

ALDO VAN EYCK, VISUALIZER OF PLACE

Arnold Wentholt

**'I will not find out what things really mean.
Because when I do, half the meaning is lost!'
(Aldo van Eyck, 1967)**



Aldo in Loenen aan de Vecht between Corneille painting and Dogon Mask. Photograph Pierre Alechinsky ca. 1964.

Aldo van Eyck called the leading figures of the avant-garde the "Great Gang" who advocated a new view, a new perspective, opposed to the age before. As an architect, he would refer to this movement several times in his numerous articles in his struggle against the hollow functionalism that dominated post-World War II architecture. He saw the avant-garde of the interwar period as a turning point, in which for instance relativity and the impact of time, needed to be given new expression in architecture. He assigned a significant role to the art and material culture of 'distant' and archaic peoples in this regard.

Early years

This receptiveness to the ideas of the avant-garde didn't come out of the blue. His exceptional background and upbringing were clearly at least partially responsible. His father, the poet Pieter Nicolaas van Eyck, the foreign correspondent for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (NRC) in London between 1919 and 1935, decided not

to send his two sons to a regular English school, but to the King Alfred School, established on an idealistic basis. Self-development is paramount here. Art in all its manifestations, crafts, and sports are encouraged in the child. Aptitude is encouraged, not required, and not imposed. It's worth pausing to consider the anti-authoritarian structure of the King Alfred School during the time Aldo attended under the inspiring leadership of Joseph Wicksteed. This headmaster was a great admirer and interpreter of William Blake, an 18th-century mystical poet who was dismissed in his day as anarchistic and controversial. The foundation of education inspired by the Dalton Plan dovetailed remarkably well with the ideas expressed, for example, in Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience," contradictions that must be overcome, such as in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." Opposite poles can be overcome through experience and brought into unity, as Aldo elaborated in his later discussions of architecture as "in-between" and "twin phenomena." "To establish the in-between is to reconcile conflicting polarities. Provide

the place where they can interact and you re-establish the original twin phenomena.” (Van Eyck 2008 (1962), *The Child, the City and the Artist*, p. 61) Aldo attended King Alfred until he was 14, after which his father sent him to a Quaker-run secondary boarding school, Sidcot, a more classically structured school but which also focused on expressive development. At home in London with his parents, his artistic passion was further fostered by reading and reciting poetry from classical and, for the time, contemporary literature. Weekends provided opportunities for exhibitions, musical performances in various ensembles, and theater. While his father absorbed the works of the poet William Blake and the philosophy of Spinoza, in which the hierarchical order of the world was dissected and replaced by an animated world, Aldo found his time at school and at home remarkably connected. Wise and well-read at a young age, he arrived in the Netherlands at the age of 17, where his father had been appointed professor of Dutch Language and Literature at Leiden University. However, his progress after secondary school was hampered by the fact that the Delft University of Technology refused to accept his English diploma, forcing Aldo to first attend the Secondary Technical School in The Hague. This was the period in which Aldo traveled with companions throughout Europe, first to Scandinavia, and later twice to Northern Italy, to experience firsthand the classical art of the Renaissance, which he had then only known from books. The squares in cities like Florence and Venice attracted his particular attention. In 1938, the year he received his diploma, his father saw an opportunity to enroll him at the Swiss Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (1938-1942)



Aldo and Hannie in front of their apartment in Zurich, ca. 1944

in Zurich. He would stay there for eight years, marrying fellow student Hannie van Roojen in 1943 and gaining experiences that would prove to be lastingly influential.

Zurich – the firebird

Aldo van Eyck is known as a relatively autonomous, sometimes unconventional, and by some described as rebellious architect, who perhaps for this very reason exerted a significant if not lasting influence on architecture in the second half of the 20th century. We could pinpoint the source in the unique constellation under which he spent his youth. The seed sown in London fell on fertile ground years later in Zurich when, during a gallery visit, he met art historian Carola Welcker. During the war, Zurich served as a refuge for artists fleeing the occupied territories. Even before the war, the city boasted a modest but vibrant art scene and a representation of the avant-garde, whose most important propagandist and driving force was the art critic Carola Welcker. Married to architectural historian Sigfried Giedion, their house in Dolderal was a hub of poets, artists, architects, and writers. After their first meeting, Aldo and Hannie became regular guests at soirées, where he stood out for his pointed observations on art and politics, while his extensive reading, referencing striking passages from literature, made him stand out. He is a beacon of light here, like a flame in the dark war years, and was therefore called “the firebird” as Carola Welcker recalls. Here, he meets Hans Arp, among others, whose organic archetypes in drawings and reliefs he absorbs so deeply that he creates a relief based on an Arp drawing. The artist is so pleased with the result that he consequently signed this sculpture as his own.

Avant-garde

In her *Plastik des XX. Jahrhunderts* (1938), Carola Welcker makes a first attempt to place the various ‘isms’ under a common heading. One of the most important themes she analyzed is the phenomenon of relativity, so present in Cubism but also in other, time-related movements. The old, assumed hierarchy is abandoned in favor of a simultaneous assimilation of two polarities. Everything has equal value, both subjectively and objectively. Moreover, there’s a lack of a dominant, central point, which allows for and develops a new perspective. This world, undefined by a transcendent entity, aligns almost entirely with what Aldo learned from his father (Spinoza, Ethics) and at King Alfred School (Blake).

Amsterdam

When Aldo and Hannie returned to the Netherlands from Zurich in 1946, their physical baggage contained works by Miro, Picasso, Arp, Klee, Tanguy, Ernst, and Kandinsky, but their mentality was shaped by the background that revealed new perspectives. In Amsterdam, Aldo found employment at the Public Works Department, led by Cornelis van Eesteren, where the mechanical, functionalist expansion plans held little appeal. He was subsequently tasked with designing public playgrounds for children. During this time, he met Constant Nieuwenhuis, who introduced him to other COBRA artists. The contemporary art collection would be expanded with works by the COBRA group, including Shinkichi Tajiri and later Carel Visser. Not only did he write about these artists, he also designed their retrospective exhibitions for various museums.



Aldo, Hannie and Sinkichi Tajiri in Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1967

The collection non western art

In Zurich, during one of his gallery visits, Aldo came across a copy of the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (1933), dedicated to the Dakar-Djibouti expedition led by the famous anthropologist Marcel Griaule. His eye was drawn to the houses, masks, and statues depicted, which bear a remarkable resemblance to modern plastic design. Shortly thereafter, when Carola Welcker sent Aldo, as a delegate of the Zurich Circle, to newly liberated Paris to deliver letters to Brancusi, Antoine Pevsner, Vantongerloo, Nelly van Doesburg, Arp and Giacometti, he also met Tristan Tzara. Tzara was a prominent collector of African and Oceanic art in his day. In 1930, he co-organized and served on the selection committee for the groundbreaking exhibition *l'Exposition d'art africain et océanien*, held in the gallery of the Pigalle Theatre. As a counterpoint to Western culture, the Dada poet Tzara was a passionate advocate of this art. Aldo and Tzara would meet several more times after this initial encounter. It was here that Aldo probably first encountered non-Western art, some of which he must have known only through illustrations, and about which Tzara would have provided him with the necessary information. Was this perhaps the prelude to the journeys to North Africa he undertakes with Hannie and in the company of artists and architects? In North Africa they enter a complete new world. The emptiness of the place and the basic building structures of both the Arab world and the sub-Saharan cultures under its influence offer him new ideas about complementarity and reciprocity. These are the years they lived at Binnenkant, until 1964.



Interior Binnenkant, Amsterdam, 1948 © Jan Versnel / MAI.

The first interior photos of the Binnenkant already prominently feature two objects: the Solomon Islands bow ornament came from Germany and was found in the attic by the father-in-law of Aldo's brother, Robert. His wife Nela then gave it to Aldo. An Amazonia stool, Yekuana, came from the family estate of his mother, who was born and raised in Suriname. In old photographs taken in the 1950s, early 60s, we see the first non-Western objects displayed on shelves. We know the provenance of one of the first objects, a Hungana ivory female figurine, thanks to correspondence with the curator of the Royal Museum for Central Africa. He bought it "just after the war" from the antique dealer Aaron Vecht in Amsterdam, who stated to have acquired it from Charles Ratton. Regarding the early acquired pieces in the 1950s, his daughter Tess remembers well that her father often took her along to Lemaire in the Leidsestraat. There he bought the small Kongo statue (...) and the Ordos figure (...). Other specialised galleries he frequented were Vecht, Kouw and Aalderink. In 1960, he traveled to West Africa for the last time to visit the Dogon people and was once again captivated by the indigenous

culture, where the cosmos and society seem so brilliantly intertwined, and to which he devoted several articles. The realization of the Burgerweeshuis (Orphanage) in Amsterdam in 1960 marked Aldo van Eyck's breakthrough, expanding his already significant influence and generating international interest. After teaching positions at Dutch institutions, invitations for guest lectureships in the United States, Europe, and seminars and conferences worldwide followed from 1961 onward.

He seized every opportunity to visit indigenous cultures wherever possible and acquire objects whose form and spatial solutions intrigued him. He observed like an architect but analyzed like an artist; his playful perspective on life is a legacy of the pre-war avant-garde artists who, as a counterpoint to Western ethnocentrism, sought solace in the material products of non-Western cultures. Expressive forms from "primitive" cultures. For Aldo, the word "primitive" didn't apply; he even resisted it, rather referring to the peoples as archaic and distant, placing them alongside those of the West, not subordinate to them.



Aldo van Eyck at Orongo, Rapa Nui, 1980's.

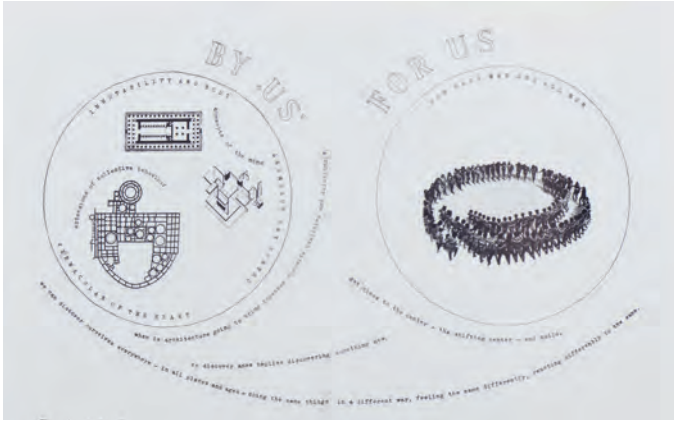


diagram Otterlo circles

In the diagram known as the “Otterlo Circles,” of which three different versions emerged over time, he places three buildings in the second version: a classical Greek temple, which represents “immutability and rest,” a concept for a house designed by Van Doesburg with the accompanying text “change and movement,” and finally, a pueblo settlement from the southwestern United States, which is given the text “vernacular of the heart” under the binding title above the circle “by us”; the opposite circle, above which is written “for us,” shows a group of Orinoco dancers spiraling around the central space and bearing the motto “for each man and all men.” This playful diagram also includes a few lines with a clear message: break the architectural canon. This diagram is intriguing because of the prominent place given to non-Western and archaic culture.

In 1964, the family moved into a house in Loenen aan de Vecht, a village southeast of Amsterdam. Not a newly designed house, but an in the 18th century extended 17th century building, the interior of which Aldo designed according to his own ideas. An atrium with a freestanding staircase acts as a pivot, connecting the ground floor and the gallery.



Interior Loenen aan de Vecht. Photograph Alejandro Campos Uribe

The staircase itself stands on a platform, accessible via two small stone steps, inspired by pueblo settlements, and is clearly designed to bring together art from all corners of the world. The simultaneous experience of modern art, distant and archaic cultures, which together span 5,000 years of history, is supported by rows of books, treatises, and catalogs on the respective cultures.

Aldo’s study, too, reflects configurations or affinities. The objects are not placed randomly next to and in front of each other, they are in a meaningful relationship to each other.



Aldo's study, Loenen aan de Vecht. Photograph Alejandro Campos Uribe

Since the 1980s, he has been selling pieces of modern art to facilitate the acquisition of non-Western art. Whenever new acquisitions came into the house and needed a place, the arrangement was rearranged, while he hummed Bach compositions as if his arrangement itself were like a musical composition.



Configuration of various objects, Loenen aan de Vecht. Photograph Aldo van Eyck.



Zulu belt, lot 680

Daily interaction with the objects provides new inspiration and new starting points. Elementary solutions in visual language as symmetry versus asymmetry, open versus closed shapes—in short, the arrangement of the constituent parts, shapes, and patterns reveals an alternative way of looking at objects.

Aldo's perception of objects is revealed in the following transcriptions.

The meaning of colour and composition is beautifully illustrated in the following passage, taken from Aldo, 'The aesthetics of large number in a loin-cloth, Zulu beadwork, South Africa. The composition is acentric and linear. Elementary figures (squares, diamonds, triangles) and various colours are used to form a horizontal composition of interpenetrating series, which, like much African music, is characterized by a complex, syncopated rhythm.' (Strauven 1998, p. 457, catalogue no. 680).

And for the simultaneous solution he found inspiration in, for example, a Pueblo people, Mimbres earthenware bowl 'The interior of this pre-Columbian bowl is decorated with the pattern of parallel lines. Instead of following the concentric contours the lines cross the bowl from side to side. They are as it were projected vertically into the hollow of the bowl. When viewed non-perpendicularly, the lines express the curvature of the bowl and produce a different image from every angle.' (Id., p. 456, catalogue no. 772).

Receptivity, wonderment, and a polemic against the prevailing building trend are perhaps the best words to



Pueblo bowl, lot 772

describe the architect in his quest. The collection now being offered for auction is the result of this search, which he perhaps found most exemplary in archaic and distant cultures.

Ref.

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