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# Rethinking relationality

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## Abstract

The text presents a discussion of possible connections between the ideas of Erik Rietveld and concepts of relationality and materiality in modern architecture, with a special focus on Dutch Structuralism and the New Brutalism.

## Keywords

Architecture, Structuralism, New Brutalism, affect theory

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From the perspective of someone who has specialised in the vicissitudes of mid-twentieth century modern architecture and urban planning, the statements from Erik's inaugural lecture on the importance of the connection between art and technology provide both happy recognition and some surprising eye-openers. To explain this, I would like to build on the three aspects as defined by Erik to describe the making practices of RAAAF, the special collaboration between him and his brother Ronald and their team: layers of meaning, material playgrounds and socio-material practices.

An overlap with thinking and approaches in modern architecture, especially Dutch Structuralism and the New Brutalism, already became evident, when I invited Erik for the opening lecture of our exhibition 'Habitat: Expanding Architecture' of 2018 at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, which explored early ecological notions in architectural thinking (van den Heuvel et al., 2020). The invitation was out of curiosity to learn more about Erik's work and his ongoing investigations into psychological ecology and environmentalism, and how he elaborated this specific notion of ecology in relation to users, inhabitants, space and architecture.

Big surprise, Erik's explanations of the intriguing projects of RAAAF seemed to seamlessly connect to the discourse of the *Forum*-group with Jaap Bakema, Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger, who laid the foundations for Dutch Structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s (Hertzberger, 2015). But the bigger surprise perhaps was not so much that Erik's work seemed to build on historical precedent, but that his conceptualisations

of ecological notions, especially the one of affordance and niche, also threw a wholly new light on the historical legacy and recharged it with new meaning and possibility.

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To start with the third and last aspect as highlighted by Erik in his inaugural lecture, the one of socio-material practices and how these can be open to change and unconventional new possibilities. Learning from, among others, the disciplines of anthropology and social geography architects started to realise that architecture is not merely a discipline of externalised form and autonomous principles of ordering, but rather concerns the socio-behavioural relationship between the spatial-material configurations they designed, and the involved future inhabitants. This might seem all too obvious, but it is not. The works of Andrea Palladio, for instance, or Pierre Cuypers are beautiful works of art, but they are also relatively hermetic exercises of formal autonomy and expressions of symbolic systems.

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**Image 1.** Aldo van Eyck, playground Zaanhof, Amsterdam 1948, photo by Wim Brusse, copyrights Aldo van Eyck Archive, Loenen.

Bakema developed this idea of a socio-material relationship for architecture at the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) conferences, especially the one of 1951, which was devoted to the reconstruction of the war-damaged cities of post-war Europe. Bakema's contribution was titled 'Relationship between Men and Things'. Implicitly referring to *De Stijl* and Piet Mondriaan he stated, 'Everyday we discover that the only thing that exists is relationships' (Bakema, 1952).

For Bakema, the 'Relationship between Men and Things' also implied the relationship between the dead and the living. He opened his 1951 talk with a reference to cemeteries and a visit to the crematorium and the poetically landscaped Woodland cemetery in Stockholm designed by Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz. The published text is accompanied by an image of the centre of Groningen, Bakema's hometown, heavily damaged in the final days of the Second World War (Image 1). The caption points out how the tall Martini tower of the city's main church 'signals the presence of both the quiet church yard garden and the busy town hall square'.

We often overlook that memory practices have always been part and parcel of architecture and urban planning, in active and passive ways. We probably understand our cities and landscapes almost intuitively in such terms, as an incrementally grown and layered environment of past experience that we keep transforming while we navigate it, inhabit it.

Such intriguing understanding of memory, inhabitation and reappropriation of the landscapes of the past that surround us, also comes to the fore in the projects of RAAAF that achieve a most acute articulation, particularly so in the case of the *Bunker 599* monument, or the *Luftschloss* project in Vienna. Usually, I'd like to argue for the need to historicise the present, since our time seems so profoundly flat and ignorant of any

historical perspective, but here all of a sudden is an example of the reverse, a futurising of the past.

## 2

Socio-material practices and affordances go beyond the mere functional and problem-solving. They also involve the ludic and the magical, terms from those earlier years of the 1950s and 1960s, that were used to reinvent everyday social practices.

This brings me to the second aspect of RAAAF's practice, the one of material playgrounds. The obvious connection is with the famous collection of Van Eyck's playgrounds for the city of Amsterdam, over 700 in total, which were realised under a scheme coordinated by Jacoba (Ko) Mulder, right hand of CIAM icon Cornelis van Eesteren. Scattered all over the city, they formed a counter city of event spaces (Lefaivre & de Roode, 2002). Assigned by the city office, they paradoxically offered playful and performative reversal of the planned public spaces of that same control machine.

The playgrounds not only served to enable children to test and grow their physical abilities, to make friends and to explore together their neighbourhood just by playing games. They also served as a tool to regenerate the urban fabric, be it the more sterile environments of the then newly built modernist spaces of the Western Garden Cities that followed the principles of the Functional City, or the ruinous historical inner city, which in the 1950s and 1960s still held slum dwellings that were abandoned by its occupants for the more hygienic and spacious new suburbs.

Erik's explanation of affordances, and his interest in how to manipulate surfaces and textures to find new sorts of behaviour and experiences made me see these playgrounds in a new light indeed. Even when their geometric language is very different, Van Eyck's playgrounds can be seen as a careful manipulation of the surfaces of city spaces, with rough and soft textures to create choreography of differences, thresholds and places for encounter.

## 3

The aspect of textures and their manipulations brings me to the third and last aspect pointed out by Erik, the layers of meaning. It is not only the site specificity of the RAAAF interventions that allow for the experience of the many different layers of meaning of the installations. The profound interest – even obsession? – for textures and their role in the creation of an ecology of niches and their affordances is equally crucial I believe. A glance at RAAAF's latest book 'The Landscape of Affordances', or the art installation at Het Hem, 'Still-Life' suffices to make this clear: coarse, and punctured, scratched, burnt, coagulated and then also industrially

cut with diamond saw blades. It is like a symphony of Brutalist sensibilities.

These textures aim for another kind of meaning, they aim for a direct, affective, emotional connection between the visitor and the work on display I believe, very much in the spirit of the New Brutalism indeed. Initially invented by the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson in reaction to a soft, sleek and commodified modernism, the New Brutalism today has become a household name for any architecture of raw concrete of a rough, unfinished and untreated quality (The New Brutalism, 1955). The historian Reyner Banham who aimed to theorise the New Brutalism recognised this affective agenda when he opened his 1955 essay with a quote of Le Corbusier:

L'Architecture, c'est, avec des matières brutes, établir des rapports émouvants (Banham, 1955).

Such emotional provocation is not to please, nor appease; on the contrary, it aims to push one out of one's comfort zone, to explore those material playgrounds to go beyond convention, and indeed explore new possibilities.

#### 4

To end with a riddle. In the same piece, Banham referred to the 'shape' of a teacup, not as the example to explain the notion of affordance, but in this case the possibility of a 'topological' architecture. Banham stated that the New Brutalism should be understood in this new relational way, in which a teacup and a 'gramophone record' share the same shape, both being a continuous surface with one hole.

The textures of the two objects, of course, are very different. The grooved surface of the record is the more

Brutalist one naturally, and not only because the Brutalists brought their new records, from jazz to *musique concrète*, to their soirées to listen to. The grooves are some sort of an affordance too, like the ear of the teacup. But in the case of the gramophone record, with audio-technology and a sharp piece of diamond, these grooves can produce the coolest music. The installations of RAAAF are such records.


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