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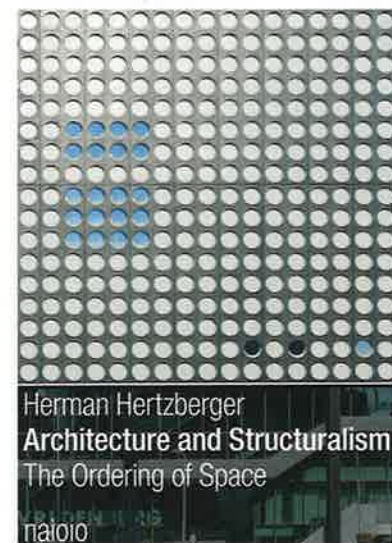
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## Book Herman Hertzberger Architecture and Structuralism – The Ordering of Space

NAI, £33

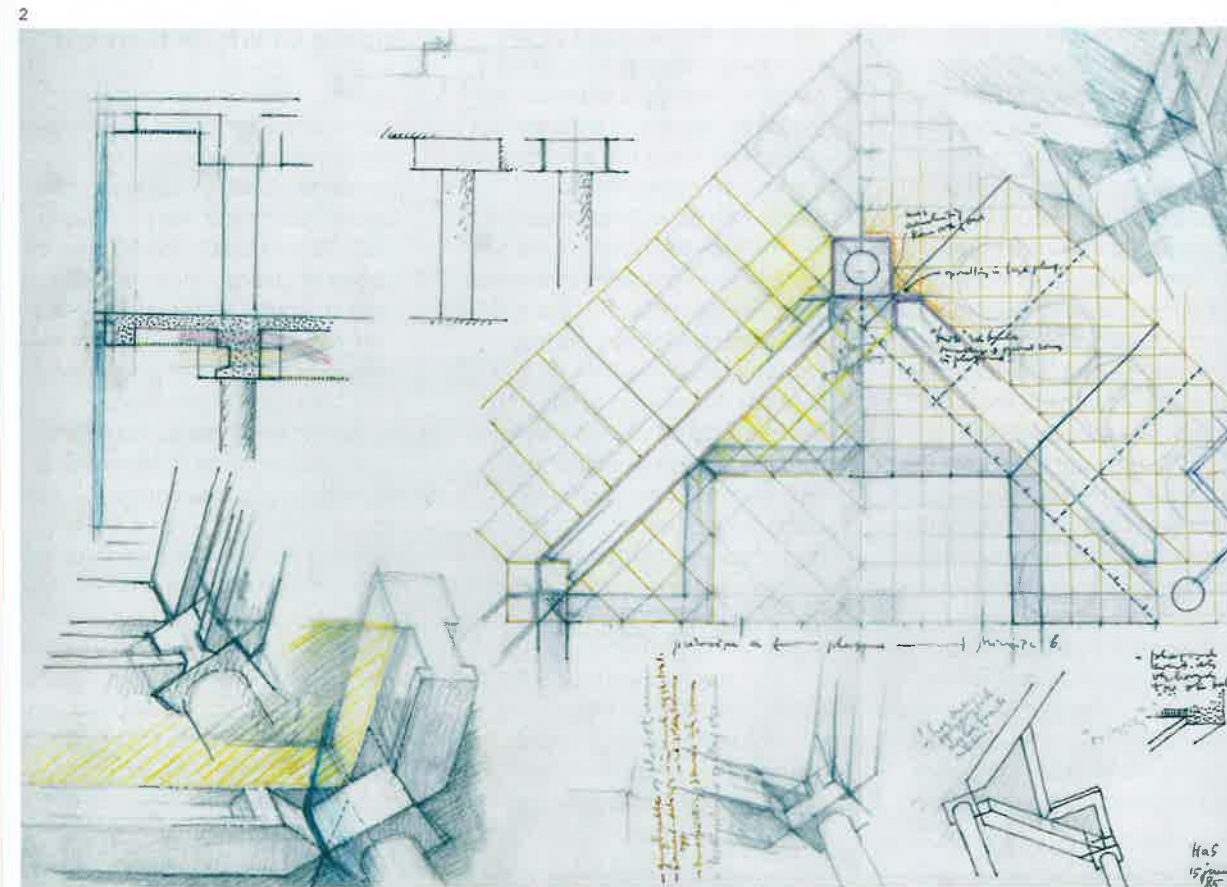
Review by Thomas Wensing



The post-war reconstruction of the Netherlands was in large measure dominated by the opposition between the brick traditionalism of the Delft School and the modernism of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, 1928–59). Although the architecture associated with CIAM is often perceived as doctrinaire, truth of the matter is that projects could vary wildly, and that the conferences were a platform from which young architects were allowed to challenge established views.

One of the results of this open climate is the way in which Team X and the Dutch Forum group confronted the established statistical and functionalist urban planning methods and formulated a response to CIAM, which came to be known as structuralism. Structuralism is usually a cellular architecture, often employing complex grids, and inspired by anthropological and primitive fascinations. The first major canonical work of the movement was the orphanage by Aldo van Eyck on the outskirts of Amsterdam (1955–60); its plan of various age groups combined in a polycentred net of square modules.

The aim was to create a sense of place and identity for the children, with carefully designed thresholds between outside and inside, between public and private, between individual and group. With van Eyck as the theorist and provocateur of the group, it was Herman Hertzberger (born 1932), however, who brought structuralism into the mainstream, and it became the architecture of choice of the corporate and government institutions of the Seventies' welfare state.



Renowned for his humane and imaginative school buildings, and especially famous for the original and somewhat anarchistic Centraal Beheer insurance building (1967–72), Hertzberger has long since been the éminence grise and moral conscience of Dutch architecture. The book *Architecture and Structuralism – The Ordering of Space* is intended as Hertzberger's definitive text on structuralism, and is at once a synopsis of his earlier books, such as *Lessons for Students in Architecture I & II*, as well as an effort to enrich and bring his theoretical framework up-to-date.

Structuralism first developed in the 19th century in the field of linguistics. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) proposed to study the structure of language rather than how it developed over time. When doing so, he made the distinction between speech (or how language is used individually) and language (that is, the system or structure that enables communication). The theory implies that language is an overarching structure of relations that enables individual use and interpretation. In the context of architecture the

difference between speech and language is used by Hertzberger as a metaphor for the idea that structuralism in architecture is able to provide a more permanent framework (language) against which individual interpretation and changes over time (speech) can take place. In addition to linguistics and Saussure, he points especially to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss (1908–2009) as an inspiration: 'The term [structuralism] is closely bound up with Lévi Strauss: his ideas — especially where they dealt with the aforementioned relationship between

the collective pattern and individual interpretations — was particularly inspiring for architecture.'

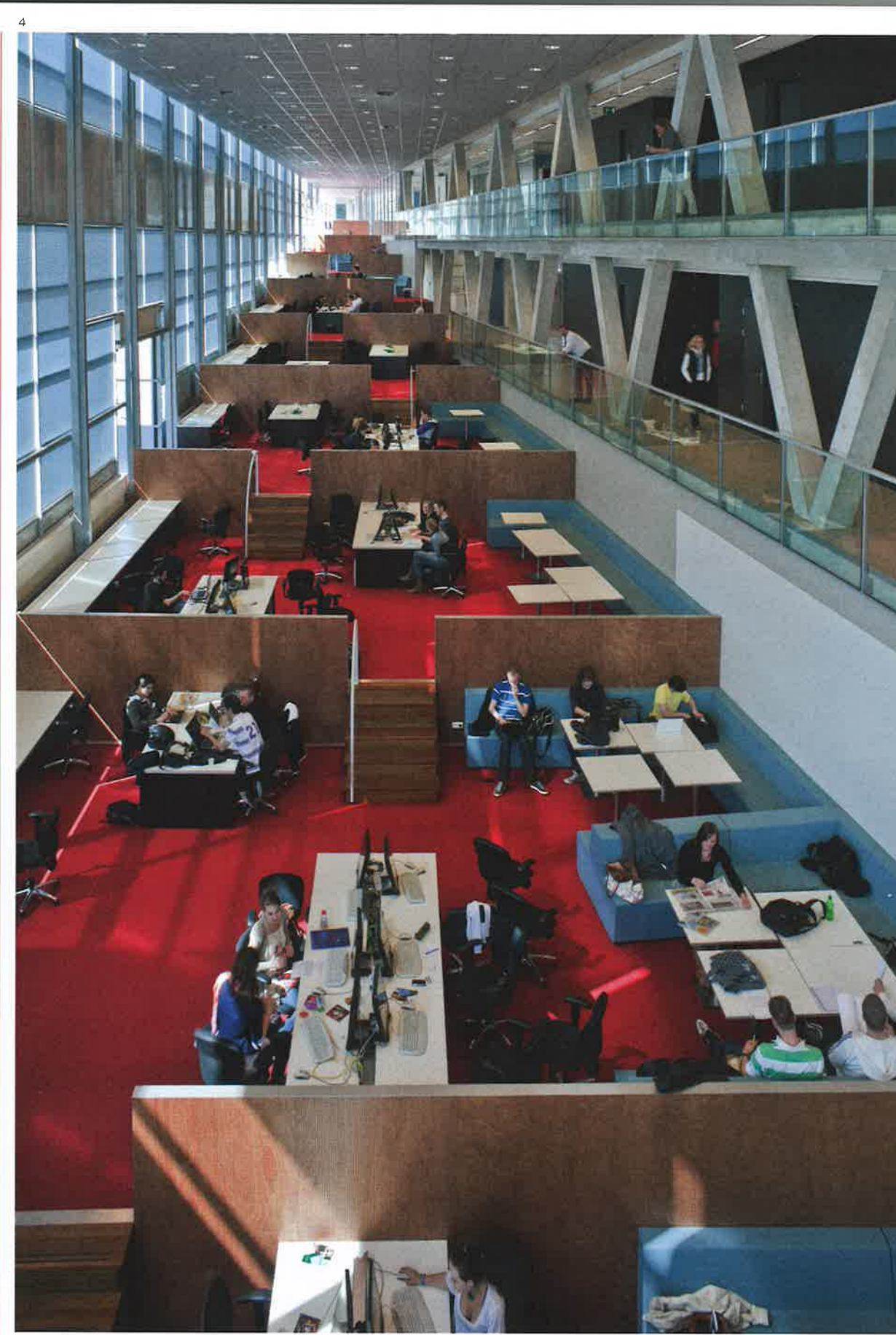
This brief explanation of structuralism points to the fact that the transfer of the term from one branch of science to another has meant it has become a word which has come to mean different things in different fields, and he laments that the use of the word has moved away from its anthropological roots and social intentions.

Hertzberger admits that 'structuralism obfuscates more than it clarifies'. Architects often use the word in a literal, analogical or visual manner. For instance, it can refer to buildings in which great emphasis was put on structure or which are characterised by labyrinthine plans. The book reminds us that structuralism was intended in a more fluid, empowering and liberating way, with buildings seen as having the capacity to become self-regulating systems.

The infinitely expandable grid patterns, often organised along internal streets and atria, were intended to accommodate the more democratic and egalitarian organisational structures of the Sixties and Seventies, and to create a world of potentialities. The bare structural system, often in exposed, prefabricated concrete, was usually complemented with an infill of panels and represented a return to archetypal and primordial architectural elements, and a backdrop against which inhabitants and users were invited to self-expression and participation.

Hertzberger is passionate, and his style is somewhat colloquial. His writings are at their most lucid when he explains his thinking in an illustrative manner, in other words when he uses his own or other buildings as examples to make a point. His theoretical explanations could be clearer, I find, but this observation may be borne by the fact that structuralism is such a broad term to begin with.

The book is strongest at the moments when it breaks a lance for



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a truly democratic balance between the individual and the collective, between human beings and the power structures we inherit and inhabit. It critiques the increasing privatisation of recent decades, and calls out for a tempering of private interests, although it remains unclear as to how this is supposed to happen.

It is perhaps indicative of the seismic political shift to the right that some of Hertzberger's more famous works will be altered beyond recognition.

In the more positive scenarios this is done by the office itself, and however successful these transitions may be, the underlying fact remains that the social climate has changed dramatically. Governments no longer build large old people's homes, are pulling back from building housing and schools and have moved away from increased democratisation and civil participation.

Democracy is only useful when

it is used as a cloak to service elites and the idea does not combine well with neo-liberal economic and fiscal regimes. It is only in recent years, with the massive challenges of climate change and growing inequality that inspired grass-root movements, that the timeless ideals Hertzberger espouses may yet have a second life.

1 – Raffaello School Rome (2005–12)  
2 – Sketches for Herman Hertzberger's Ministerie van Sociale Zaken (1988)  
3 – Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer insurance building in Apeldoorn (1967–72)  
4 – NHL University in Leeuwarden (2004–10), by Hertzberger