



Blaak 333, a Critical Review of its Second Life

Before addressing the subject of my lecture, I should express some modesty in relation to the other contributions on this conference. Not to say I am the heretic in a group of experts. In most presentation we have seen till now, the subject have been monuments of modernism – who's architectural and historical importance is evident. And we enjoy the ingenuity with which such projects have been restored or even reconstructed. The cases I am going to show have more to do with a day-to-day practice, where the existing may have some value, but not to the degree that the way you should cope with that value is obvious from the start. Moreover, the case of the Blaak tower is an extreme in the spectre of what you can do with an existing premise: We have turned it into a completely new building with its merits and its defaults. Henceforth the word »critical« in the title.

From 1987 until 1992 my office has been involved in the complete renewal and extension of Blaak 333 but I became a member of the design-team only in late 1988, when the design stage was said to be nearly completed. 31 years old, and working free lance three days a week for Kraaijvanger, I soon turned out to be the project architect, changing whatever was conceived before. The result can therefore be seen as the product of my imagination, for better or for worse. Since its completion in 1992, the assessment of the metamorphosis of Blaak 333 has turned for the worse, primarily for two reasons: Firstly, the new façade, made of point-fixed, heat strengthened glass, proved to be deficient. Although only 6 out of 600 panels actually came down (which in a normal industrial process is an acceptable fail-out) the whole building was wrapped in nets, just two months after the official re-opening. I need to say, that our office was not to blame, but it is only after making the glass bridge in our office building, that I can express a certain pride in being the architect not only of one of the most advanced contemporary glass constructions, but also of the greatest glass-disaster in Dutch history.

Secondly, and maybe inspired by examples like Blaak 333, we have seen the rise of a new appreciation for the heritage of the »Reconstruction Period« (de Wederopbouw) that is so typical for Rotterdam – and for our office. The great benefit of this is the growing awareness for the merits of the existing. In spite of our increased wealth, buildings of the past are not easily replaced by something better. But the appreciation sometimes verges towards nostalgia, neglecting the fact that the relished objects of the fifties often have technical problems that need to be repaired. With the knowledge and the position I have now, I would above all challenge the starting points of the project, namely, that the existing building was not seen as a source of inspiration, but as a structure that was cheaper to renew than to replace.

The original building – formerly known as »De Hoofdpoort« – was designed by our office between 1958 and 1961. The concept was derived from the Lever-Sunlight building in New York by S.O.M. It consisted of a concrete skeleton structure with free floors around a central core that contained all the necessary services. Around this structure a thin, single layer of glass in steel window-frames was wrapped, with a system of alternating high and low openable windows. Being the first post-war skyscraper in the area, the building dominated for long its environment.

Of course, the building was much too hot in summer on one side and much too cold in winter on the other. An outside sunscreen was added later, the first automatic system in the Netherlands. In all its simplicity, the design of the façade showed a very attractive combination of transparency, depth, and a rich variety of scale. The design of the ground floor might have been a bit weaker, showing little contrast with the tower above while potentially being the socle. At the corners the façade had been closed like with blinkers. The interior had become obsolete, with an ubiquitous, musty smell of the fifties.

The metamorphosis of Blaak 333 consisted of four main interventions, all of them determined before I became involved: The replacement of the original façade, the reconfiguration of the central core, i.e. the elevators, the building of three more floors and the extension of the ground floor on two strips of no-man's-land adjacent to the building. These extra two meters contain a parking for 57 cars and an extension to the main hall.

Before turning to the façade, I will briefly explain the other parts of the operation: The exchange of two landings and the back-to-back elevators for a central hall with four modern elevators is by any standard an improvement. But it was a radical intervention – big toys for big boys. We learned how concrete can be sawn like plywood. The original structure had naturally strengthened over the years and by means of a light weight prefabricated construction, the maximum we could add were three more floors. The critical factor was a large perimeter beam on the second floor that separated the tower from the somewhat recessed socle. This beam allowed a double distance of the columns on the ground- and first floor (from 3.25 m to 6.50 m). We had to reinforce these columns by adding prefabricated strips. The extension of the 13-floor building by new floors meant that the penthouse on the 14th floor had to be demolished, much to my regret. It was one of the most peculiar and specific places in Rotterdam, containing a large boardroom and a tiny apartment for the building's concierge. The idea of living on the building you are managing and the shamelessly small dimensions of the apartment showed an old fashioned commitment that would deserve preservation. And the penthouse beautifully topped the building. The new plantroom failed to



III. 1
Rotterdam, Blaak 333
during its renewal
(1987-1992)

III. 2
Rotterdam, Blaak 333
designed between 1958
and 1961 (left side)

III. 3
Rotterdam, Blaak 333
after the completion of the
renovation in 1992





acquire the same beauty – let alone it ever could have functioned the same way. I should have realised that the modern way of going about is to integrate the plantroom in the main volume.

The extension of the groundfloor offered an interesting architectural problem: How to connect to a tower, that is by definition a stand-alone. The problem is solved by clad-

ding the new building mass with a well-detailed glazed brick wall. This wall is kept loose from the tower by a curved glass wall on one side, and the more graphic sloping masonry line on the other. The building has become »anchored« in the urban setting, following the parcelling lines of the site. This results in an interesting sequence of spaces, widening from the Keizerstraat to the large open axis of the Blaak. The new ramp behind the old structure plays a crucial role in this, as well as the enhanced transparency of the ground floor in general. The fact that the available money has been directed towards the low rise parts – »where you can touch the building« – does show off. The contrast between high-rise and socle has become greater, also by the reinforcement of the main columns, fulfilling the potentials of the original design.

Back to the façade of the high rise: The three demands were: 1. Light-weight (this prevented any concrete panel to be applied), 2. Cheap (this excluded a curtain wall or a double layered »climate façade«), 3. 30% windows, with a ZTA of 0,39. This indicated the use of reflective glass and made keeping the original transparency virtually impossible.

The contractor – also the client – had gone one step further. He proposed the total concept of the façade: A light-weight eternit panel, insulated and waterproof, with a cladding of enamelled glass panels, point-fixed to aluminium strips. I personally liked the glass and began the design. The light-weight panel suggested a system of holes in a plane façade, like a series of television screens. The final composition consists of four elements: The window, the parapet, the strip between the windows and the strip in the parapet. The latter two just cover the column behind. The parapet is made of grey enamelled float glass, the strip inbetween is of the same colour, but of a different texture (crepy, looking like an orange's skin). The strip between the windows represent the only colour: glass-like turquoise. For the window we tried to come close to normal transparent glass – that is: as far from reflective glass

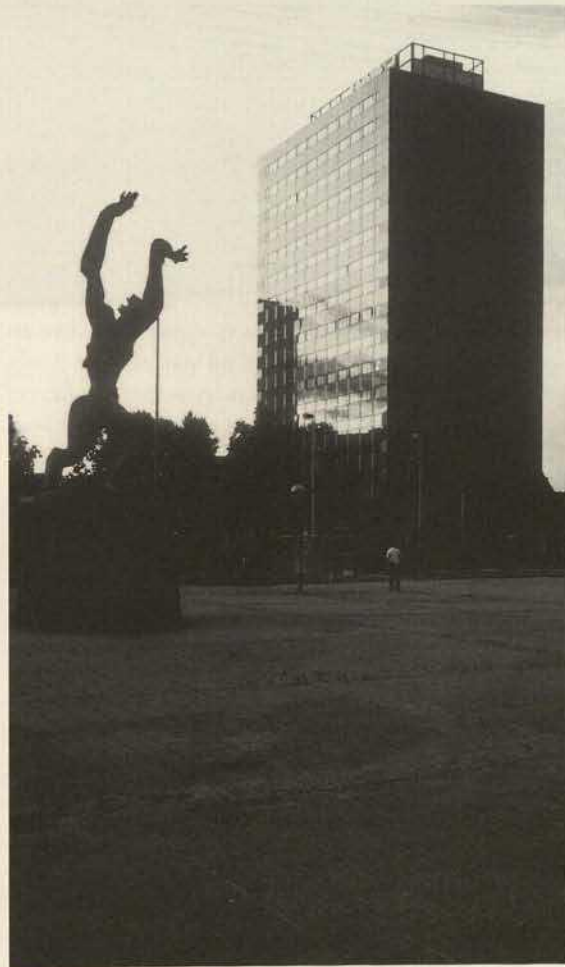


as possible. The solution came from lightly tinted green glass that combined a sufficient ZTA with a high transparency, while avoiding the greyish veil from inside. (Today's glass technology with invisible coatings has advanced incredibly in only five years time, and could have provided the same characteristics without tinted glass).

The effect we pursued was to express both a horizontal and a vertical articulation of the façade. The horizontal is evident in almost any office building with 30% windows, but the vertical had to be created by the alternating strips of crepe and turquoise glass. Because of the neutral grey and moreover the crepe surface, the façade changes with weather conditions and the hour of the day. This dynamic, or rather chameleon-like feature must be known to regular passers-by. Basically the idea was to replace the literal transparency of the original – that means in reality looking into a shallow space of max. 50 cm deep – by a virtual transparency, where columns were »shining through« the outer enamelled skin. So after all the main architectural theme of the building remained the same, i. e. the wrapping of the structure in a thin layer of glass.

Conclusion

Blaak 333 has turned into a completely new building that works much better than the former one. Its climate and inner logistics have improved dramatically as did the interior decoration. I believe the lower level – the socle and the extension – is much better now than before, both architecturally and from an urban point of view. For the tower I regret the loss of depth and the lack of elements that mediate between the scale of a window and the total block. Perhaps most important – as in any renovation project – are the following initial questions: Can the old inspire the new or should it deserve preservation? Does the composition of the building team allow sufficient influence for the designer and room for an open process and the necessary research? Are there any technical requirements that deter-

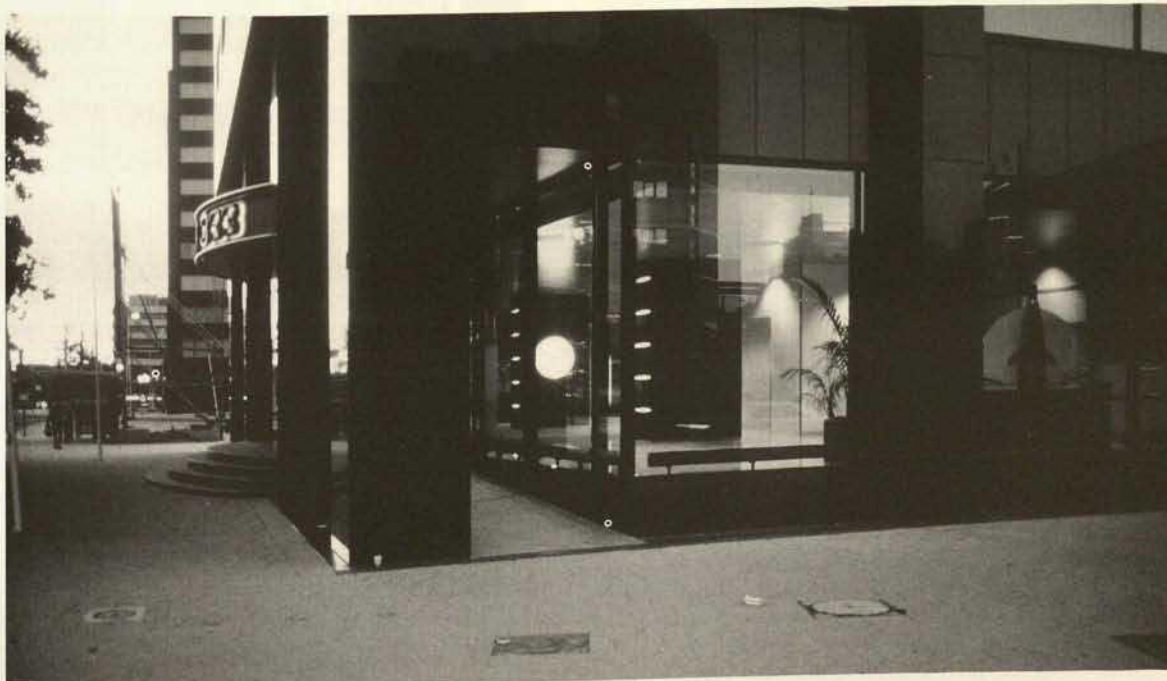


III. 6

Rotterdam, Blaak 333
after renovation: the
original transparency of
the façade is lost

mine the result and might have to be challenged? (In case of Blaak 333 the standard 30% window ratio.)

My conclusion as an architect is not that keeping to the original of mediocre post-war architecture is better than replacing it tabula rasa. But the choice should be a conscious one. Once that choice is made, it generally doesn't matter what you do, but how you do it.



III. 7

Rotterdam, Blaak 333,
the remodelled entrance
and ground floor