

Olympic Heritage in Amsterdam

Marieke Kuipers

The 1928 Olympic Village in Amsterdam was a remarkable ensemble of both permanent and temporary buildings. All were designed by architect Jan Wils (1891–1972), former member of the avant-gardist *De Stijl* group, in a clearly contemporary style. The core of the complex was – and is – the red brick-cladded stadium with its eye-catching Marathon tower. From the start, partial demolition and replacement were equally part of the planning strategy, aimed at subsidised housing after the Olympics. After careful restoration Wils' permanent buildings are today successfully (re)used.

Location and planning

When, in 1923, Amsterdam was definitively designated to host the IXth Olympics, the Dutch organizers first had in mind to enlarge the then nine-year-old Netherlands Stadium by architect Harry Elte. This was partly inspired by the Olympic stadium at Stockholm and located in the southwest area of the city, for which Hendrik Petrus Berlage had drafted his famous urban extension plan South. Without a preceding competition, the sports enthusiast Jan Wils, jury member for the 1924 Olympic architectural design competition at Paris, was tasked to compose a provisional sketch for an upgraded stadium and adjacent facilities in the existing Netherlands Sports Park.¹

Wils knew both Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, and the Dutch Olympic Committee member, captain Pieter Wilhelmus Scharroo, with whom he was co-editor of the construction monthly *Het Bouwbedrijf* and co-author of an extensive monograph on international sports facilities and their setting.² After Wils' first overall

sketch for the available location was initially approved for further elaboration, it soon became evident that more sports facilities and space were needed as well as sufficient infrastructure for the expected masses of spectators. A second commission followed for an entire Olympic City at a new location, just opposite the initial one, at the very edge of the city. For this purpose, a triangle exchange was established between the three major parties involved (Netherlands Sports Park Ltd., City of Amsterdam and Netherlands Olympic Committee, NOC), and Berlage's Plan South was adjusted regarding the unbuilt southwest corner of the municipal territory. The arrangements were such that Elte's stadium would serve as an auxiliary facility during the Olympics and afterwards would make room for the already intended housing schemes, and also that the Netherlands Sports Park company would have both the exploitation of the new permanent stadium and the land lease contract of the related plot.³ Another outcome was that the Olympic hockey and football tournaments would be held in Elte's stadium two months before the official Games would start.⁴

Unexpectedly, the confessional majority in Parliament had voted against the proposed governmental subsidy of one million guilders for the new building because Olympic matches and ceremonies would also be held on Sundays (being Lord's Days). Thanks to the NOC's successful funding campaign among the Dutch population, Amsterdam could continue its candidacy as Olympic host. But Wils' second building programme for a full Olympic City had to be downsized substantially. Hence, housing was cancelled for the almost 3,000 international athletes – male *and* female – from 46 countries and, for the first time, from all continents. Instead, 18 school buildings, 66 hotels and 18 ships served as accommodation; rowing and sailing took place on open waters nearby (Sloter Ringvaart canal and Buiten Y, respectively), whereas the pre-finals of the equestrian sports were held at Hilversum.⁵

Concept and construction

The new location, west of the south-bound exit road Amstelveenseweg, was a marshy piece of land, requiring a lot of pre-construction work. A newly dug canal served for the supply of sand and other construction materials. Both NOC and Wils were keen on a fast circulation of the masses, in the urban context (aided by differentiated transportation tracks and parking) and within the Olympic ensemble as well as inside the stadium, for which broad staircases were designed to fill the spectators' seats from above.⁶ Wils' holistic ap-



Fig. 1 The restored Olympic oval in Amsterdam with Marathon tower, relocated Prometheus monument and second Citroën building (2015)

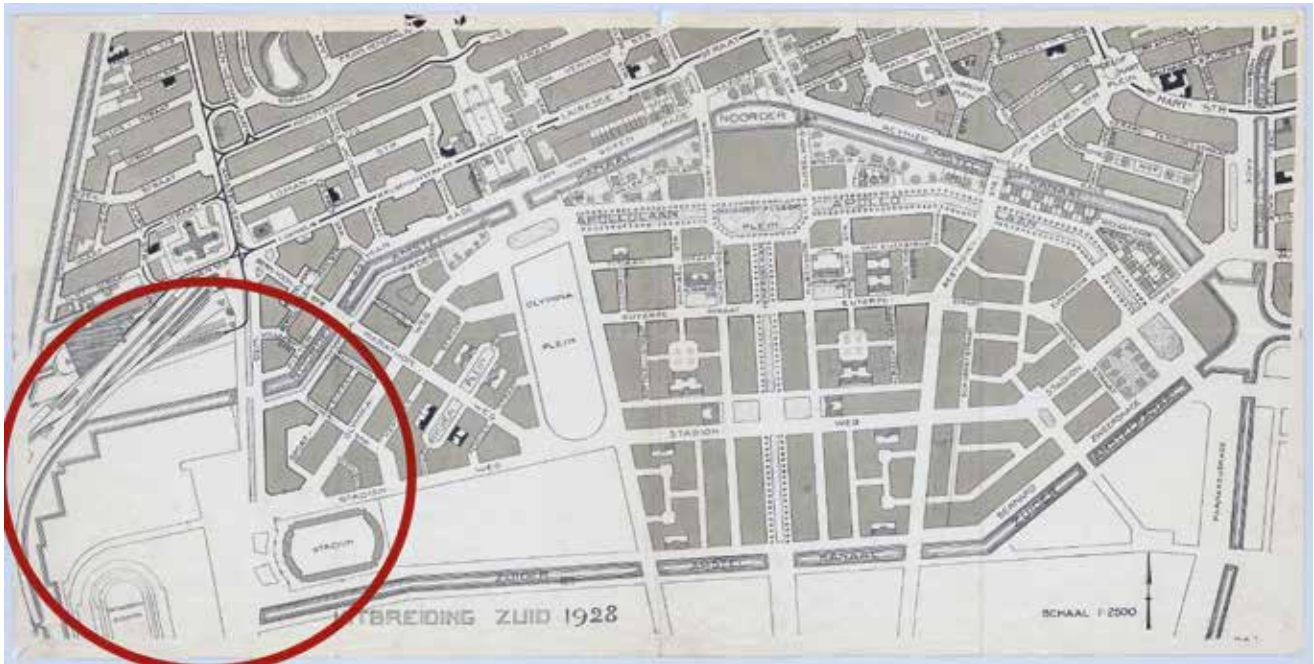


Fig. 2 Location of the Olympic village site with new and old stadium projected on the 1928 Amsterdam South urban development map of public works



Fig. 3 Aerial photo of the opening ceremony of the IXth Olympic Games in Wils' new stadium (bottom left), with Elte's stadium at the right, temporary sports buildings in the centre, and swimming pool at the top (1928)



Fig. 4 Postcard of the Stadionplein from the town in southern direction, with the fencing hall in front of the stadium (1928)

proach of all elements was directed at an architecturally coherent and functionally organised ensemble for sports and spectators, also suitable for cultural events in the future. After all, he aimed at a modern temple for sports as a binding factor for the community and at a useful facility for the new man to become and remain healthy in body and mind.⁷ In those days, the Olympics comprised not only physical sports competitions, but also artistic contests. Out of 124 submissions for sports-related architectural designs, Wils' holistic concept was awarded the first prize and exhibited in the City Museum.⁸

The new territory allowed for a more advantageous north-south orientation of the permanent Olympic arena, a monumental urbanistic embedding in the axis of the future townscape, and a compact ensemble of adjacent semi-permanent

sports facilities – thus expressing de Coubertin's Olympic ideal of togetherness and unity. North of the Noorderamstel Kanaal, accessible via a shipping bridge, the open-air swimming pool was situated, provided with a 50 x 18 m concrete basin, dive towers and wooden stands.⁹ West of the arena, a temporary restaurant was located near an outdoor terrace along the surrounding canal. It consisted of eight triangular parts that alternated in colour and height to attract the attention of the visitors.¹⁰ At the very edges two permanent staff houses were erected.

In front of the arena, two semi-permanent structures were built with steel frameworks, slag brick walls and white painted wooden cladding, as cubist compositions that marked the main entrance area. The power sports hall (south) was laid out around the boxing ring, the fencing hall (north) had eight



Fig. 5 The Olympic arena with its concrete framework and cycling ring under construction (1928)



Fig. 6 The Olympic ensemble of stadium, Marathon tower and temporary sports hall by night (1928)

lanes of each 19 m length inside and large portions of glass to simulate an outdoor situation.¹¹

The Olympic oval was kept relatively low (as was the flat land) with strong horizontal lines. It was constructed with a reinforced concrete skeleton and clad with plain brick walls to be in harmony with the already inhabited housing blocks of the nearby Stadion district, while provided with steel-framed windows. The multiple-sports arena was built around the central football field, a 400 m-long cinder track for athletics and a 500 m-long hollow concrete ring for race cycling. This meant that the field players had to enter through a special tunnel underneath. In the basements under the stands, restaurants, offices, changing and medical treatment rooms were situated, clustered or separated according to their function.¹²



Fig. 7 The Dutch Ladies team after winning the first prize in athletics in the Olympic Stadium, posing in front of the score panel (1928)



Fig. 8 The first Citroën garage, designed by Jan Wils, with Marathon tower behind (1931)

The total capacity was 31,600, though Wils had first aimed at a higher number by providing more standing room instead of the increasingly requested seats. After adding wooden temporary stands, there was space for 41,000 spectators. The projected canopies above the seated long wings were supported by technically advanced free-hanging steel frameworks for unrestricted views of the sports activities.¹³ The short ends were originally designed as stands and the northern one was crowned with an enormous scoreboard. The honorary box – intended for the royal family and international officials – was located in the long west wing. Central in the opposite east wing, the Marathon gate opened towards the city, where the long-distance runners would start and finish. Above the gate, at the city side, the five coloured Olympic rings were placed, together with the motto *CITIUS*,

ALTIUS, FORTIUS (faster, higher, stronger). In the gate's side walls the tablets of honour were placed with the gilded names of the Olympic gold medal winners, including Wils. Hardly any other decoration was applied on the walls, apart from four friezes above the boxes, subtle cubist details, flower boxes and flag pole holders, while carpets and flags were dynamic providers of colour. Important exceptions were two symbolic reliefs in stone (by Johan Altorf) at the main entrance and the bronze sportsman who delivered the Olympic salute in honour of the late Baron Frits van Tuyll van Serooskerken, the first NOC president (designed by the female sculptor Gra Rueb). Originally, this monument stood left (south) of the Marathon gate. At the other side rose the freestanding Marathon tower, 45 m high.¹⁴ This strong vertical accent counterbalanced the predominantly horizontal ensemble and was truly an eye-catcher. The tower could be lit from inside and shine at night through the long strips of glazed stones at the sides. It had four balconies for the trumpet players and the first electric loudspeakers and a concrete bowl on top to hold the burning Olympic flame. Wils had invented this novelty to connect the modern and ancient games, and the slender Marathon tower became the hallmark of the Amsterdam Olympics – until today.

Post-Olympic developments

The IXth Olympiad had proven a successful and festive event; it led to a serious breakthrough of sports as a leisure activity in the Netherlands. Perhaps it was also the first international sports activity for which professional photography and film were consciously used to inform the public at large about the construction and architecture of the Olympic village, and, obviously, the Games and the participants. Besides the official NOC publication on the Olympics, also a multilingual album on Wils' Olympic creation was issued, with the Marathon tower on the cover and artistic photographs by Bernard Eilers.¹⁵ Showing the specific architectural qualities, they made the assignment of building sports facilities definitively *salonfähig* within the architectural circles and beyond.¹⁶

Nonetheless, after the Olympics were over, the temporary facilities were torn down to provide, as contractually agreed, vacated plots to the city for the anticipated urban development, in which just one (inter)national sports facility was foreseen. Elte's stadium was thus demolished for middle-class housing blocks. Their realisation completed Plan South and with the Van Tuyll van Serooskerken square formed the monumental axis towards the Olympic Stadium. The first stone was saved during the demolition and transferred to a place under the Marathon stand.

In front of the stadium a new modern transport-related building replaced, in 1931, the former boxing hall: a showroom and garage for Citroën.¹⁷ It was purposely designed by Wils to assure the desired architectural harmony with his widely appreciated arena. Subtly different, he applied yellow bricks, visible concrete columns and rounded shop windows; also, the brand's name was conspicuously placed, but the flag poles had a similar detailing as those on the Olympic oval.



Fig. 9 The reinforced concrete extension ring around the oval stadium core (1992)



Fig. 10 The Olympic Stadium with Marathon tower, Van Tuyll monument, Prometheus war memorial and reused second Citroën garage (2019)

Meanwhile, the stadium remained in use for football and hockey, athletics, cycling, equestrian sports and great national cultural events, which all contributed to the popularity of the place. In October 1929, for example, the first artificially lit football match on the European continent took place during the Edison light week, with a temporary installation of 64 lamps above the field. Five years later, four permanent steel constructions were placed to illuminate matches after sunset.¹⁸

Besides the economic crisis, the exploitation of the stadium came under pressure due to two other developments, the relocation of the Amsterdam hockey club to the new 'Amsterdam Wood' (part of the functionalist Amsterdam Extension Plan, AUP) and the opening of the new football stadium for Feyenoord in Rotterdam (designed by Jan Brinkman and Leen van der Vlugt) in 1937. This modernist masterpiece of steel, nicknamed 'the Tub', had a capacity of 65,000. To



Fig. 11 The Olympic Stadium, view of the west wing after restoration (2019)

keep pace with this rival stadium, a huge concrete extension was added around the Olympic oval, also designed by Wils in the same year.¹⁹

Even during the difficult period of the Nazi occupation in the Second World War, the stadium was used for sports, except for the harsh hunger winter. Afterwards, a sculpture of Prometheus (by Fred Carasso, 1947) was placed on the south stand, to commemorate the victims of war from the world of sport and as a reminder of the Olympic fire.²⁰ Once more Wils was commissioned by Citroën to design a showroom and garage, now at the former location of the fencing hall. Opened in 1960, this white and transparent ‘Car Palace’, demonstrating Wils’ architectural evolution, was also a response to the Corbusian Renault garage by Wouter van de Erve (opposite the Amstelstation).²¹

Due to new developments in sports and society – such as TV at home, other facilities elsewhere – the exploitation of the Olympic stadium came increasingly under pressure since the 1970s. Even Amsterdam’s ambitions to host the 1992 Olympics were not supportive, while a totally new sports complex was foreseen (just as in 1928). Luckily, Los Angeles won. After 60 years of intensive use for sports and cultural events, the local political conditions changed drastically when the district council opted for new housing projects on the Olympic grounds – only the Marathon tower was intended to remain. Yet, after a storm of protests against the intended demolition, because of its original architectural significance and associated memories of sports and cultural events, the interwar stadium ensemble was legally protected

as a national monument (meeting the minimum age of 50 years).²²

Revival and re-use

Just as in 1928, intense cooperation between private and local and national parties was vital to achieve agreement on both the revival and re-use of the Olympic stadium ensemble as a national monument and the construction of 800 new housing units (Olympic Quarter). The project was submitted to a difficult melange of – sometimes conflicting – present-day requirements and possibilities related to finances, sports activities, technique, safety, urban planning, housing and architectural conservation. Architect André van Stigt, specialised in such challenging assignments, was engaged in 1998 to draft a combined plan for the restoration and adaptation of the stadium and its side buildings as well as for the financial participation of external partners. So, the Social Fund Construction Industry (SFB) that purchased the premises also became co-principal of an underground parking garage for 850 spaces under the inner arena, but again a crowdfunding activity had to bridge a financial gap.²³

Actually, van Stigt applied a similar holistic approach as Wils, starting with circulation and technical facilities, though for an already existing sports ensemble and with great respect for its special architectural qualities. An important decision was to remove the concrete outer ring and

the concrete inner cyclist ring in order to restore the original Olympic oval, making it an athletics stadium with A status, and to add 40 business units to generate additional revenue for future operation and maintenance costs. Energy-saving equipment was applied in various places, such as a combined heat and power plant inside the old scoreboard, underfloor heating in all units, special glass in the façade, high-frequency luminaires, water-saving measures and high-quality indoor insulation.²⁴ The porter's lodge was slightly relocated, just as the Van Tuyll monument and the Prometheus sculpture (which stand today in front of the arena and a new public bikers road), for allowing new uses of public space.

Van Stigt's integral approach was nationally awarded and after the reopening in 2000, the Olympic Stadium is – still or again – an internationally appreciated sports facility, event location and hotspot. Several Marathons were run from and to it, and the 2018 ISU World Allround Championships were hosted here successfully.²⁵

Also, the second Citroën building was listed, as a national monument of post-war architecture. Most recently, the two Citroën buildings underwent adaptive reuse (commerce and restaurant) and on the opposite Stadion square, two residential apartment blocks with public use in the plinth were realised (Dam & Partners, 2017), together with two reconstructed kiosks by Wils.²⁶ Ultimately, the integrated conservation of the Olympic Stadium and redevelopment of its surroundings have led to a reappraisal of Wils' achievements and the Olympic ideals.

Abstract

Das Olympische Dorf von 1928 in Amsterdam war ein bemerkenswertes Ensemble sowohl dauerhafter als auch temporärer Gebäude im Südwesten der niederländischen Hauptstadt. Das Herzstück des Komplexes war das ovale, mit Ziegelsteinen verkleidete Stadion mit dem auffälligen Marathonturm, auf dessen Spitze zum ersten Mal die olympische Flamme zu sehen war. Der Architekt war Jan Wils, ehemaliges Mitglied der avantgardistischen Gruppe De Stijl, der auch die angrenzenden Unterkünfte entwarf.

Von Anfang an waren zukünftiger Abriss und Ersatz ebenso Teil der Planungsstrategie wie die Schaffung einer neuen Arena, die den olympischen Bestrebungen entsprach. Die Stadt hatte daher einer Überarbeitung des bereits genehmigten Erweiterungsplans von Berlage für Amsterdam Süd zugestimmt, die eine Verschiebung neuer Wohnbauprojekte bedeutete.

Sobald die Spiele vorbei waren, musste das bereits bestehende Fußballstadion (1914), das Harry Elte nach dem Vorbild des Stockholmer Olympiastadions gebaut hatte und das als Nebenspielstätte gedient hatte, Platz für Wohnblöcke der Mittelschicht machen. Auch die Holzkonstruktionen wurden abgerissen; zwei Geschäftsgebäude – für Citroën – kamen 1931 und 1962 hinzu, die ebenfalls von Wils entworfen wurden.

Das Stadion wurde weiterhin für Fußballspiele, Leichtathletik, Radsport und verschiedene nationale Kulturveranstaltungen genutzt. 1937 wurde im Wettbewerb mit dem neuen rivalisierenden Stadion in Rotterdam („die Wanne“ für



Fig. 12 The Olympic Stadium with score panel, after restoration (2000)

Feyenoord) ein großer Anbau aus Stahlbeton hinzugefügt, um die Kapazität zu erhöhen.

Nach 60 Jahren intensiver Nutzung, aber nur zögerlicher Instandhaltung, änderten sich die politischen Bedingungen drastisch. Der neu eingerichtete Bezirksrat beschloss, den Pachtvertrag mit dem privaten Unternehmen, das das Olympiastadion betrieb, nicht zu verlängern, um Platz für neue Wohnprojekte zu schaffen. Dennoch kam es zu zahlreichen Protesten gegen den beabsichtigten Abriss des einzigartigen olympischen Erbes, sogar vor Gericht. Doch schließlich wurde der Status eines nationalen Kulturerbes zuerkannt und 1998 unter der Leitung von André van Stigt eine vollständige Renovierung in Verbindung mit einer angepassten Neunutzung in Angriff genommen.

Der Betonaußenanbau wurde ebenso wie der Betonradweg entfernt, weil er die Aussicht aus den neuen Büroräumen in den ehemaligen Einrichtungsräumen behindern würde. Nach seiner Wiedereröffnung im Jahr 2000 ist das Olympiastadion eine international geschätzte Sportstätte, Veranstaltungsort und Hotspot. Auch das zweite Citroën-Gebäude wurde als nationales Denkmal der Nachkriegsarchitektur unter Denkmalschutz gestellt. Zuletzt wurden die beiden Citroën-Gebäude für eine gemischte Nutzung unter dem Namen The Olympic renoviert.

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¹ Van ROSSEM, *IXe Olympiade*, 1928, pp. 182–185.

² SCHARROO, WILS, *Gebouwen en terreinen*, 1925.

³ WILS, *Mededeelingen*, 1927.

⁴ Van ROSSEM, *IXe Olympiade*, 1928, pp. 84–85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–249; 278–292.

⁶ WATTJES, *Stadion te Amsterdam*, 1928.

⁷ KUIPERS, *Sports versus housing*, 2003; WILS, *Mededeelingen*, 1927.

⁸ Van ROSSEM, *IXe Olympiade*, 1928, pp. 903–907.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–292; VAN LINGE, *Vergelijking*, 1928.

¹⁰ KIERS, WILS, *Olympisch stadion*, 1978, p. 14, p. 24.

¹¹ Van ROSSEM, *IXe Olympiade*, 1928, pp. 215–219.

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²³ KALK, *Bouwmeesters*, 2006, pp. 124–133.

²⁴ [www.herbestemmen.nu/Olympisch stadion](http://www.herbestemmen.nu/Olympisch_stadion), accessed 5 January 2020.

²⁵ www.theolympicamsterdam.nl, accessed 5 January 2020.

²⁶ BUCHHOLZ, *Nieuw stukje stad*, 2017.