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Willem Marinus Dudok

architect and town-planner

(1884-1974)

Willem Marinus Dudok (1884–1974) can be regarded as one of the most remarkable 20th century architects in the Netherlands. His major works were built during the period between the two World wars. Although he never intervened in the discussions about modern architecture in the Twenties, retrospectively, he can be considered as an important transitional figure between modern and traditional building. Dudok is especially known for the outstanding quality of his work in Hilversum, where he arrived after a short career in the army and a position as city-engineer for the city of Leiden. During his period in Leiden he not only designed schools, bridges and other work in commission of the city but collaborated on projects with J.J.P. Oud, whom he had met shortly before in Purmerend. Together they built worker-housing in Leiderdorp (1914-1915) and the office for the “Leids Dagblad” (1916-1917), which shows an expressive use of brick. The two men remained lifetime friends.

From 1915 till 1924 Dudok was in charge of the Public Works Council of Hilversum. As such, he was responsible for the design of many public buildings, among them schools, slaughterhouses, cemeteries, policestations, etc. Thanks to these buildings and his many residential quarters in this city he defined the future town-scape to a great extent. He advocated a closely concentrated city with restrained growth and limited extension, therefore, bound in form. The possibility of indefinite growth he considered only as a potential planning nightmare, which would ruin the surrounding nature.

For other cities Dudok designed several recognized and exceptional buildings like the Dutch Student House at the Cité universitaire of Paris (1927-1939) and the department store “De Bijenkorf”, with its long expansive glass-walls, in Rotterdam (1928-1930, destroyed). Yet, his name is attached most often to one outstanding building - the Town Hall of Hilversum (1915-1933). With this work the architect achieved international renown. This buildings complex articulation of volumes, the moderate architectural language in which functionalism is combined with romanticism and the use of the traditional building material brick (the famous yellow Dudok-brick), are features that characterize much of Dudok’s later architecture. The initial ideas for the town hall date back to 1915, he began by making designs in the style of Berlage and the Amsterdam school. In 1923 he reached the definitive solution for this building which was to become a mecca for many young architects. In many ways Dudok tried to arrive at an architecture that retained characteristics from the Amsterdam School, neoplasticism and functionalism among them.

Besides his work for Hilversum Dudok took advantage of the opportunities given to him to plan and build in many other cities. Due to the fact that primary attention has always been focused on the Town Hall of Hilversum these projects have remained almost completely in the shadow. The columbarium at Westerveld (1925-1926), the HAV-Bank in Schiedam (1931-1935), the Office for “de Nederlanden” in Arnhem (1937-1939), the Citytheater in Utrecht (1937-1941), are all works which are crucial to his development before 1940 and are hardly taken into consideration. Yet, undoubtedly, they constitute masterworks in Dutch architectural history.

Another aspect of his work which deserves more attention are the various townplanning proposals Dudok was asked to elaborate for Hilversum (from 1915 onwards), the Hague (1934-1942: 1945-1952), Alkmaar (1942-1943), Velsen (1945-1952) and Zwolle (1948-1953). Although his plans rarely found opportunity for execution, they left their imprints upon the work of many architects and planners who followed. Furthermore, for Dudok, the relationship between city-planning and architecture was always integral, as evidence most of his projects. In townplanning principles Dudok was influenced by Camillo Sitte and Raymond Unwin. His working method followed from the large to the small scale. The first sketches of a building were typically perspectives, made in order to address the visual effect of a built object within the cityscape. Inversely, in an interior walk through of the townhall of Hilversum the sensation of going through a city is felt, for he also adhered to the principles of Leon Battista Alberti – that a house should be a small city and the city a big house.
Of the period after World War II, buildings which have hardly found acknowledgment are the administration building for the Royal Dutch Steelworks at Velsen (1947-1951), with its extraordinary glassbridge over the street, and the townhall of Velsen (1949-1965). At the end of his career, after having left his position in Hilversum, Dudok worked on a large number of projects for a real estate developer. The tension which characterized his pre-war architecture is often lacking due to a search for clarifying simplicity. Although the quality of these projects remained highstanding, especially compared with the architectural poverty in the Netherlands in those days, they never had the innovating character of his work from before the war.

The scope of this dissertation was to give an overall view of the work and the personality of Dudok. Large space has therefore been given to quotations from the architects published and unpublished writings.

In the preface and afterward I have tried to give a characterization of Dudok's position. He considered himself as 'lonely on the fair' and felt that he was not very much understood in the Netherlands. In the first chapter I focussed on his early buildings, on his problems with historical styles and his initial struggle for power within the city of Hilversum. The period till the final project for the townhall of Hilversums is discussed amply. The second is dedicated to the schools, a theme that was long dominant in his oeuvre and that produced some beautiful results. Schools were seen by Dudok as a means to add something special to a neighborhood. They formed an important center around which he arranged his housing-projects. He dedicated much attention to their form and situation. They were considered a way to educated the population. The third discusses his major projects, among which the townhall of Hilversum, the projects for the townhalls of Leiden and the Hague, the warehouse De Bijenkorf in Rotterdam. The fourth chapter of my book is on town-planning, it is also the central one, because the logic in his thinking always went from the large picture to the smaller. Although in the beginning Dudok was much influenced by the Garden-City movement and stresses the aesthetic values of a city, he slowly recognizes the importance of mobility and of the special character of a city. This leads him to apply more and more the principles of the C.I.A.M.-townplanning. The fifth deals with housing and shows how much this topic was connected with that of the cityform. The dissertation finishes with a long catalogue raisonné in which the process of each building is discussed, the way it was received indicated and the location of archive material and a bibliography of the items is given.