

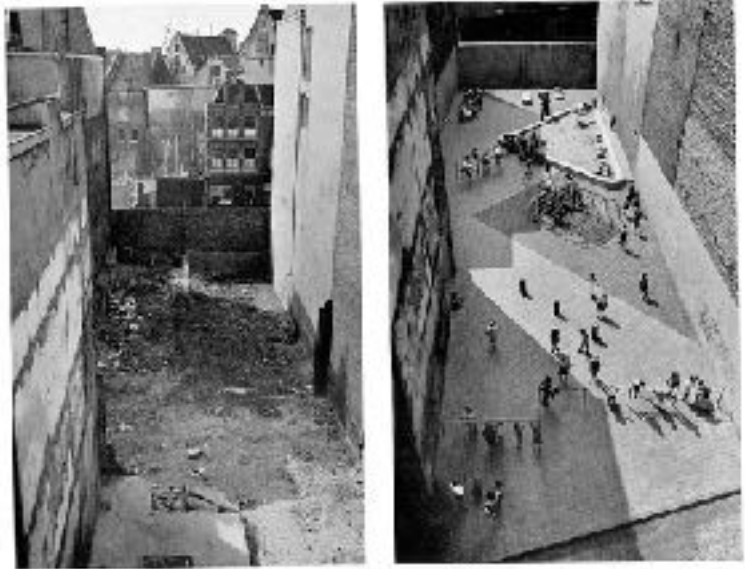
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SOMETHING MORE PERMANENT THAN SNOW

To consider the city is to encounter ourselves.
To encounter the city is to rediscover the child.
If the child rediscovers the city,
the city will rediscover the child – ourselves.
LOOK SNOW!

A miraculous trick of the skies – a fleeting
correction.
All at once the child is Lord of the City.
But the joy of gathering snow off paralyzed
vehicles is short-lived.
Provide something for the human child more
permanent than snow – if perhaps less
abundant.
Another miracle.

Aldo van Eyck



As the subject of politics in architecture has gained a new urgency with the current global political instability and its inevitable projections to the built environment, Aldo van Eyck's *galaxy of playgrounds*¹ are great source of inspiration. Between 1947 and 1978, Aldo van Eyck changed the destiny of a whole generation of a post-war city, Amsterdam. He did this by designing over 700 playgrounds and introducing imagination to a state of dereliction. By injecting tiny utopias inside the existing frayed tissue of the neighborhood, he revitalized the street both from the destructive memories of the war and modernist functionalist architects approach of the time. He did this by simply believing in a ludic man, who is a higher evolution of the current “traditional working man of industrial society.” Even though raising ludic men seems like a naive ambition, at that time it served as a complex political device. Playgrounds functioned as a crystallization point

of cultural critique where as every utopia does, it proposed regulation and imagination, political correctness and social fantasy at the same time.

In order to fully comprehend the radical approach, first one should be conscious of what play means. Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga discusses the necessity of the play element of culture and society in his book *Homo Ludens* written in 1938. He defines play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means."² As he describes it, the social aspect of the play is already inherent in the definition. Huizinga suggests that play cultivates culture; that culture grows out of play. The culture of play is also captured by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1560, in his painting *Children's Games*. He depicts 230 children playing with 83 games. As he is giving the beholder an encyclopedic view of the children's games of his time, he is also blurring the lines between citizen and children. The portrayal of children are almost like miniature adults. In the painting, the city becomes the space of play thus culture, as children become the true citizen.



Children's Game, Pieter Bruegel the Elder,

This notion is quite significant in Aldo Van Eyck's work as he blurs the lines between *the child, the city, and the artist*. He describes this particular relationship between children and the city as "The children exist in spite of the cities: the cities persist in spite of the children. Both survive, the children with, the cities without identity."³ For him, if the city is not meant for children then it's not meant for citizens either. In other words, the city can be human only if it is designed for children. Only then city accommodates Bruegel's children, Huizinga's Homo Ludens, and thus play breed culture.



The density and the diversity of the urban setting provide a stimulus and a milieu for the exploration of the notion play. Public space provides a special realm for play as the city constantly produces memories and arouses imagination at the same time. The city can accommodate ludic men because the characteristics of the city (ambiguity, contradiction, exposure, risk, provocation, unpredictability etc.) overrides social order and control. The city functions as men continuously make and remake himself, as Mumford puts it "In the city, the making and remaking of selves . . . is one of its principal functions . . . each urban period provides a multitude of new roles and an equal diversity of new potentialities. These bring about corresponding changes in laws, manners, moral evaluations, costume, and architecture, and finally, they transform the city as a

living whole."⁴ So each new role has the potential to change the city thus the social constructs that come with it. It is essential to understand that this potential lies in people while the city provides the stage. It is also about what Lefebvre defines as *the right to the city* which "stipulates the right to meeting and gathering; places and objects must answer to certain 'needs' generally misunderstood, to certain despised and moreover transfunctional 'functions': the 'need' for social life and a centre, the need and the function of play, the symbolic function of space."⁵ It is not just the function but the need of play that the city provides or even triggers with its provocative

environment. Thus, the very act of play in the constraints of the city becomes inevitably socially and politically charged. This endless potential that city provides is important to truly comprehend van Eyck's approach to the existing city and how he accepts and takes advantage of the constraints that come with.

As the city holds the power of creativity, Van Eyck sought to find where the city leaks freedom; the notion of in-between. Similarly to the mental and psychic (in-between) nature of man, the city produces transitions, thresholds, spaces of relation. As man fluctuates between the need of protection and the desire of freedom, the city produces interstitial spaces to accommodate the ludic man. He describes this as "To establish the in-between is to reconcile conflicting polarities. Provide the place where they can interchange and you re-establish the original twinphenomena Two worlds clashing, no transition. The individual on one side, the collective on the other."⁶ This liminality not only suggests an endless potential of encounters, confrontations, and conflicts but also blurs the lines between interior and exterior. As city and house are twin phenomena, interior and exterior are not polar but ambivalent realities. In his lecture in TU Delft for International Design Seminar (Indesem) in 1987, he shares a quote from Cezanne "Nature is on the inside. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope. I am immersed in it. After all the world is all around me-not in front of me." This temporal character



and liminal approach was radically different than the tabula rasa approach of modernism. Even Giedion's *space* and *time* become *place* and *occasion* in van Eyck's theory: "Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space in the image of man is place, and time in the image of man is occasion."⁷ Playground, in this case, served him as a perfect in-between space to combine place and occasion and further explore their potential.

Aldo van Eyck's ideas on interstitial space found its physical presence in the traumatized post-war city. Dutch cities were in a state of dereliction after World War II, the society was emotionally wounded. Problematic housing stock, dysfunctional infrastructure created an emergency for planners. The structuralist, functionalist, rationalist approach of that time concentrated on the ravaged urban tissue but not the society that has just come out of a war and experienced famine. "Functionalism has killed creativity", Aldo van Eyck stated in an article in the Dutch magazine *Forum*, "it leads to a cold technocracy, in which the human aspect is forgotten. A building is more than the sum of its functions; architecture has to facilitate human activity and promote social interaction."⁸ The society's concerns were distinctly shifted after the war thus the solutions were a lifeless expression of urban planning that ignored the identity of the inhabitants and the potential of urban forms. With the birth peak of the post-war baby boom, no space was available for accommodating children neither inside nor outside. In this chaotic



Dutch Hongerwinter, 1944



One of van Eyck's playgrounds, after 1947

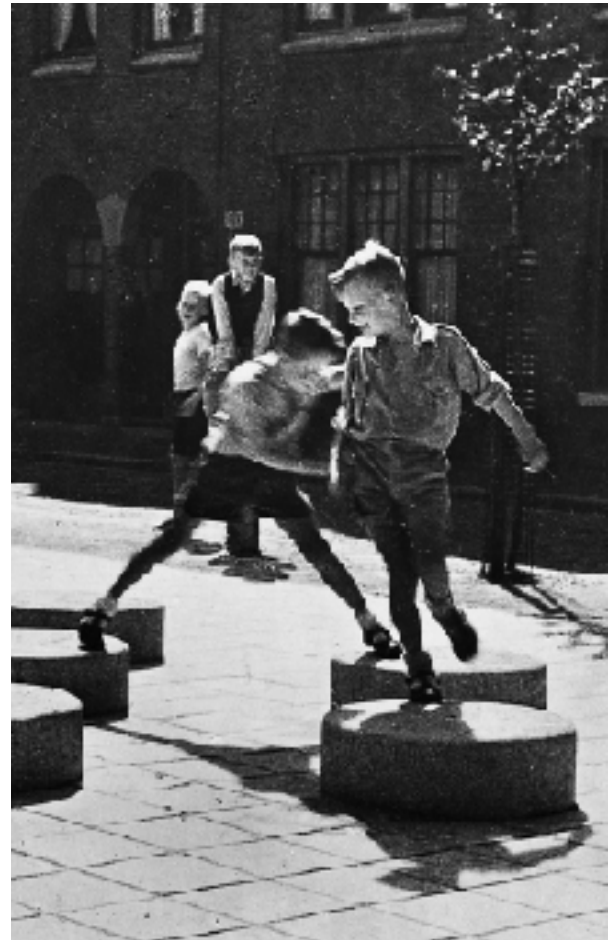
situation, with producing over 700 playgrounds, taking play as a serious matter and seeing the potential of the liminality produced a significance beyond just a creative solution in the times of crisis.



The culture of play sprouted through out the city as the vacant, derelict sites turned into playgrounds. The idea of in-between easily mold into the existing tissue and it had the most compelling effect in the frayed tissue of Amsterdam. These playgrounds were all site-specific and unique but they never created a world within a world. On the contrary, each playground worked as a field that dissolves into the world. Because they were never fenced and van Eyck always broke the limits of the non-hierarchical composition, they easily became the part of the tissue. As he kept the urban character by using metal and concrete, playgrounds easily disappeared into everyday life. With the minimalist approach, he achieved the notion of infill, something which interacts minimally in relationship to specific conditions which one faces. The design organized around principles of geometry, inspired from formal investigations of Dutch Modernists of 1920s such as Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian. The minimalistic design stimulated the imagination of the children, a different conception of space where they can freely appropriate and interpret. The mute abstraction didn't impose any orders or rules because the design didn't "aim to show what they are and how they should be used, they rather suggest what they could

be”⁹. As the minimalist approach avoided any association with other inherited knowledge of objects or rules of play, modularity helped endless combinations to take place. The diversity of ways in which children interact with the surrounding stimulated the sociocultural environment.

It is incredibly inspiring to see how a theory, a speculation can be physically designed into something that has so much power in politics of space. It’s not just how theory, design, and politics can be merged that is intriguing but also ways in which such small actions can have an active political and ideological effect on both the city and the society. These playgrounds represent one of the most emblematic of architectural interventions that truly transformed a whole generation. Van Eyck did this through liberating Homo Lumens, believing in the provocative potential of the city and never forgetting that people have the true right to the city. It is crucial and urgent to learn from his ideology and embrace the power of architecture in today’s political instability. After all, it’s about seeking for the in-between and providing something more permanent than snow.



- 1 Lefaiivre L., Tzonis A. (1999). *Aldo van Eyck: Humanist rebel*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.
- 2 Huizinga, J (1980). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- 3 Eyck, Aldo van, et al. *The Child, the City and the Artist: an Essay on Architecture: the in-between Realm*. SUN, 2008.
- 4 Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961.
- 5 Lefebvre, Henri, et al. *Writing on Cities*. Blackwell Publishers, 1999.
- 6 Smithson, Alison Margaret. *Team 10 Primer*. Standard Catalogue, 1966.
- 7 Aldo van Eyck, 1959
- 8 Aldo van Eyck (1959) ‘Het Verhaal van een Andere Gedachte’ (The Story of Another Thought). In: Forum
- 9 van Lingen A., Kollarova D. (2016). *Aldo van Eyck: Seventeen Playgrounds*. Eindhoven: Lecturis.