

Herman van Bergeijk

Dutch Office Building 1900–1940. A Question of Style or Mentality?¹

In 1915 a newspaper in Rotterdam opened an article on office building with the following sentence: ‘Awareness of power expresses itself in a lust for building and as the trade companies in Rotterdam are growing in size and influence, they will establish in our city office palaces that already on the street side show what they have to mean’.² The article is a token to the importance given to office building in the city on the Maas. Remarkably enough it was preceded by an article on the architecture of the public authorities suggesting a relationship between the two.

Yet to state that the question of the office building has been a recurrent theme within Dutch architectural debates would be an exaggeration. On the contrary, it seems that the topic has hardly been worth discussing. Architectural magazines and books regularly present office buildings but it is not a topic that ranks high on the professional agenda. And in history? For different reasons in the typically one-sided histories of modern architecture office building plays a marginal role. In general, office buildings follow the stylistic developments and only a few examples, isolated phenomena, can be considered ‘ahead of their time’. As far as the Netherlands are concerned, the focus points in history are those which were affected by innovative legislation, and in particular the famous ‘Woningwet’ (Housing Law).

Office building is dependent on a client who is willing to put an extra effort in the question of representation and who wants to combine aesthetic qualities with usefulness. This can either be the government or a company that needs administrative facilities. Office building belongs in the capitalistic world or as the architect Jan Wils noted in 1920, there is a close link between the modern businessman and the modern artist. The artist sublimes the intentions of the merchant and Wils listed buildings that could be considered a ‘plus for commercial enterprises’.³ The facades of office buildings are often a token of richness and a representation of a certain ideology. Due to its particular nature, in some cases, office building will even become an object of speculation for private entrepreneurs. Such is surely the case of the so called ‘White House’ in Rotterdam (Fig. 1), designed by Willem Molenbroek and constructed around 1900. This building was beyond any doubt an important beacon in the city. It was the first high-rise building in the Netherlands and was considered to be inspired by American skyscraper examples. Clearly the developers saw the potential of high-rise for office building, but the Netherlands were not the United States and the project was not a great success. It was difficult



Figure 1: W. Molenbroek, ‘White House’, Rotterdam, 1897–1900

Figure 2: J. S. C. van de Wal, gate building/ later main office building of the Holland-Amerika Lijn (Poortgebouw), Rotterdam, 1878

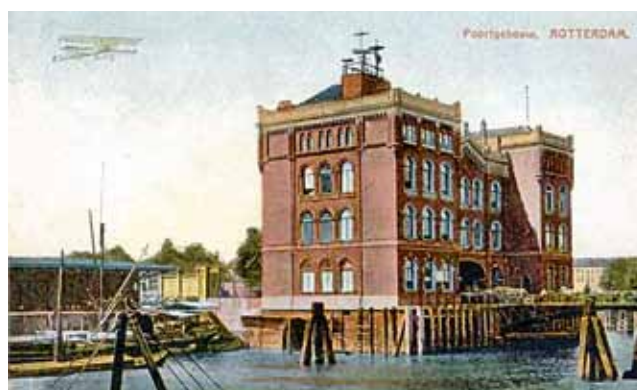




Figure 3: J. A. Brinkman and L. C. van der Vlugt, Office building of the Van Nelle factory, Rotterdam, 1926–1929

to find renters. The prominent position was deliberately chosen. It increased its potential to be used for advertisements. The white building with its massive roof that functioned as a panorama platform – a belvedere – was visible from great distances along the main river. With an elevator one could rush to the top and admire the spectacular view. It was a billboard in more than one way. Yet, the architectural world hardly took notice of the building. The White House did not in any way represent the character of this port-city, but neither did the gate building (Poortgebouw) (Fig. 2) that was

Figure 4: A. J. Kropholler, Main office building of the bank Mees & Co, Rotterdam, 1929–1933



finished in 1878, which for many years would be the main office building of the Holland-Amerika Lijn.

Although for many years the White House remained an important icon in the city of Rotterdam, it would be substituted at the end of the nineteen twenties by the famous Van Nelle factory of J. A. Brinkman and L. C. van der Vlugt (Fig. 3) that represented a more modern and contemporary approach to the problem. The factory had a separate administration block that showed the same transparency. From heaviness the accent had moved towards lightness, the same lightness that was considered to be fundamental for products of a modern industrialized society. The contrast between the White House and the Van Nelle factory cannot be bigger but nevertheless both were seen, in their time, as examples of modern architecture. Between these two extremes there was a broad spectrum of other possibilities. It seems that Rotterdam was the city of extremes. This can also be exemplified by two office buildings of the bank Mees & Co. On the one hand one has the modern bank building of Brinkman and Van der Vlugt (Fig. 4) and on the other the brick main office of the same bank at the Blaak designed by A. J. Kropholler. Both buildings were built in approximately the same years. This dualism between heaviness and lightness characterizes the two sides of a city that after World War II has done much to portray itself as a modern town. Architects like W. Kromhout and H. F. Mertens belong to the group in the centre between these extremes. Their work shows in the masonry the influence of the more expressionistic architecture of the Amsterdam School. Kromhout was the architect of the amazing Noordzee building (1916) and of the office of the navigation association (Fig. 5) built in

1920, and Mertens was the house architect of the Rotterdam Bank Association and the architect of the remarkable Unilever building. These buildings certainly bring a touch of Amsterdam to its rival city in the south-west. The interesting buildings of Kromhout bear more connotations to ships than the Scheepvaarthuis. The critic and architect Willem Retera was ecstatic in his opinion. According to him ‘these buildings are no more blocks where people talk and do their business [...] but buildings that open up in atmosphere and space, and that have taken in the stimulating times and radiate it again’.⁴

Responsible for this gaze towards the capital was the construction of the Scheepvaarthuis, the collective housing of several shipping companies, from 1912 onwards (Fig. 6). The commission had been given to the well established firm of J.N. and A.D.N. van Gendt. Van Gendt had and would build many big buildings. They were specialized in structural engineering. In order to achieve an aesthetically gratifying image it was decided that J.M. van der Mey would design the facades. Van der Mey, a talented draughtsman, had hardly built but he had been the aesthetic advisor of the city and was probably also related to one of the directors of the shipping companies. The building was the overture to an architectural fashion that was especially heralded in the beautiful magazine *Wendingen*. Michel de Klerk, Piet Kramer and many other artists worked under the supervision of Van der Mey in the design of many architectural details. The building was overloaded by all kinds of ornament and expensive materials. The history of Dutch shipping was illustrated in many sculptural elements although in its overall setting the building did not embody any reference to a naval metaphor, there were many aspects that connected to the companies that were housed in the building. Some details like the ropelike edge of the roof and the undulating movement of the same can be seen as derived from a marine inspiration and there were many allegorical scenes. The main entrance was marked by a truncated tower in which one could find a luxurious staircase to all the different floors. Although some people have tried to read the building as an analogy to a ship, this likeness is less apparent than in the famous building of Höger. With a little fantasy one could see in the Chilehaus the bow of a ship with which Henry B. Sloman transported his goods from South America. But whereas the Chilehaus forms an ensemble with its environment the Scheepvaarthuis in Amsterdam remains an isolated object. The manner in which ornament and decorations were applied in the building in Amsterdam is totally different from the way Höger and the brothers Gerson had used it in their buildings. They work more with patterns and texture. A building that does have a Hamburg flavor is the head office of Siemens on the Huygenspark (Fig. 7) in The Hague, built in 1922. It is still unknown who the architect was. Schumacher was well appreciated in The Hague where an exhibition of his work was organized in the same year 1922. Yet it is well known that Hans Hertlein was the architect of many Siemens buildings in Germany.

The impact of the Scheepvaarthuis on the cityscape was also less evident than that of the White House. Besides their location along the waterfront the buildings had little in common and similarities are hard to find. Although both made



Figure 5: W. Kromhout, Office of a navigation association, Rotterdam, 1920

use of the advanced technologies of their time these were draped in different kind of dresses. The White House wanted to be international, whereas the Scheepvaarthuis tried to establish and connect itself to a Dutch tradition without falling into a specific historicism. It is an example of ‘Backsteinarchitektur’ in the same way as the famous Stock Exchange of H. P. Berlage (Fig. 8) had been but it left the sober and rationalized style of Berlage far behind, at least as far as the facades and ornament went because the concrete skeleton of the construction belonged to another tradition. In fact it was a total neglect of the principles of Berlage, a fact that was acknowledged by Van der Mey when he admitted that ‘the

Figure 6: J.N. and A.D.N. van Gendt/J.M. van der Mey, Scheepvaarthuis (collective housing of several shipping companies), Amsterdam, 1912–1916

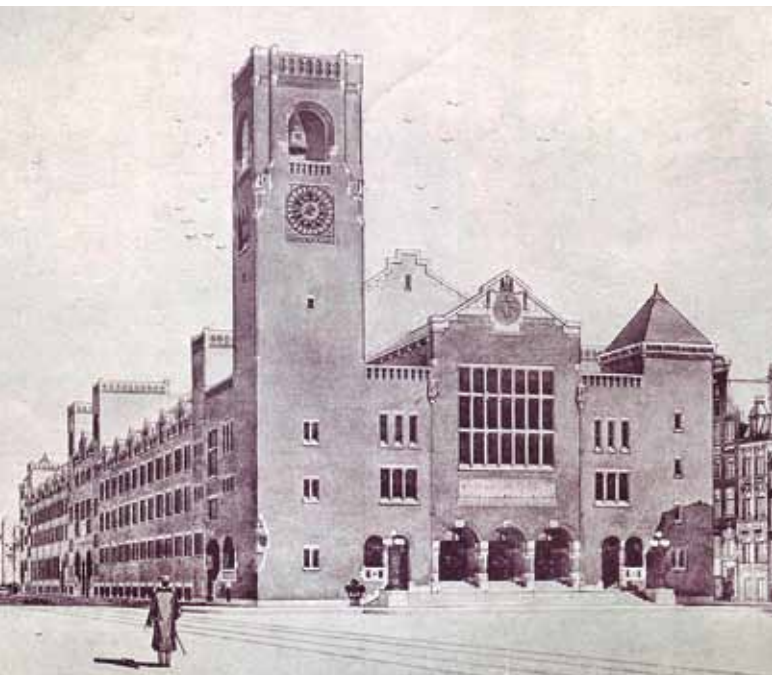




Figure 7: Hans Hertlein, head office of Siemens, The Hague, 1922

façade had nothing else to carry than its own weight and that it was supported by the core construction'.⁵ Like in many other buildings of architects that are considered to be a part of the Amsterdam School there is no relationship between the outside and the inside. This was however an attitude that not many Dutch architects would approve of, even if some German critic saw it as 'natural means of expression of a healthy brick art'.⁶ The main office of the Dutch railroad in Utrecht, designed by the civil engineer George W. van Heukelom in 1921, is a witness that brick could also be applied in a more rigorous way without becoming immediately orna-

Figure 8: H. P. Berlage, Stock Exchange, Amsterdam 1896–1903



mental. In its vertical articulation it is similar to the Stumm-Konzern building of Paul Bonatz in Düsseldorf. It stands in great contrast to, for example, the post office building of the government architect J. Crouwel (1924) in the same city of Utrecht.

The reception of the Scheepvaarthuis differed greatly. Whereas the architect J. Luthmann saw it as the expression of 'a tense and very personal spirit', in 1941 it was seen as a reaction to the work of Berlage. All truth in architecture had been thrown overboard, according to H. M. Kraayvanger. And K. P. C. de Bazel once stated that it was pure 'virtuosity, without deeper grounds, ingenious, but without conviction'.⁷

The engineering office of the brothers Van Gendt would also be responsible for the structure of the construction of the Dutch Trading Company (de Nederlandsche Handel Maatschappij), in the center of Amsterdam in the years 1919 to 1926 (Fig. 9). This enormous and impressive building was to be one of the last works of K. P. C. de Bazel, an architect who was a member of the Theosophical Society. The zoning of the upper floors gave the building a more Borobudur, temple like appearance, but inside the light courts showed the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin building in Buffalo, which in many aspects also resembled a temple. Compared with the head office of the oil company Esso in The Hague, built in the same years by the Rotterdam office of De Roos and Overeynder (Fig. 10), we notice that the building of De Bazel is more compact and less expressive in volume. Yet what the buildings have in common is that again the structure is made of concrete and the façade is just a visual component. The Esso building functions, thanks to the deep red color of the used bricks and the massive tower, as a beacon to all those who come to the city, but in relation to its environment it has a certain ambivalence that was noticed and well worded by the reviewer in *Bouwkundig Weekblad*.⁸

Another office building with a structural skeleton designed by the office Van Gendt was the building of 'De Nederlanden van 1845' in The Hague. Here the relationship between outside and inside was much stricter which should not surprise us when we know that H. P. Berlage was the architect (Fig. 11). Berlage created the corporate identity of several insurance companies from 1895 onwards and was responsible for the office building of the Wm. H. Müller & Co. in London in 1914 that had an almost classical appearance. Imaging becomes important. Whereas brick had been the main component in these buildings, in 1925 he chose to express also the concrete structure in the façade. Two years after his trip to the Dutch Indies Berlage made an extraordinary achievement and proved to still be an inspiring figure in Dutch architecture. Thanks to the structure the building was flexible in its use and in 1954 a second floor was added by the Hilversum architect W. M. Dudok. It is an extension that is not obtrusive at all. When the project of Berlage was published in the newspapers it was seen as an experiment in which 'the always living wood' had been substituted by 'the dead concrete'.⁹ The sober building had nevertheless not lost its aesthetic effect and that had also been the main purpose of the architect who was continuously looking for new beauty.

In this overview of Dutch office buildings we started in Rotterdam that profited itself as port city, then went to the more culturally oriented Amsterdam and now will end in The Hague. It is in this last city that certainly the most remarkable office buildings have been realized thanks to the presence of the government and many international banking and oil companies. Generally speaking, these clients tended to be more inclined towards a more conservative and solid appearance. Tradition was a key word. In that light should also be mentioned the big building that J. J. P. Oud designed for the B. I. M. (Bataafse Import Maatschappij) in 1938 (Fig. 12) in the periphery of The Hague and that marked a turning point in his career. The board of directors wanted a building that was ‘simple, sober and in line with the new management culture that the company represented’. It should be different from the large office of the B. P. M. that the brothers Van Nieuwerkerken had designed in 1915 (Fig. 13) and that was in a sort of Dutch neo-Renaissance style. A competition was held and the project of Oud was awarded the first prize. The scheme that the architect had applied permitted a building in phases. Besides, Oud did not want the building to look like housing and in spite of his attempts to rationalize his decisions the building was heavily criticized by his former friends. In their eyes the building had become a question of style and not the proper result of an attitude that wanted to be seen as modern. Especially the application of ornament was considered to be a betrayal of the principles of modernism. A radical architect had become in their eyes a reactionary, illustrating the problems of ‘affiliation’ in a more and more politically complicated society just before the national-socialistic Barbarism. Also Van Nieuwerkerken expressed in his unpublished memoirs a negative judgment on the building: ‘For the exterior I have no admiration and the inside is sober objectivity. [...] When I see the cold objectivity I am reminded of the ink coolie in a paper warehouse, a slave of the office in modern life that has made economy and speed to the highest ideals’.¹⁰ Oud seemed unable to please anybody.

His building is maybe the last building in which representation was embodied within ornament. After the Second World War the ordering of volumes will be the main issue for architects to deal with. Their solution will be, according to their own opinions, purely architectural in nature and easy to read for the common passer by. The tendency towards abstraction was victorious.

In order to take decisions regarding what we should do with these kinds of buildings after that they have lost their original function it is absolutely necessary to learn to read, decipher and understand what they have been telling us all along and what they are telling us in this moment. To do that we need certain skills and should not act too hastily based on only a superficial opinion, as in the case of the *Scheepvaarthuis* – the building has been recently transformed into a hotel. Where once decisions were taken, people now sleep and dream away. The rich decoration helps them on their way into the somatic realm of oblivion.

What we can learn from this short overview – and I deliberately use the thin worn word of Venturi ‘learning’ – is that some buildings have captured the spirit of the place and some have been capable of installing a new one, but that is



Figure 9: K. P. C. de Bazel, *Nederlandsche Handel Maatschappij (Dutch Trading Company), Amsterdam, 1919–1926*

Figure 10: De Roos and Overeinder, *head office of the oil company Esso, The Hague, 1919–1925*





Figure 11: H. P. Berlage, office building of 'De Nederlanden van 1845', The Hague, 1920/1924–1927

of great importance to take into account the specific context through a more than random observation. Whereas in The Hague and Rotterdam there is a strong tendency to put isolated objects in an urban context that has a totally different character, in Amsterdam this is less the case.

Abstract

Niederländische Bürogebäude 1900–1940. Eine Frage des Stils?

Der vorliegende Beitrag über niederländische Bürogebäude aus der ersten Hälfte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts versucht, einen kurzen Überblick über diesen Teil der Großstadtarchitektur in den Niederlanden zu geben und die gestaltenden Kräfte dahinter zu erforschen. Im Zuge der Entwicklung eines neuen Management-Kapitalismus entstanden große, oft international tätige Unternehmen wie Banken, Versicherungen und Mineralölgesellschaften, die große Büroflächen benötigten. Diese dienten nicht nur repräsentativen Zwecken, sondern wurden in dem Bestreben errichtet, das charakteristische Gepräge der städtebaulichen Umgebung zu berücksichtigen und ihm etwas Neues hinzuzufügen. Das führte zu einer Heterogenität, die einerseits Abbild der stilistischen Vielfalt der Zeit sowie der Debatte darüber ist und andererseits die veränderte Haltung zur Rolle der städtischen Architektur widerspiegelt. In Amsterdam neigte man dem Expressionismus zu, in Rotterdam lässt sich ein eher funktionaler Stil erkennen. In Den Haag wiederum wird die Suche nach einer historisch orientierten Monumenta-

Figure 12: J. J. P. Oud, head office of the B. I. M. (Bataafse Import Maatschappij), The Hague, 1938



litéit deutlich. Es waren meist die Bauunternehmer, die für Entwurf, statische Berechnungen und Erstellung der Stahlrahmenkonstruktion verantwortlich zeichneten, aber den Architekten kam die Aufgabe zu, sich um die Ästhetik zu kümmern. Auf diese Weise ergab sich ein subtiler Dialog zwischen der eher neutralen Konstruktion und dem repräsentativen Charakter der Fassaden, bei dem Architekten, Auftraggeber, Baumeister und städtische Behörden zu Wort kamen und wo Technik und Ästhetik zusammentrafen.

Literature

- BANK, J./BUUREN, M. van, 1900: *The Age of Bourgeois Culture*, Assen 2004.
- d. CL., ‘Kantoorgebouw Petrolea’, in: *Bouwkundig Weekblad*, 1925, nr. 13, pp. 197–206
- EEDEN, F. van, *Dagboek*, part III, 1911–1918, Culemborg 1971
- JOBST, G., *Kleinwohnungsbau in Holland*, Berlin 1922
- Kantoren, banken, administratiegebouwen*, Rotterdam 1933
- ‘Kantoorbouw’, in: *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 1915, 16 June.
- KRAAYVANGER, H. M., ‘De Nederlandsche bouwkunst na Berlage’, in: *Nederland bouwt in baksteen 1800–1940*, Rotterdam 1941
- LUTHMANN, J., ‘Overzicht van de ontwikkeling der bouwkunst in Nederland’, in: *Moderne Bouwkunst in Nederland*, part 1, Rotterdam 1932
- ‘Nieuw gebouw De Nederlanden van 1845’, in: *Het Vaderland*, 1924, April 19th, p. 1.



Figure 13: M.A. and J. van Nieukerken, office building of the B.P.M. (Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij), 1915–1917

- RETERA, W., *W. Kromhout Czn.*, Amsterdam 1925.
- WILS, Jan, ‘Handel, verkeerswezen en bouwkunst’, in: *Het Vaderland*, October 7th 1920, avondblad B, p. 2.

Sources of illustrations

All reproductions stem from the collection of the IHAAU/TU Delft or from the private collection of the author.

* The photo rights have been clarified by the author and he has the responsibility

¹ This paper is a shortened version of a longer article that will be published elsewhere. A short overview is given in: *Kantoren*, in de serie ‘Moderne Bouwkunst’) in the series ‘Moderne Bouwkunst’.

² ‘Kantoorbouw’.

³ See: WILS, ‘Handel’.

⁴ RETERA, *Kromhout Czn.*, p. 54.

⁵ See: BANK/BUUREN, 1900, p. 190.

⁶ See: JOBST, *Kleinwohnungsbau*, p. 23.

⁷ See: LUTHMANN, KRAAYVANGER, p. XII and, for the remarks of De Bazel: EEDEN, p. 1503

⁸ See: d. CL., ‘Kantoorgebouw’, pp. 197–206.

⁹ ‘Nieuw gebouw’.

¹⁰ See the typoscript ‘Van leven, bouwen, strijden en ontvangen in een architectenfamilie’, in: NAI, Archive Van Nieukerken, nr. 584, p. 759.