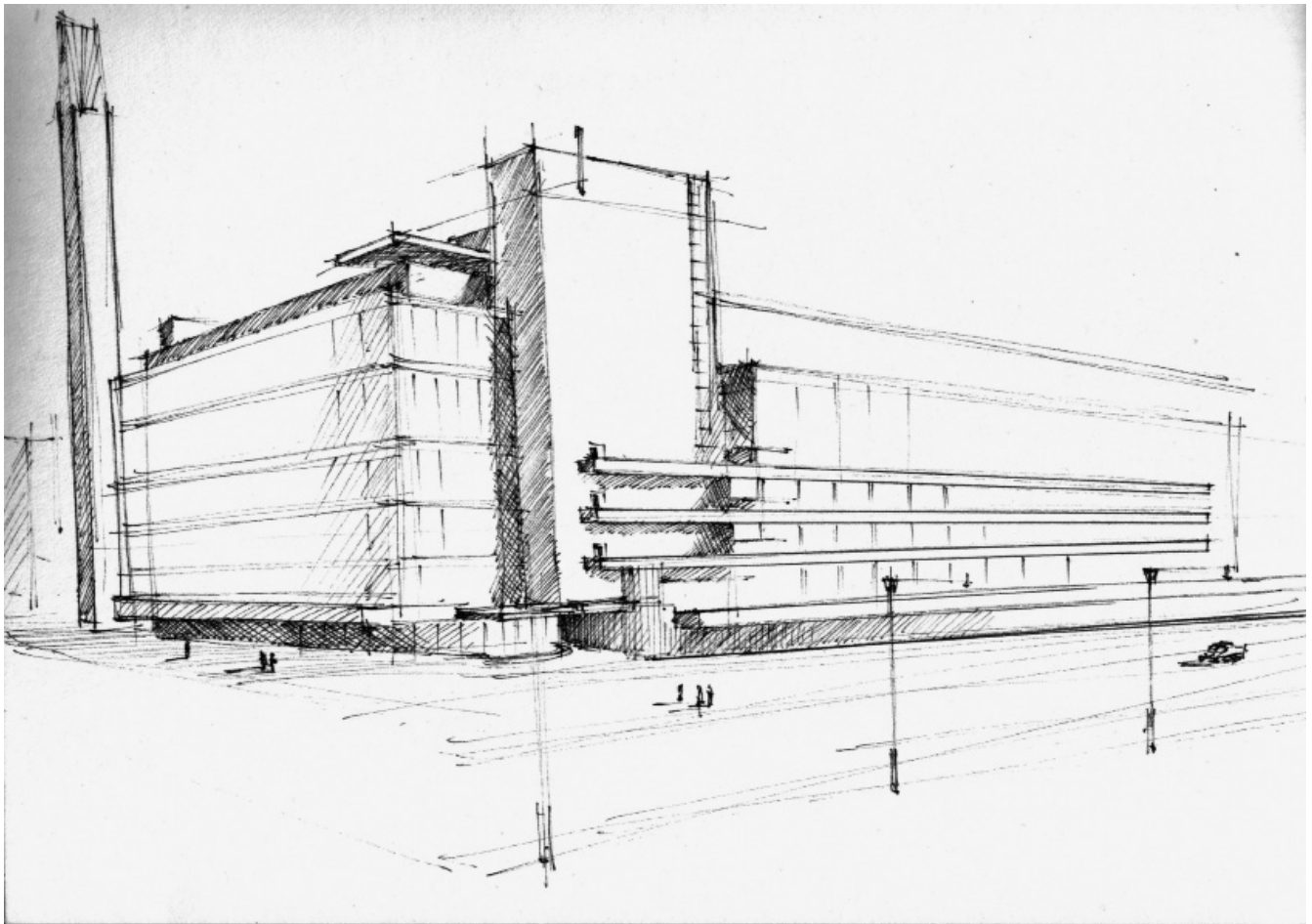
Rotterdam was reluctant to accept changes resulting from the Housing Act. The legislation bound local authorities to abide by the recommendations of the local Health Board and to draw up land use plans. The Board's decisions were binding for the local government<sup>4</sup>. According to Rotterdam municipal council, the powers of the Board were too great and encroached on people's most private affairs, like "the way of using the flat," and supporters of the reforms were called "hygienic fanatics". The Rotterdam Health Board, however, went to

1. L. de Klerk, *Mooi werk. Geschiedenis van de Maatschappij voor Volkswoningen, Rotterdam 1909-1999*. Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010 1999, p. 12.

2. E.g. in spite of the 1887 ban on constructing dark alcoves, they were still built in the 1930s. Ibidem, p. 14.

3. M. Wallinga, *Over de Horsten gesproken*. Rotterdam: Stichting voor Volkshuisvesting Tuinstad Zuidwijk 1994, p. 25.

4. *Wonen. Woning. Wet. Wij wonen – 100 jaar Woningwet*. (J. Keesom, ed.), Amsterdam: Stedelijke Woningdienst Amsterdam 2000, p. 59.



3. Bijenkorf department store. Architect: Willem Dudok, 1930. Demolished in 1940; drawing by the author

war against the council by making checks of the condition of flats, criticising local policies (lack of subsidies for building societies, the 1911 building code which did not require a toilet in every flat, unavailability of land for development), but first of all expressing alarm about the desperate shortage of flats<sup>5</sup>.

In 1917, the city established the Municipal Housing Authority (*Gemeentelijke Woningdienst*), but building initiatives were more often taken by progressive, socialist organisations independent of the City Hall. After the Housing Act was passed, the first house building companies (*woningbouwcorporaties*) were established. In 1910-1940, about 97,000 flats were built in Rotterdam, but only 7% of them were built by the city and 8% by house building companies (*woningbouwcorporaties*), i.e. with government support.<sup>6</sup> Many of the projects carried out in Rotterdam were very inventive, particularly as compared with what was constructed in Amsterdam at the same time. In spite of the fact

that in 1931 the City Development Department (*Dienst Stadsontwikkeling*) was established, managed by Willem Gerrit Witteveen, very few projects were completed due to the economic crisis, the city developed chaotically, and experimental housing estates and garden towns (*tuindorpen*) were just a drop in the ocean of the needs<sup>7</sup>. Several modernisation projects were carried out in the city centre, but they did not change the appearance of the city.

### **The role of avant-garde architects in creating modern identity of the city**

Rotterdam owes its outstanding works of modern residential and industrial architecture mainly to the awareness of local entrepreneurs, who were willing to invest their profits in state-of-the-art technologies, and who wanted their offices to express their aspirations, as well as to the avant-garde of Dutch architects. And so in the 1920s several working-class housing estates were built, designed by leftist architects who believed their work would help improve housing

5. L. de Klerk, *Perculiere plannen. Denkbeelden en initiatieven van de stedelijke elite inzake de volkswoningbouw en de stedsbouw in Rotterdam, 1860-1950*. Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut 1998, p. 41.

6. L. de Klerk, *Mooi werk...*, op. cit., p. 15.

7. A. Kraaij, J. van der Mast, *Rotterdam Zuid. Voorstad tussen droom en daad*. Delft: TH Delft 1990, p. 47.



4. Witte Dorpe estate site manager's house. Architect: J.J.P. Oud, 1923. Demolished in 1944, reconstructed in two different locations in 1993. Photo by the author

conditions. What also mattered was the influence of the *De Stijl* group, particularly the personality of its founder, Theo van Doesburg, who inspired many Rotterdam architects<sup>8</sup>. Architects and businessmen, and finally municipal officers as well, started to create their own designs – and the appearance of the city – in opposition to Amsterdam, where the Hendrik Petrus Berlage school and brick Expressionism still prevailed.

An architect who rendered the greatest service to Rotterdam, although underestimated during his lifetime, was Jacob Oud. He thought that it was as important for the architect to learn from the dwellers how to construct flats as for the dwellers to learn from the architect how to live. Oud created some unique designs, e.g. a block in the district of Spangen, the White Village (*Witte Dorp*) in Oud Mathenesse, his best-known housing estate *Kiefhoek* on the southern river bank, and the housing estate *Blijdorp* (never built). His plain and simple architecture was highly valued by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russel Hitchcock, who recognised him (in 1932) as one of the four founders of the

International Style<sup>9</sup>. Oud himself believed that his house designs had greater influence on the development of modernism in Eastern Europe than in his homeland. Helena Syrkus confirmed his words. She translated Oud's articles for the "Praesens" magazine, and in the 1980s she wrote that it was him who invented the idea of "house counselling"<sup>10</sup>. J.J.P. Oud resigned from his position in the city of Rotterdam in 1938 when his brother, Pieter Oud, became Mayor of the city. He moved to Wassenaar in order to avoid suspicion that he owed contracts to his brother's position.

In the 1930s, Functionalist architecture was institutionalised, and even became the vogue. Architects of the next generation, centred around the *De Opbouw* group, participating in international congresses, travelling to the Soviet Union and convinced about the rightness of their views, openly acted against the *De Stijl's* "cubism" of the previous generation. A pioneering example of this kind of functionalism was *Van Nelle*, a tobacco, coffee and tea plant (designed

8. Mart Stam's *Trousers: Stories from behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism*. (Crimson, M. Speaks, G. Hadders, ed.), Rotterdam: 010 Publishers/Crimson 1999, p. 96.

9. E. Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. Cambridge-Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2000, p. 122.

10. H. Syrkus, *Spoleczne cele urbanizacji. Człowiek i środowisko*. Warsaw 1984, p. 137.

by Jan Brinkman, Leendert van der Vlugt, Mart Stam, 1927). The International Style, extremely functionalistic, was used in designs of factories, industrial and port plants, exclusive villas and public buildings, and the few novel steel-frame residential high-rises, e.g. *Bergpolderflat* (designed by Jan Brinkman, Leendert van der Vlugt, Willem van Tijen, 1932). In the late 1930s, the International Style projects, even though not the most numerous in Rotterdam, became a characteristic feature of the dynamically developing industrial city, modernising its space without forgetting the workers living there<sup>11</sup>.

### Identity of the modernist city after WWII

Like many European cities re-built after war damages in the 1940s and 1950s, Rotterdam based its image on modernity, wide roads, high residential buildings, malls in the city centre, new railway stations and department stores<sup>12</sup>.

Today, just like in the 1920s and 1930s, Rotterdam is shaping its identity in contrast and rivalry to the Dutch capital. Safeguarding the works of prewar Modernism is all the more important given that the city lost the tissue of its historical centre during the war. Therefore, these modernistic buildings prove the continuity

of the city's history. The modernistic image of the city is often reconstructed literally. Oud's projects were reconstructed, e.g. the residential block in the district of Spangen, and the houses in the *Kiefhoek* housing estate were meticulously taken to pieces and erected again with the use of the same building techniques that had been used 60 years before, though the flats were connected and modernised. The housing estates preserved their residential function. Oud's other projects in the *De Stijl* stylistics – "Café De Unie" and the *Witte Dorp* site manager's house (taken to pieces by the estate residents for firewood during the war) – were reconstructed, but, paradoxically, in different siting.<sup>13</sup> The *Witte Dorp* estate, originally meant as temporary, was reconstructed according to Oud's design, but in a different architectural layout. Other icons of prewar Modernism were given new functions: *Van Nelle* factory now houses exclusive offices, and the Sonneveld family villa – part of the exposition of the Netherlands Architecture Institute. There are still controversies over the demolition of the *De Bijenkorf* shop building (designed by Willem Dudok in 1930), damaged during the 1940 air raids, which according to some, should have been rebuilt.

What serves Rotterdam's modernistic architecture best is the appreciation of its artistic values and its recognition as a key element in shaping the identity of the city; this was equally

11. H. van Dijk, *Twentieth-Century Architecture in the Netherlands*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers 1999, p. 46.

12. C. Wagenaar, *Welvaartsstad in wording. De wederopbouw van Rotterdam 1940-1952*. Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut 1993, p. 297.

13. *Mart Stam's Trousers...*, op.cit. p. 43.

5. *Kiefhoek* housing estate. Architect: J.J.P. Oud, 1925. Demolished and reconstructed in 1989. Photo by the author



true eighty years ago when it emerged as it is today, when it is the subject of protection.

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Research interests: history of Modernism, protection of modernist buildings; housing industry and policies; community of the housing estate, neighbourly relations; identity of cities and housing estates

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