Saffierstraat, 1950-1951. © *Beeldbank, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.*

Aldo van Eyck and the Amsterdam playgrounds

BY VINCENT LIGTELIJN

Aldo van Eyck design experiences engendered the development of broader architectural concepts, many of which he further developed in his writings. Aldo van Eyck used various forums to attack an impoverished functionalism that was devoid of qualities such as ambiguity and reversibility.
In the history of architecture, it is rare for architects to reflect on their own work, but design and research, writing and building were intrinsic to Aldo van Eyck. He kept on looking for a formal vocabulary to bring the multiple and the general into order and harmony through his architectural assignments. When he set to work at the Amsterdam public works department the opportunity to regenerate the vacant urban spaces in the city arose through the design of an intricate network of playgrounds. This essay will focus on the architectural qualities of these playgrounds.

Just as one places a bench because one wants to sit, a lamppost because one wants to light the street, a newsstand because one wants to buy newspapers, I am putting a play dome there because children want to play.[1]

Just as Aldo van Eyck (1918–1999) — nestor of Dutch postwar architecture — viewed the specific and the general in each other's light, his design experiences engendered the development of more general architectural concepts, many of which, including "twin phenomena", "place" and "in-between", he elaborated poetically in his writing. A gifted rhetorician, he used various forums to attack an impoverished functionalism that was devoid of qualities such as ambiguity, reciprocity and reversibility.

In the history of architecture, it is rare for architects to reflect on their own work, but design and research, writing and building were twin phenomena that were perfectly natural to Aldo van Eyck.[2]

The most pressing problem he saw himself facing as an architect, in an age poorly equipped to address it, was that of "the great number". Since he did not receive any assignments for urban expansion — projects concerned par excellence with the visual arrangement of great numbers — he had to explore this subject in his architectural assignments. Wherever it made sense, Aldo van Eyck was looking for a formal vocabulary to bring the multiple and the general into order and harmony — something which he thought the classical syntax was not capable of, as it was aimed at the single and the special. He felt himself supported by the "aesthetic meaning of number", which he recognized in the work of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Georges Vantongerloo (1886–1965), Sophie Taeuber (1889–1943) and Richard Paul Lohse (1902-1988), and in the artifacts of tribal "primitive" people whose capacities he described lyrically in the catalog for the exhibition of his work in Rotterdam in 1989:

They alone, the world over, excelled in repetition and variation of element and theme, in serial composition, counterpoint, syncopation, shifting symmetry, multi-centrality and, perhaps most relevant for us today, in the ability to deal with form and counterform as equivalents and, above all, to open the center by avoiding a single or central dominant. Nor are geometric and non-geometric design ever separate categories.[3]

From the outset, Aldo van Eyck strove to ensconce the ideas of the avant-garde at the heart of a contemporary architecture by confronting them with tradition which, despite the tabula rasa of the avant-gardists, retained its value as an expression of a constant human identity that had manifested itself differently across times and cultures.

This perspective emerged in Zürich, where Aldo van Eyck studied and then stayed until after the war. Carola Giedion-Welcker (1893–1979), the protagonist of modern art, introduced him to the art world, bringing him into contact with artists of the ilk of James Joyce (1882–1941), Hans Arp (1886–1966), Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), Max Ernst (1891–1976), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Richard Paul Lohse and Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), giving him first-hand insight into their philosophies. Aldo van Eyck became increasingly convinced that the various "isms" in contemporary culture were expressions of one and the same new reality — that of relativity — within which things came to cohesion through mutual relationships thanks to their equality and relative autonomy. This thus brought an end to subservience to a single central hierarchical principal, creating space for polycentric constellations. The new

relationships were every bit as important to Van Eyck as the things themselves: "Reciprocity belongs to my credo", he said, in a statement that would hold true throughout his life (1918-1999).[4]

This reciprocity was expressed directly in his first playgrounds, which usually consisted of no more than a few simple pieces of playground equipment, benches, trees, bushes and paving grouped together and related to the structure of the city on a basis of equality, using both a classical and a non-classical syntax. The playgrounds subsequently developed into a polycentric network that became increasingly expansive and intricate. Each playground constituted a world in itself, and the hundreds of playgrounds together made up a cosmos whose "great number" had an ennobling and liberating effect both for children and the city.

Start

Immediately after his Zürich period, Aldo van Eyck set to work at the Amsterdam public works department under the leadership of Cornelis van Eesteren (1897-1988).[5] During the implementation of Van Eesteren's Expansion Plan (*Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan*) for Amsterdam, Jacoba Mulder (1900-1988), then head of the design department, addressed and elaborated existing ideas on the creation of public playgrounds. One playground that she initiated, at Bertelmanplein, and for which Aldo van Eyck produced the design in 1947, was so successful that he went on to produce almost 800 designs over the course of 30 years.

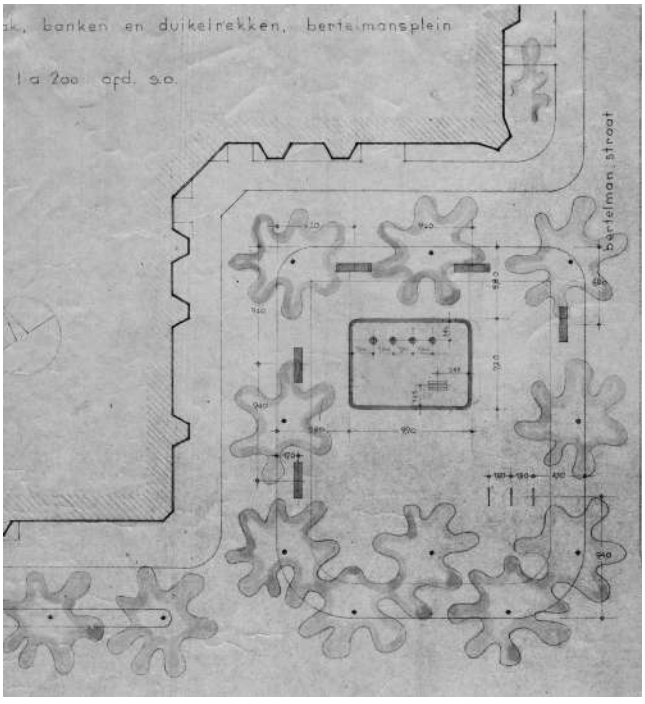
Obviously, Aldo van Eyck was affected by and aware of the influences of his time, in which children became the subject of a renewed interest in the philosophical, psychological, social and historical sciences as well as in literature, film-making and the fine arts. It is also highly significant that he was the father of two small children; he was captivated on a daily basis by a childhood that he could identify with. But rather than analyzing all those influences here, I will focus on the architectural qualities of the playgrounds that were the immediate result of Aldo's creativity.

Bertelmanplein playground, 1947

This square, set out in a classical manner with four trees at the corners and a tree in between, sets the scene for Aldo's first playground. A rectangular sandpit measuring 7.20 x 9.90 m and featuring a sturdy concrete rim with rounded corners is the central element in the playground, with its transversal longitudinal directions. The eccentric positioning of the sandpit in the north-western corner of the site leaves space for a large playing area. The associated diagonal setup is confirmed by the three tumbling bars in the opposite corner of the site.

The framing of the sandpit (not visible on the drawing) and of the square by means of zones of squared paving stones contrasting with the herringbone paving of the large area support the independence and mutual eccentricity of the square and the sandpit.

The positioning of the five benches within the framing of the square may appear rather casual but it is at the same time highly deliberate: the interval of the benches on the western side corresponds with the transverse axis of the site, while the northernmost bench at that side corresponds with the longitudinal axis of the sandpit. The interval of the benches on the northern side, on the other hand, is shifted somewhat — although across a distance that corresponds with the intermediate size of the play tables in the sandpit so that the axis of the interval runs across one of the tables.



01 Bertelmanplein, 1947. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

02 Bertelmanplein, 1947. © *Beeldbank, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.*

While the bench at the eastern side of the square appears to be isolated, it not only constitutes an area together with an adjacent diagonal bench but is also connected with the bench on the other side of the sandpit via a rotational symmetry whose basis coincides with the axis of the eccentrically positioned row of jumping stones — as if they, as the smallest elements of the playground, form the source leading to the configuration of the sandpit, benches and other elements.

However simple and restrained this first playground may be, the play of reciprocal reactions is already in full swing. This project not only represents a precursor to later playgrounds but also to the Burgerweeshuis orphanage, particularly through the superpositions of various equivalent structures and the non-hierarchical use of axes to tack objects and spaces together, as it were.

Work in progress

The playground project took place over time, and could therefore not be based on any dirigistic masterplan. It was a matter of continuously responding inventively to the possibilities in a concrete city where circumstances were liable to differ from time to time and from place to place. Suitable locations for children's play areas had to be discovered piecemeal. Basically, that was in the hands of the municipal services (*Gemeentelijke Dienst*), but Aldo van Eyck contributed actively thanks to his cycling and walking tours through the city, during which he observed all manner of seemingly insignificant and forgotten areas – not only residual areas and clumsily arranged pavements, streets and squares but also glaringly empty lots of land where deportees had once lived during the WWII and whose homes had been demolished by city dwellers in need of fuel.

The public playground project was an entirely new assignment. There were no suitable examples extant for the required playgrounds, but Amsterdam did have a considerable tradition of enclosed/closed playgrounds. These areas, which usually consisted of a large playing area with a sandpit and mobile playing equipment were only open to children who were paid members of a playground association (*Speeltuinvereniging*). Sparsely and haphazardly located in the city, these playgrounds were permanently watched over by a playground supervisor. Aldo van Eyck regarded the new public playgrounds, prominently integrated into residential areas and freely offering space to both parents and children, as essential additions to the traditional playgrounds.

Naturally, these playgrounds brought with them a degree of nuisance for local residents – noise, balls hitting windows and walls, sand blowing around, vandalism, improper use, etc. The municipal services and Van Eyck attempted to address these problems in their selection of locations and in the designs themselves, but they were inescapable in spite of the alterations that Aldo van Eyck made to the plans at the request of the neighborhoods, and the city proceeded with the playgrounds despite the problems they entailed. Unlike the purists, Aldo van Eyck did not regard cities as some kind of heaven on earth. He was convinced that cities were inevitably chaotic with their flexibility and livability and continued to emphasize that the playgrounds' advantages greatly outweighed their disadvantages.

03 Aldo van Eyck, the second of the four Grid panels for CIAM 10, Dubrovnik. Photograph: Violette Cornelius. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

CIAM

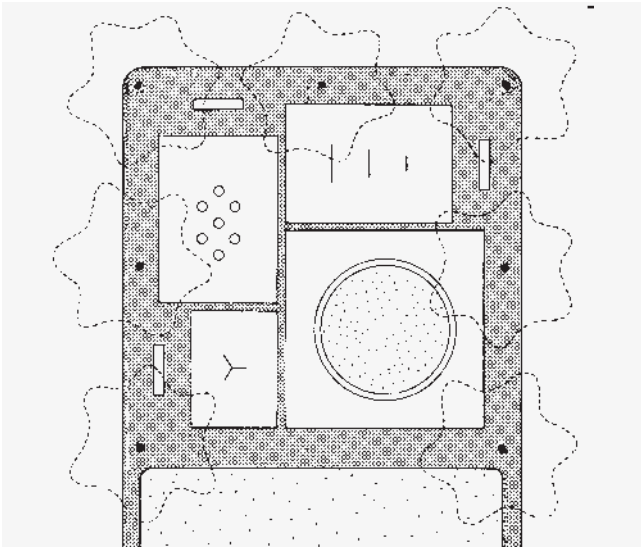
Although the local residents soon realized the significance of the playgrounds, many critics were correspondingly slow to accept them. Even Cornelis van Eesteren, who was a great advocate of the project, had his reservations regarding their expanding nature, objecting for example in 1957 to four playgrounds in the Tuindorp Oostzaan neighborhood in the hope "…that the four squares could be reserved for adults for a change".[6]

However, Aldo van Eyck did receive particular appreciation from his Team 10 colleagues for the playground project that he had presented at the CIAM 10 congress in Dubrovnik in 1956. Peter Smithson (1923–2003) praised "the playground in a city like a grain of sand in an oyster, triggering a transformation and regeneration of the social fabric", while John Voelcker (1927–1972) found them significant

> *…because they reveal the importance of time to the urbanist […] and because they represent a particular scale of work essential to the urbanist for here he may come into personal contact with some of the more positive and vital elements at work in a community: he is able to combine in a single process both creative achievement and research…*[7]

CIAM 10 took place in the same year that the playground in the Zeedijk area of Amsterdam was constructed, at a time when Aldo van Eyck was also working on the Burgerweeshuis orphanage (1955–1960). By then, he had been working on the playground project for eight years before presenting it publicly. He did so not with lengthy analyses, statistics and diagrams as was customary at CIAM, but rather with four directly appealing panels. Photographs and texts, replete with paradoxes and metaphors, illustrated the isolated position of children in the city and the task of the architect-urban planner in this context. Concisely and visually, poetically and provocatively, first and foremost the conflict between city and child and a symbol of a partial

04 Zaanhof 1948-1950. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*



05 Zaanhof, plan, 1948-1950. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

solution were presented, the latter encapsulated in a photograph of children playing in a snowy city followed by a panel showing four of his playgrounds, and an appeal to the authorities:

> *Snow! The child takes over. Yet what it needs is something far more permanent than snow.*
> *If childhood is a journey, let us see to it that the child does not travel by night.*

Never before had children been regarded as fully-fledged residents of the city, or the city regarded as mature before it had taken account of the expressive significance of children.

Van Eyck's approach was at odds with that of CIAM. The Athens Charter[8] drawn up by Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and which served as point of departure for CIAM's postwar planning methods offered him nothing to go on, although he could draw on the Charter's dictates relating to the smaller recreational areas directly required for the residential units, as well as the photographs of the roofs of the units featuring children at play, which supported his ideas about what architecture and children could mean for each other. Nevertheless, from the start of his CIAM membership in 1947 he continued to resist the institution's rigid attitude, as well as Cornelis van Eesteren's way of implementing the theme of the 'functional city' from CIAM 4 in the General Expansion Plan for Amsterdam. It is therefore not surprising that Aldo van Eyck, irrespective of the expansion of his architectural practice — including with the assignment for residences in Cornelis van Eesteren's new district of Slotermeer, in which he clashed with him regarding his parcelization methods — resigned in 1951 from the urban development department (*Dienst Stadsontwikkeling*) and devoted himself to the playground project on a freelance basis until 1978.

A closer look at a few configurations

A selection of four groups of two playgrounds, partly based on their context.

Zaanhof, 1948

Aldo van Eyck now himself introduces the classical special definition of the playground area with four trees at the corners and four in the middle of each side as dictated for the Bertelmanplein. This time, however, the sandpit, tumbling bars, jumping stones and *tourniquet* [merry-go-round] do not feature a framework as at Bertelmanplein but rather areas with their own form and dimensions. Owing to their materials and structure — white concrete tiles — they contrast with the large dark paved area that flows through the four areas in narrow strips. By positioning the playground apparatus at the center of their areas, they constitute a whole with the playground equipment, expanding into an area, going beyond their own boundaries, bringing the playing equipment closer together than their actual separating distance. Each playing object is thus but a single step away from the next one.

Together, the areas make up an unusual windmill pattern built up from two interlocking windmill sails of three areas, each with its own rotational point. The suggested rotations are brought into balance by means of three areas interlocking with the windmill pattern, which are part of the general paving and accommodate a bench, thus also activating the ground plane. The dynamic composition of the elements in the playground and the classical static order of the site boundaries are expressed through their antitheses and brought into synthesis.

Jacob Thijsseplein, 1949

Aldo van Eyck foresaw this playground at the southern part of a square intersected by Heimansweg as having two perpendicularly positioned groups of trees with an open

corner between them, compressing the triangular site. One group of trees consists of two rows of four trees, forming a small lane from the southern corner of the area to the open corner. The other group of trees consists of three rows of six trees, with two rows on the playground and one on the other side of Heimansweg. They constitute a small lane as an extension of the pavement along the road and mark the intersection with the square. The two eccentric trees along the diagonal side are equidistant to the two groups of trees.

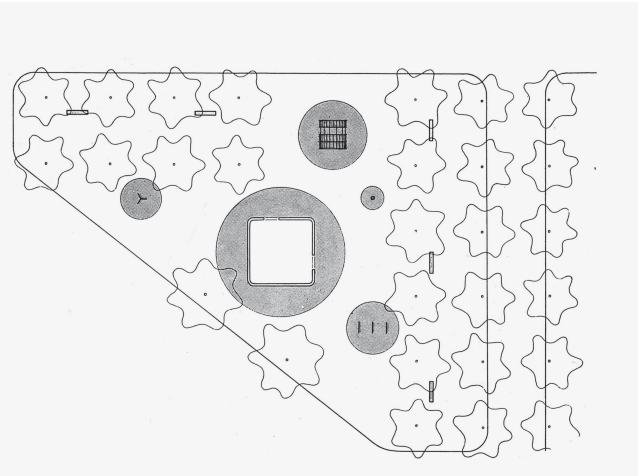
The square has a double center: the sandpit in the focal area of the triangular open area and the climbing dome at the center of the open corner area. The other pieces of playground equipment, such as a *tourniquet*, three tumbling bars and a drinking fountain fly around the large sandpit as freely as juggling balls - deceptively so, though, because their positions are carefully anchored in axes, not directed towards the sandpit and climbing dome but rather at the spaces between each set of trees. In the intermediate intervals, there are benches for sitting on, two along Sleutelbloemstraat and three along Heimansweg. The first-mentioned benches are positioned in front of the tree trunks of the outermost row, and the others behind the tree trunks of the innermost row, allowing them – just like the two groups of trees – to occupy an independent, eccentric position in relation to the square.

The pieces of playground equipment are placed centrally in their circles of clinker bricks within the expanse of white concrete tiles, forming a unit, like a hat and its brim. The circles bring the playground features closer together, preventing them from swimming around loosely in the large playing area. But first and foremost, they activate the ground plane, revolving, narrowing and widening between the circles, as if the interim areas are even more important than the circles with their playground features.

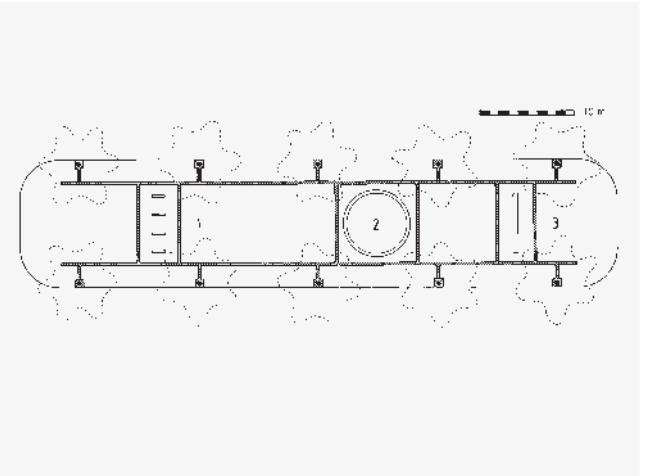
Woestduinstraat, 1949

This apparently simple linear playground is paved with paving stones and flanked on the two long sides by five trees

06 Jacob Thijsseplein, 1949-1950. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

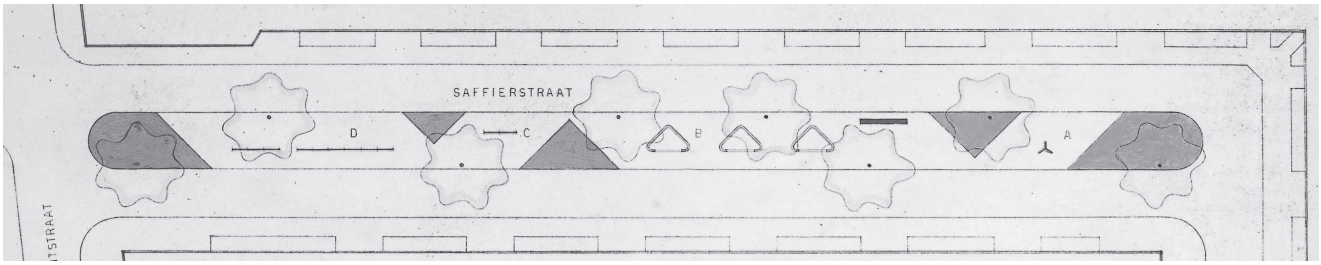


07 Jacob Thijsseplein, plan, 1949–1950.
© *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*



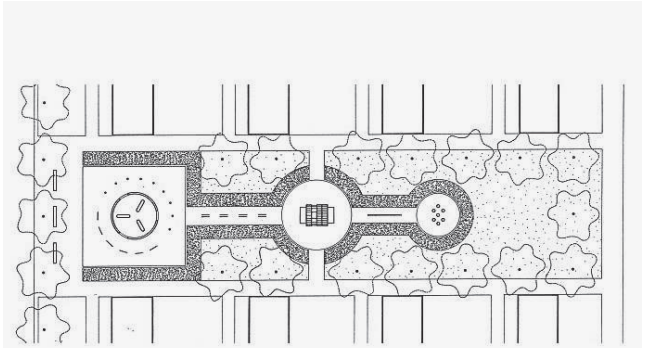
08 Woestduinstraat, project not executed, 1949.
© *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

09 Saffierstraat, 1950-1951. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*



which are perpendicularly edged with clinker brick paving connected by two long clinker brick tracks situated eight tiles inwards equidistantly from the edge. All the clinker brick tracks are a single tile wide, reminiscent of chalk lines drawn by children on pavements to mark out hopscotch courses. These areas, however, function in a slightly different way: between the two long tracks, six cross-connections have been applied which compartmentalize the elongated central area into various smaller areas as variations on the square: a half, a single and a double one. The end areas, sized as a half and a whole square, are delineated by clinker brick tracks on three sides, while the fourth side is open to the surroundings.

Within this dynamic grid, the areas are alternately used for the playground features of tumbling bars, sandpit and bench. The spaces in between are open playing areas. The various elements of the playground are arranged according to their own system and rhythms. The whole is like a simple but fugal score in which the polyphony and varied repetitions of the parts determine the composition – beyond the hopscotch course.



10 Top: Mendes da Costahof, 1959-1960. Bottom: Dulongstraat, 1954-1957. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

Saffierstraat, 1950

Here, the problem of the long, narrow 6 x 120 m plot is tackled by articulating the central reservation lengthwise by means of triangular, dark clinker brick paving that alternately penetrates the playground from the two peripheral roads, activating the area and creating new directions. Unlike the playgrounds described above, these dark areas do not constitute spaces for the playground features, although they do sometimes contain the odd tree or fire hydrant. The *tourniquet*, benches, climbing frames and tumbling bars are positioned alternately on the right and left sides of the playground, with the exception of the three more centrally situated triangular sandpits. Longitudinally, the two large triangles and one small one within the two diagonally truncated head areas form a series with an exciting rhythm. The large white expanse thus has alternating areas that are more or less emphasized, and contractions and expansions. In between these complex rhythms, the rhythm continues of the eight trees which are positioned alternately and deliberately not evenly spaced from each other along the longitudinal sides of the site, traversing the rhythmic white and dark areas. The middle two trees suddenly appear next to each other, on the same side. The rhythm resumes with this surprising turn, contributing to the overall complex rhythm of the playground, and distinguishing it from the continuous repetition of elements in the street scene surrounding the playground, starting with that of the streetlamps.

Dulongstraat 1954, Mendes da Costahof 1957

These classical if not mythical-seeming playgrounds which are secretly hidden and apparently sculpted out of an enormous mass of human-high scrub constitute a family due to their linear linking of elementary spaces and corridors. The round spaces increase in diameter while the corridors shorten, ending as a square space. Placed centrally, the playground features ensure that the walking route is displaced from the axis, relativizing it as a "carrier". Passing along their expressive outer sides, the playgrounds are also dynamic

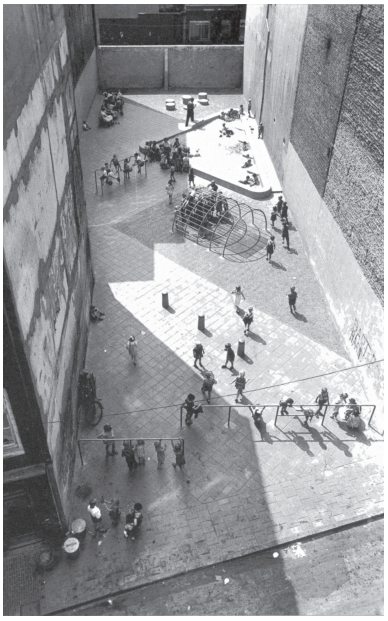
spatially because the high vegetation advances towards you and retreats alternately, causing the street area to widen or narrow. In areas without vegetation, such as at the crosswise paths or the tree-lined corridors, the other side of the road suddenly becomes recognizable.

Dijkstraat, 1954

This playground was built on the site of a house that was demolished during the WWII. The site, measuring around 10 x 25 m, is bordered on the two long sides by high walls. The rear wall of the site is low, and the street side completely open. As in the case of the central strip in Saffierstraat that became an active central space by including triangular areas that penetrate the playground from both traffic lanes, that happens here, too, but in a different way.

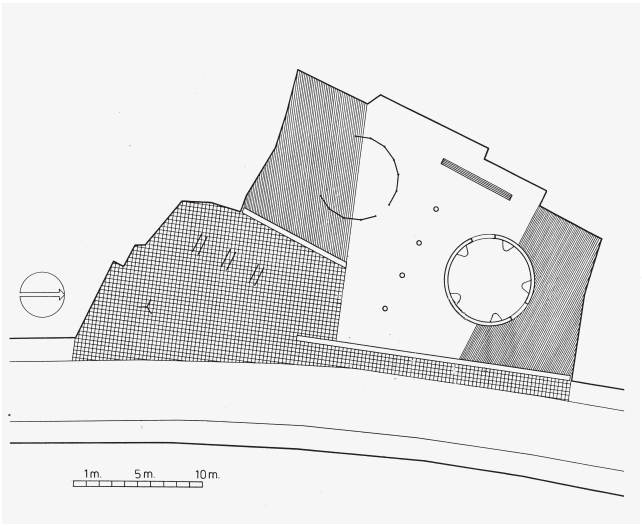
The two floor areas, each with their own clinker bricks and paving stones, and connected along their entire lengths with the adjoining partition walls, are notched together coarsely. The triangular sandpit joins in with this play by shifting partly across the two floor areas. The serrated border thus extended emphasizes the separation as well as the connection between the two areas. The ensuing tension spatially activates the area, which was previously but a lifeless remnant between two buildings.

The playing equipment is positioned eccentrically in the various areas, each feature supporting with its direction the diagonal directions of the floor areas, with the exception of the bench, which is positioned parallel to the partition wall and the two tumbling bars placed at right angles to the partition walls. These frames, placed out of alignment, create an entrance area which is both part of the playground and the street. Between the frames, shifted in relation to each other, an entrance is created that leads you to curve into the playground. At the back, the jumping stones invite you to make rotational movements, which in turn then automatically spin you back towards Dijkstraat.



11 Dijkstraat, photograph, 1954. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

12 Zeedijk, 1955-1956. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*



13 Zeedijk, 1955-1956. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

Zeedijk, 1955

Aldo van Eyck broke open a piece of wasteland where five houses had once stood, overlooking the higgledy-piggledy backs of houses along Oude Zijds Achterburgwal, which had for many years been closed off from the Zeedijk by a high wall around 40 m long. The wall was replaced with a 20 m long brick retaining wall 80 cm high. Together with an equally thick retaining wall perpendicular to the longest side wall (11 m long and 40 cm high) they reduce the large site to two smaller ones, which are connected via a contraction between the two low walls, one of which is directly connected with the pavement, and the other separated from the pavement by the low wall.

Here, too, the paving plays a major role in differentiating the two areas. As a continuation of the pavement, the front area is paved with paving stones, and the main area is given a wedge-shaped paving of white concrete tiles flanked laterally by two areas of dark brown clinker bricks. The borders of the two long sides of the white area are respectively at right angles to the low wall along the building

line, and to the rear boundary, which varies in height. This radiant field can be regarded as the central area around which the three other areas are grouped.

The transverse axis of the area runs over the four jumping posts. As a basis for a rotational symmetry, this axis continues at right angles towards the bench against the rear wall and the three bridging fences in the front area. In a rotational movement, all the playground features, including the sandpit and circle of climbing frames, which increase incrementally in height, are connected in equivalence. The sandpit and tumbling bars grouped symmetrically on opposite sides of the cross axis create a connection across the border of the central space with the two side areas. With its rotation, the *tourniquet* emphasizes the front area as a transitional area between the city and the playground, which has become a dynamic system of shifting balances with the aid of multiple architectural means in an area surrounded on three sides by raggedy borders. After implementation, Van Eyck understood that the configuration could not function as a contra-composition in view of the indefinite nature of the inner space. He was not able to solve this problem using architectural means. With the help of the painter Joost van Roojen (1928-) the messy border of the inner area was transformed into a panorama of color and shape that intensifies towards the center. Aldo van Eyck was so enamored with the effect of the painting that he commented "…one would almost nevermore want to miss the fitful world of the inner area which here suddenly appears over the color explosion of the painting. 'It allows one to see once more!".[9]

Playground equipment

The public playgrounds required a different type of equipment than that used in traditional playgrounds, which featured mobile equipment such as seesaws, roundabouts and swings which were too complicated, damage-prone and risky for the new playgrounds. Aldo van Eyck simply had to design the equipment himself.

Unlike mobile equipment, on which children basically sit still, Aldo van Eyck developed static equipment that literally and figuratively got children moving:

> *Fifteen years ago, we still thought we had to create complicated things for play. Now we set up a simple tumbling frame, and we see the children somersaulting round it like flywheels while talking at the same time! It's a fine thing a human flywheel right there on the street. The tumbling child belongs in the city scene, just like herring carts.*[10]

This statement was preceded by a great deal of design work. To function as intermediary between children and the city, the equipment had to accommodate things that children do by nature such as skipping, jumping, climbing and tumbling as well as stimulating their imagination, and at the same time being included as perfectly normal street furniture in the cityscape.

> *An aluminum elephant is not real, since an elephant is meant to move, and as an object in the street it is unnatural. A child can make anything out of a single form. If a play apparatus represents an animal from the start, the form dictates its construction so much that it puts an end to pure play. There are rods you can't stand on, sharp corners into which your hand vanishes. […] The elementary archetypes such as the dome, igloo and arch are perfectly satisfactory because a child can sit on or under them and can discover all sorts of things in them.*[11]

Aldo van Eyck developed abstract forms in relation to the materials used, drawing inspiration from the restrained yet associative world of form of Arp, Brancusi and Sophie Taeuber. For economical and visual reasons, they had to be limited to a small number of types. Over the course of time, they were expanded and adjusted where necessary. They make up families, of which the concrete sandpits and the aluminum apparatus were the largest.

Sandpits

The sandpits, commonly the focal point of the playgrounds, and which were brought into balance with multiple lighter pieces of playground equipment, consisted of prefabricated elements forming a round or polygonal body. By preventing the outer and inner contours from running parallel, the upper part of the rim took on differences both in dimensions and shape, increasing the multiple aspect of the rim, also in terms of use. If running parallel, concrete jumping stones were placed inside the sandpit or against the inner wall. These stones lent dimension to the sandpit, making it feel larger or smaller. The concrete was given rounded corners and finished with decorative concrete. The same applied to the jumping posts and the round jumping stones (with a diameter of a single step) which were grouped into circles of six around a central stone, or into elliptical circles of seven stones. The epitome of simplicity, both groups elicited circular inward and outward jumps.

Frames

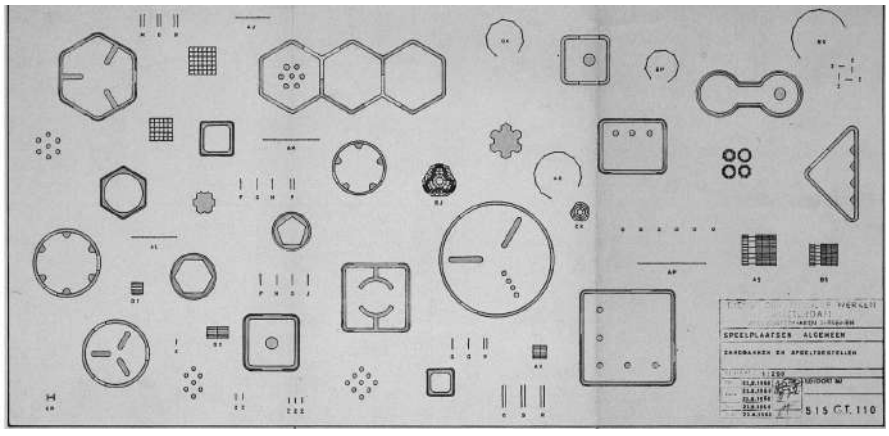
The aluminum frames formed an extended family. Initially, the tubular sections consisted of galvanized iron tubes of a single size (about 4 cm), which were later replaced by smoother and cleaner anodized aluminum tubes in various diameters.

The frames, with their varying heights and widths, were placed both in circular and linear formations, sometimes in close proximity like gymnastics equipment. The climbing arches, which children could climb over or crawl under, were soon supplemented with climbing domes, which constituted both a cave and a mountain. The subsequently developed conical climbing frames were placed next to each other in such a way or assembled together, as in the case of the roundabout, so as to activate the oblique space in between. The only mobile piece of playground equipment that Aldo van Eyck introduced was a simple *tourniquet*. These usually did not last long.

Wood

The wooden family of playground equipment is smaller. Starting as horizontal balance bars on metal supports, the

14 Photographs of playground equipment: roundabout (left); climbing funnels and climbing dome (right). © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*



15 Playground equipment: drawing for the Department of Public Works, 1960 (left); photograph of tumbling bars (right). © *Beeldbank, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.*

trunks, originating as leftover cylinders from veneer plants (without an outer layer), were used as boundary elements. In the late 1960s they were incorporated into "climbing mountains". Together with palisades and flat disks they formed interlocking round and spiraling bodies, with attention falling more on the whole than on the constituent parts, accentuated by the unity of the rough material. This robust new playing apparatus was intended to counterbalance the empty spaces and colossal housing blocks in Amsterdam's new suburbs. This made these playgrounds very different from the earlier playgrounds in the historical city with their more delicately constructed city furniture.

Nevertheless, one such a robust, relatively homogenous playground was built in the inner city, but then in a large, cleared area in the Nieuwmarktbuurt neighborhood (1968). This was to be Aldo van Eyck's only playground with a roof, allowing children to play both inside and outside in all weathers.

Maintenance

Poor maintenance spelled the beginning of the playgrounds' demise. As from the late 1950s, indifference on the part of the urban authorities caused neglect to disfigure the entire fabric, freeing the way for monetization of the sites. There were no neighborhood protests; the postwar baby boom had skipped over the playgrounds, and residents wanted to be able to park in front of the door. The qualities of the playgrounds went unrecognized, as did the attention and care needed for them to function. Children paid the price, all the more so as opportunities for playing became increasingly restricted as car traffic increased. No alternatives were offered.

All the playgrounds have disappeared from the city center, apart from a few unrecognizable remnants. They served as temporary facilities in open plots that were gradually built on after the war. These were Aldo's most intensive playgrounds, having been designed in an intricate context.

A few playgrounds can still be found in a more or less original state in the postwar suburbs around blocks of flats. Most of these playgrounds have fallen into disuse, however, as a result of an aging population, and have now become derelict.

Between these two city areas, most of the playgrounds have been sacrificed to parking areas. Here too, only a

16 Zaanhof playground, stepping stones. In the Zaanhof playground the stones had all the same height, elsewhere they had different heights. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

17 Wooden climbing mountain, Molenwijk, 1969. © *Beeldbank, Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.*

18 Nieuwmarkt, city center, 1968. © *Archive Aldo + Hannie van Eyck Foundation.*

few playgrounds remain, not counting the subsequently constructed play dome, tumbling bar and conical frames in the side garden of the Rijksmuseum national museum, which are devoted to art, not children.

Coda

The playgrounds with their playing equipment, precisely arranged among themselves and in relation to the city due to their general significance, constituted focal points from which the city "rejuvenated". As such, the project formed an urban reconstruction process *avant la lettre* with an experimental start and an open ending. The ending came soon, though. The playgrounds have almost entirely disappeared: "as if the children too have gone".[12]

The playgrounds, however, were not only intended for children. As urban features, they were designed as spaces for everyone. Did Aldo van Eyck not always see the child as a metaphor for ourselves?

Heritage

A number of buildings in Amsterdam, whose inner city has been declared as a UNESCO world heritage site, have been awarded the status as a municipal and national monument. In that context, their new destinations were supposed to be carefully considered in respect of the possibilities afforded by the old construction. Their absorption capacity was limited, as was justifiably argued in the guidelines of the city's heritage policy.

Things proceeded very differently in the case of Aldo van Eyck's Tripolis office complex (1990-1994), which finds itself in a miraculous symbiosis with the adjacent orphanage now listed as a national monument on the periphery of the new and lucrative Southern Axis (Zuid-As) office area.

Motivated by profit-making, investors and project developers submitted a proposal for the conversion of the acquired Tripolis complex. The design literally and figuratively steamrollers the complex, swamping it with high-rising office blocks, depriving the Orphanage of breathing space.

In a completely impenetrable municipal decision-making process, this application was dealt with simultaneously with the application by the Heritage Association (Heemschut) to declare the Tripolis Complex a municipal monument – and here comes the apotheosis:

Both applications were approved in combination by the "*Commissie Ruimtelijke Kwaliteit*" [Commission for Spatial Quality] (sic), after which the Tripolis complex was mutilated and then given the status of monument! An upside-down world. After the playgrounds, we are now set to lose the Tripolis complex as well due to the indifference of the municipal authorities and the scourge of the moneymakers, and with it the Orphanage. A precedent is being created for subsequent applications for protected monument status — **docomomo** has its work cut out!

Notes

1 Aldo van Eyck, "On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds", in Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven (Eds.), *Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947–1998,* Vol. 2 of *Aldo van Eyck Writings,* Amsterdam, Sun, 2008, 113.

2 Vincent Ligtelijn, *Aldo van Eyck Werken*, Bussum, Uitgeverij Thoth, 1999; *Aldo van Eyck Works/Werke,* Basel/Boston/Berlin, Birkhäuser, 1999.

3 Aldo van Eyck, "The radiant and the grim", in *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, Vol. 2, ibid., 648.

4 Aldo van Eyck, "Ex Turico aliquid novum", in *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, Vol. 2, ibid., 14–15.

5 From 1929 to 1959 Van Eesteren (1897–1988) was Head of the Department of Public Works in Amsterdam. He was a member of "De Stijl" before he became president of CIAM (1930–1947).

6 Ingeborg de Roode, "De speelobjecten: duurzamer dan sneeuw", in Liane Lefaivre and Ingeborg de Roode (Eds.), *Aldo van Eyck, de speelplaatsen en de stad*, Amsterdam, NAi, 2002, 100, note 12.

7 John Voelcker, "Polder and Playground", in *Architects Yearbook*, No. 6, London, 1955, 89–94. Reprint in *Aldo van Eyck, Works*, ibid., 296.

8 The Constations (Observations) of the fourth CIAM meeting were idiosyncratically drafted by Le Corbusier in 1933. In 1941 he revised the text, in order to bring about a rapprochement with the Vichy regime of Pétain. In 1943 his Constatations were provided with a new, "politically correct" preface in order to have them published in occupied Paris as "La Charte d'Athenes", with an eye forwards towards the urban reconstruction that would follow the imminent victory of the Allied Forces. See: Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism 1928-1960*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2000, 116, 153-156.

9 Aldo van Eyck, "the Amsterdam Playgrounds", in *Aldo van Eyck Works,* ibid.,72.

10 Aldo van Eyck, "On the design of play equipment and the arrangement of playgrounds" in Vol. 2 *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, ibid., 114.

11 Ibid.

12 Aldo van Eyck, "the Amsterdam Playgrounds", in *Aldo van Eyck Works,* ibid.,72.

References

DE ROODE, Ingeborg, "De speelobjecten: duurzamer dan sneeuw", in Liane Lefaivre and Ingeborg de Roode (Eds.), *Aldo van Eyck, de speelplaatsen en de stad*, NAi, Amsterdam, 2002, 100.

LIGTELIJN, Vincent, *Aldo van Eyck Werken*, Bussum, Uitgeverij Thoth, 1999.

LIGTELIJN, Vincent, *Aldo van Eyck Works/Werken,* Basel/Boston/Berlin, Birkhäuser, 1999.

LIGTELIJN, Vincent; STRAUVEN, Francis (Eds.), *Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947-1998,* Vol. 2 of *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, Amsterdam, Sun, 2008.

MUMFORD, Eric, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism 1928-1960*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2000, 116, 153-156.

Vincent Ligtelijn

Architect and former lecturer in Housing and Urban Design at the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University, in the seventies in association with Van Eyck. His articles and lectures concern architectural items of all times and places, his books monographs about Josep M. Jujol and Aldo van Eyck.