

Arthur Staal



Shell tower on the river IJ (1988).
Image: City Archive Amsterdam.

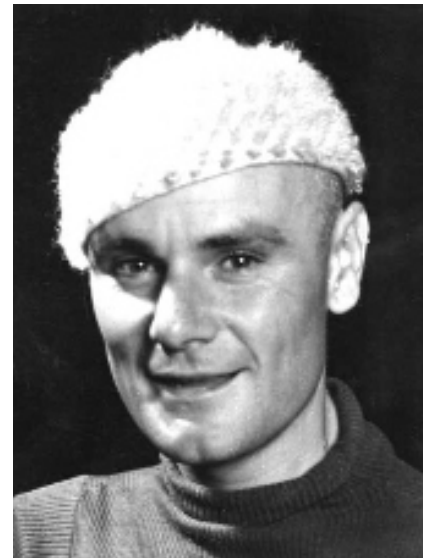
As a little boy growing up in Amsterdam, I remember being fascinated by a number of remarkable buildings, including the parking garage with circular ramps on Marnixstraat (Europarking by Piet Zanstra), the building on the Overtoom with Volkswagens displayed in a window box (Autopon by Ben Ingwersen) and the tall building on 'legs' across the IJ (Shell tower by Arthur Staal). Furthermore, my comrades and I had a playground under De Poort building on Hugo de Grootkade (by Cees van der Bom & Wouter Ingwersen), a care home with a passageway with huge concrete 'corbusian' columns. For me, as a boy, Amsterdam was naturally a city with canal houses and impressive 'old' buildings (such as the Rijksmuseum) and the 'new' buildings as mentioned above. These early fascinations have probably led me to pursue architecture, shaping me into the architect I am today.

The idea of devoting an issue of Local Heroes to the work of Arthur Staal has been around for a long time. I was motivated by the observation that Staal's work does not always receive its due recognition and, in my opinion, is deserving of greater appreciation. His built legacy is vulnerable. Many of his buildings have since been demolished or modified – even 'mutilated', in the words of Staal – to the extent that the original qualities are no longer present, and his intentions are no longer legible. To prepare this issue in the summer of 2015 I went on a tour along Arthur Staal's buildings in Amsterdam with architect Joost Hovenier (1963–2016), who, as a child, lived in Staal's Abraham Staalmanplein project in Amsterdam West. To Joost, former partner of Office Winhov, my employer for many years, friend and colleague and initiator of Local Heroes, I would like to dedicate this issue about the architecture of Arthur Staal.

Background and education

Arthur Staal was born in Amsterdam on the 3rd of July 1907 as the son of the architect Jan Frederik Staal and Johanna Elsa Hoogenkamp. He was a third-generation architect: his grandfather was a developer and architect, and his father was the acclaimed architect of De Wolkenkrabber ['Skyscraper'] on Victorieplein in Amsterdam. J.F. (Frits) Staal (1879–1940) was among Berlage's generation and belonged to a daring group of architects who revolutionized Dutch architecture. The elder Staal was a major figure in the development of modern architecture in the Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century. Arthur therefore grew up in a progressive and intellectual environment.

Staal started his engineering education in 1924 at the School of Architecture, Decorative Arts and Craftsmanship in Haarlem. Here he received a very thorough education. The unusually high student-to-tutor ratio – fifty tutors for the sixty students – guaranteed the personalized attention required for a vigorous training in a creative field. Arthur recalled being asked to design something as trivial as a dog house with the same degree of reverence and detail as any other project: from detailed design drawings, materials selection, construction cost calculations and consideration of the consequence of design decisions. However, this training was canceled a year later due to budget cuts under the Dutch governments education re-organization. Most of his class-



Arthur Staal (1907–1993).



Housing project on Abraham Staalmanplein in Amsterdam West, 1958.



The Skyscraper, the first high rise building in Amsterdam by J.F. Staal, 1932.

mates continued their studies at the Hoger Bouwkunst Onderricht (HBO) in Amsterdam – predecessor of the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture. However, Staal went instead to the MTS for Architecture in Utrecht.

After his studies, Staal returned to Amsterdam in 1928 to work at his father’s office and later for a short period as a draftsman at the architectural firm of H.A.J. Baanders. He finished his education in 1932 with a one-year course at the HBO in Amsterdam. Stimulated by his teachers, who were affiliated with the Architectura et Amicitia Society (A et A), Staal became a member of this architect association.

Group '32

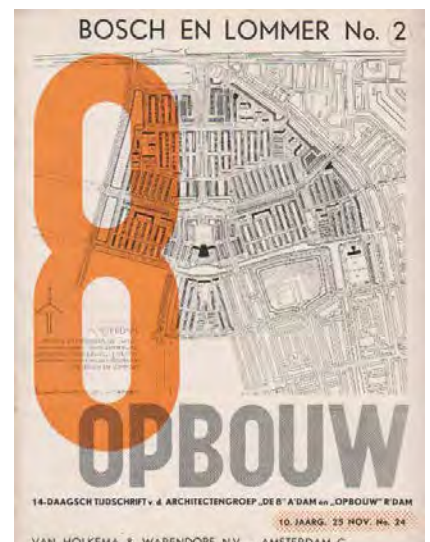
Shortly after joining A et A, Arthur Staal united in Group '32, a group of young architects including Albert Boeken, Piet Zanstra, Jan Giessen, Karel Sijmons, Siem van Woerden and Gerard Holt. With them, Staal was committed to a new form of modern architecture, the so-called Nieuwe Bouwen ('New Architecture'). As a counterpart to the Dutch Modern Movement, where form follows function combined with certain social criticism, the group wanted to pay more attention to beauty and craft in architecture for its own sake.

Berlage argued that architects should build rationally, but Staal felt that pure aesthetics should also be considered. Staal strongly believed that architecture is not just about technical prowess, and cited the enduring charm of the crooked canal homes from the Golden Age as an example of imperfect designs executed flawlessly. He also believed in returning to the small scale, as opposed to the prefabricated concrete blocks that, when built in the thousands all at once, led to standardization and soulless neighborhoods. Since they found little response to this attitude within Architectura et Amicitia, Group '32 left and joined the architectural association De 8 and Opbouw from 1934 to 1938 before choosing their own direction.

Staal and his associates still shared the opinion that the final shape of a building is partly determined by aesthetics and therefore not exclusively shaped by functional and structural considerations. Under this philosophy, classical antiquity can also be a source of inspiration. According to Staal, Nieuwe Bouwen ('New Architecture') is a direct descendant



Group '32 with Arthur Staal, Gerard Holt and Siem van Woerden (left to right).



Cover of the magazine *De 8 and Opbouw* (1939) about the Bosch & Lommer development plan in Amsterdam. Arthur Staal would build a housing project in this area soon after the war.

of the beautiful brick classicism from the Golden Age. Both can be characterized as ‘a style of pure, classic simplicity – neither exuberant nor deplorable’ as he said.

Although Arthur Staal presented himself as an independent architect, the then prevailing circumstances were not favorable to him. After the stock market crash of 1929, construction was almost stopped. He managed to win a few assignments, but Staal returned to his father’s office in 1932, where he experienced years of hardship as well. It was a period where architecture rarely progressed past the drawing board, because the funds for the implementation were often lacking. For instance, together they worked for some time on a second ‘Skyscraper’, on the Weteringschans opposite the Rijksmuseum (on the plot where around the 1980s the two controversial ‘Pepper & Salt’ office towers by Frans van Gool would be built). They also worked on a competition design for the new town hall on the Frederiksplein in Amsterdam in 1937, in which they made it to the final four. None of the projects from this period were built.

Study travels

In 1934 Staal made his first study trip by bicycle(!) to Italy and France. While in Paris, he went to visit Le Corbusier who took him personally to a number of his houses. With this newfound international perspective, he noticed that Dutch architecture was rather similar to the British in their shared love of the domestic realm. There is a fondness for the small and intimate, in contrast to the French tendency towards expressions of power and monumentalism.

In 1935, Arthur Staal won the prestigious Prix de Rome. In addition to a gold medal, the prize consisted of a three-year stipend for a study trip to countries around the Mediterranean Sea. In 1936, Staal went on an adventure on his motorcycle from France and Spain to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, and from Sicily to Greece. In 1939 he left to Egypt and traveled across the Sinai desert to Palestine, further through Lebanon and Beirut and from there to Syria and Damascus. In 1940 he returned to the Netherlands, where he published his travel reports in two books: *Onder de gouden zon van het morgenland* [‘Under the Golden Sun of the Morning Land’] from 1940 about his journey through Egypt, Palestine and Syria and *Hellas* from 1944 about his journey through Greece.



Perspective drawing of the second ‘Skyscraper’ (1932) opposite the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.



Entry for Amsterdam town hall (1937) on Frederiksplein by father and son Staal.



Arthur Staal on the road with his motorcycle.

The books are richly filled with sketches and drawings but also with photographs taken by Staal with his Leica, not only of the architecture and 'art treasures' of antiquity but also of everyday life in general.

The books read together as an adventure novel and diary and give a good impression of the freedom he enjoyed. Hellas is a wonderful mix of a travelogue, an architecture guide, an philosophy manifesto and an adventure novel. Staal was friends with various society figures in Athens, including the Dutch ambassador. He even describes how he, at some point, got arrested and locked up by the police. His solitary adventures instilled in him an 'uncompromising contemporary style', that gave him a reputation for being an individualist, and he developed a personal repertoire of original ideas. In each individual project he retrieved details from this repertoire, which became his signature. He never lacked ideas and although he did not have the opportunity to implement them all, the buildings he realized that are (still) in their original state show those ideas in full glory.

During the Second World War Groep '32 made an alternative plan for Amsterdam's *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan* (AUP, 'General Extension Plan' from 1934) called 'Building from House to City' (published in 1946). They criticized the plans of AUP's chief architect-urbanist Cornelis van Eesteren because it was too functionalistic in its design approach. In their vision the city had to be seen as a work of art as a whole instead of a sum of several functions pulled apart. In their view, the AUP offered too little architectural possibilities.

Reconstruction

After the war, Staal started building. In the context of post-war reconstruction housing projects, he had projects in Velsen, IJmuiden, Wijk aan Zee, Beverwijk, Katwijk aan Zee, Utrecht and in Amsterdam in Bos & Lommer and New West.

In addition to major reconstruction projects and small-scale projects for housing corporations, Staal focused on working for private clients. Of the houses that Staal designed and built during his career, quite many can be found in Zandvoort, but also in Wassenaar and a noteworthy one in Bergen aan Zee.



Travel sketch by Arthur Staal from 1936. The books are richly illustrated with aquarel drawings and sketches.



Crete terrace in Rethymnon from *Hellas*, 1944.



Private house in Bergen aan Zee (1970), with a remarkable garden wall. (Presumably demolished.)



Post-war housing project with apartments and shops on ground level on Burgemeester Fockstraat in Amsterdam New West (1957).

After the war Staal's personal life also changed significantly, when he married Mariquita (Quita) Pronk, a ballet dancer fourteen years his junior, with whom he started a family (they had a son and a daughter) and lived together until his death in 1993. The family alternately lived in a simple house in Zandvoort (now inhabited by Arthur's son) and their canal house in Amsterdam on Lijnbaansgracht 324–326.

Royal Dutch Shell

One of Staal's first exceptional buildings is the clubhouse for the Rowing and Sailing Association *De Amstel* on the Hobbemakade that he designed in 1954, along with an adjacent Shell service station and Fiat workshop of the same year. The clubhouse is now on the list of 100 most important post-war monuments in Amsterdam. In 2011 the building was renovated and expanded on each side. Shell appeared to be a loyal client for Staal. After completing the attractive Shell service station at the Hobbemakade, he designed for them a medical centre (1956), laboratories (1959), a research centre (1969), the Shell tower (1971) and the company



Clubhouse 'De Amstel' (1954).



Shell service station (1954) with the original awning (which is replaced in the 1970s).

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restaurant (1976), all situated at the Shell technology campus on the IJ riverbanks in Amsterdam North. In recent years, the campus has been transformed into the cultural and residential area *Overhoeks*, named after the Shell towers' 45° rotation.

Euromotels

In 1957 Arthur Staal received his first assignment for a Euromotel, to be built on the Sloteweg, the first motorway from Amsterdam to Schiphol and beyond. The motel was a concept of 'motorway hotels' imported from the United States. The *Amsterdam Motel*, designed by Staal, was the first of its kind in the Netherlands. After the new A4 motorway was completed in the 1970s, the motel became off the route and was demolished. A replacement hotel, also designed by Staal, was built in 1978 and is located right next to the A4 on the Oude Haagseweg (nowadays Mercure Hotel).



Euromotel Joan Muyskensweg (1962). Upon completion, this Euromotel was the largest motel in Europe. (Demolished.)

Other motels he built, such as one near the Utrechtsebrug in Amsterdam (1962) and in Alkmaar (1968), have since been demolished. In 1969 Staal entered a compe-

tition for Grand Metropolitan Hotels with a high-rise hotel building located on the Stadhouderskade, near the Leidseplein and Vondelpark. He lost the competition and finally the Marriott hotel was built here in the early 1970s (by Gerard de Klerk).

In those years Staal also built several schools, including a kindergarten and primary school in Bilthoven and a libertarian school for personal development in Zaandijk. In 1962 he delivered a technical school in Amstelveen. Most of the school buildings are unfortunately demolished.



Competition proposal for a high rise hotel building on Stadhouderskade, near the Leidseplein and Vondelpark (1969).

C&A building (1963) in Amstelveen designed with Piet Zanstra. The clothing warehouse was demolished in the 1990s.



Since the late 1950s, Staal was involved with the architectural firm of Van den Broek & Bakema in the city center plans for Amstelveen, where he realized the large-scale housing project Meander Flats and Tower apartments (1961). In Amstelveen he also designed and built a clothing warehouse for C&A (1963), together with his friend and colleague Piet Zanstra.

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Furthermore in this period Staal realized a large number of office buildings in Amsterdam, such as an office & laboratory building on the Apollolaan for Dorr Oliver (1958) (nowadays refurbished), an office building at the corner of Frederiksplein and the Utrechtsestraat (1965) and a characteristic complex along the Schinkel (1968). In 1968 he also designed the headquarters of the Dutch Credit Insurance Company at Keizersgracht 271–277. The former Rijkspostspaarbank building on the Haarlemmerweg (1969)

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was another typical office building. This building has recently being stripped of the gravel concrete facade and will serve as a donor skeleton for a future residential building. On the Overtoom Staal designed a very peculiar office building with prefabricated gravel-concrete panels and aluminum window frames (1969). Nowadays this functions as a hotel.

An exceptional design proposal from the mid-1950s is the exhibition hall Het Atoom ('The Atom' in Dutch). Initially designed for a plot at the Slotterplas in Amsterdam West, it was later situated at the former site of the market halls on the Jan van Galenstraat and finally at the airport Schiphol.

A nuclear reactor had to be set up in a seventy-meter-high glass 'atomic pyramid' so that the Dutch population could experience that atomic energy was not frightening or dangerous. The exhibition finally took place at Schiphol in 1957, in an ordinary boxshaped shed building. Whether the exhibition at Schiphol was designed by Arthur Staal cannot be determined (it is not mentioned in his archive), but the futuristic glass pyramid has never been realized.



Model of the Atom exhibition hall (1956), as projected on a site near the Slotterplas.



The Metropool (1964) on Weesperstraat with Herman Hertzberger's student-complex in the back.

Metropolitan Amsterdam

In the 1960s, the municipality of Amsterdam had metropolitan ambitions. With *Plan Stadsspoor*, the city expressed its ambitions to connect all districts in the city with a metro network. From 1968 onwards, the metro line to the Bijlmermeer was the first to be constructed. This route would run from the Central Station towards the Amstel Station, passing underneath the Nieuwmarkt area and below the Weesperstraat

and the Wibautstraat, that would eventually become major arterials flanked by metropolitan buildings.

As part of the reconstruction plans of C. Wegener Sleswijk, the 154 meter long building *De Metropool* ('Metropolis' in Dutch) designed by Staal, has been realized on the east side of the Weesperstraat, between the Nieuwe Keizersgracht and Nieuwe Prinsengracht, with an underpass at the Nieuwe Kerkstraat.

The design was at first criticized both for being insufficiently modern for such a major thoroughfare like the Weesperstraat, yet excessively modern compared to the adjacent canal houses. Staal had resolved this impossible design conundrum by mimicking the canal houses' distinctive rooflines along the top, while, up close and at street level, the building remained a modernist monument. He recognized the challenge of building in a city, where, unlike a freestanding object in a meadow or by the sea, a different kind of creativity was required. He strongly believed the past and future could coexist, as long as scale and context were respected, and the buildings had the right relationship with their environment.

In 1966, nearby De Metropool building, between Jodenbreestraat and Waterlooplein, Staal built a residential complex with apartments, an Amro bank branch, a garage with a Ford showroom and (again) a Shell service station. This building was part of the 1950s reconstruction plans for the heart of the Jewish community before the war. The street was supposed to be transformed into a main traffic road towards the Prins Hendrikkade with commercial buildings on either side, which was never completed due to strong opposition from the neighborhood and others.

The building still mainly exists today, but the typical ground level exterior with hexagonal windows along the Jodenbreestraat and the petrol station, showroom and garage with its characteristic garage doors on the side of Waterlooplein are no longer there. The ground floor has been affected over the years, mainly due to the arrival of other functions. The rest of the facade is also no longer in its original state: at the beginning of the 21st century, the original black (painted) colour turned into red brick.

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The Metropool (1964).



The Waterlooplein-complex (1966) showing ground level with Shell service station, garage and a Ford showroom, of which nothing can be found now.

Bank branches.

With the rise of cashless money transfers in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of bank branches in the Netherlands increased sharply. Arthur Staal has built several bank branches for the Amro bank, including complete new buildings on the Haarlemmerplein (1972), Kinkerstraat (1976) and Rozengracht (1981) – his last newly-realized projects. He also designed several bank branches on the ground floor of existing buildings, including one on the corner of the Stadhouderskade with the Van Woustraat (1974) and on the corner of the Koninginneweg with the Amstelveenseweg (1977).



Amro Bank on Haarlemmerplein (1972) is nominated to be declared a municipal monument.

Over time all the bank branches have disappeared, but Staal's interventions are still recognizable by, for example, the strikingly coarse natural stone baseboards with triangular shaped endings, as shown in the ground level of Van Woustraat or in the arched openings in the facade on the corner Koninginneweg/Amstelveenseweg. In the Kinkerstraat and Rozengracht buildings the bank branches are turned into stores. In these projects the original upper floor apartments are still there. The building on Haarlemmerplein, that was



Former bank branche on the corner Stadhouderskade/Van Woustraat with characteristic natural stone interventions on the ground floor (1974).

recently nominated to be declared a municipal monument, is currently being transformed and expanded at the top into a store on ground level with apartments on the upper floors.

Later years

Since the 1960s Arthur Staal has been involved in extensions to the *Beurs van Koophandel* (stock exchange building, the current WTC) in Rotterdam, built by his father J.F. Staal from 1936 to 1940. From the mid-1960s Staal provided an awning for the *Cineac*, adjusted the fronts of the shops on the ground floor and expanded the low-rise building with an extra topfloor.



Model of the extension of the Beurs van Koophandel (1978) in Rotterdam.

In 1978 Staal designed one of the previous high-rise towers for the city of Rotterdam. Two years earlier the 95-meter high rise building *Hofpoort* was built for Shell by Kees Abspoel (1976), but at that time the Rotterdam city council was not so fond of multinational companies. Due to its low economic feasibility and a new political zeitgeist the project by Staal was canceled, which was an immense disappointment for Staal. After the stock exchange got privatized in the early 1980s, a competition was launched and the current greenblue mirror glass WTC-tower (by Rob van Erk, then partner at Groosman) was built.

One of Arthur Staal's last major construction projects was the renovation and extension of a vacant existing theater into the Flemish Cultural Center *De Brakke Grond*, that was completed in 1981. As part of this complex, Staal has also added a typical canal house on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal. Located on a square on the Nes in the middle of the historic city centre of Amsterdam, *De Brakke Grond* still offers performances in the fields of theater, dance, music, film and other forms of art.



Flemish Cultural Center *De Brakke Grond* on the Nes in the historic city centre (1981).

Arthur Staal retired from daily practice in 1979 and left his office to his companion Ben Smit, but he remained active in designing and was involved in the continued work of the office. In the early 1980s he designed the urban plan Oktoogoon for a long undeveloped site on the Jan van Galenstraat and he got involved in the renovation of a housing project designed by his father in Amsterdam Watergraafsmeer.

His last design proposal concerned the redesign of the Museumplein in Amsterdam, for which *NRC Handelsblad* had launched a competition in 1988. With the words "On such a concrete parking souterrain, a paved stone square should then be laid. It should not be hidden under grass and trees!" he made his last public design statement. Arthur Staal died on December 5, 1993 in Amsterdam at the age of 86.



Staal's last design proposal for the redesign of the Proposal for Museumplein (1988), a competition launched by the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*.

Publications

From his first designs in the early 1930s until the late 1970s, much attention was paid to Arthur Staal's work in professional journals such as *De 8* and *Opbouw*, and after the war, the *Bouwkundig Weekblad* and *Forum*. He was an editor of magazine *Forum* from 1951 to 1960. Staal himself published extensively in the aforementioned magazines and also in national daily and weekly newspapers and he has, as mentioned before, published books about his travels. He wrote explanations for his own projects and commented on the works and ideas of fellow architects. During his career Staal was a member of the 'Housing Council', the 'Aesthetics Committee' in Haarlem and a board member of the 'Commission for the Old City' in Amsterdam.

Publication and interview with Arthur Staal (1977).

Een amsterdams bouwmeester

Blijmoedig gaat hij voort op de moeilijke weg; de eenvoudige wijst hij veelal af.

Het drama is ver, het plezier nabij.

Maar Nederland torst een loodzware erfenis; plezier is slechts een geaccepteerd maar geen erkend goed.

Arthur Staal is eigenlijk on-Nederlands.

Maar een indrukwekkend oeuvre bewijst dat deze bouwer een zeer prominente plaats inneemt onder de Nederlandse architecten.

Alles heeft hij gebouwd, van benzinstations tot machtige wolkenkrabbers.

Niets is hem te groot, niets te klein.

Arthur Staal, derde generatie van een geslacht Amsterdams bouwers.



'Ik ben een individualist. Vandaar dat er niet meer dan vijf mensen voor mij werken. Teveel mensen maken mij gejaagd. Ik doe veel dingen liever zelf. Ik hoef dan een ander niet eerst uit te leggen hoe ik het hebben wil. Ja, je zou kunnen zeggen dat ik een individualist ben.'

Het architectenbureau Staal bevindt zich midden in de oude stad Amsterdam, op de Keizersgracht, niet ver van de Raadhuisstraat. En het is vanzelfsprekend dat ook het woonhuis van de Amsterdams Staal in het hartje van de stad ligt, een klein grachtenhuisje aan de Lijnbaansgracht.

Het is uiterst onwaarschijnlijk dat de serie bouwmeesters die Staal heten met nog een generatie zal worden uitgebreid; zoon Rogier heeft geen aanleg voor het vak. Dat weet hij en hij zoekt het dus in een andere richting.

'Ik ben er eigenlijk vanzelf ingerold. Zowel mijn vader als mijn grootvader zaten in het vak. Mijn grootvader was makelaar in onroerende goederen en dat betekende in die tijd dat je ook bouwplannen maakte. Onder meer hield hij zich bezig met grote verbouwingen, bankgebouwen hoofdzakelijk. Mijn vader werkte aanvankelijk op het bureau van zijn vader, maar ging zich later verder bekwamen op een ander architectenbureau. U weet misschien dat mijn vader, samen met mensen als Berlage veel baanbrekend werk heeft gedaan, zo omstreeks het jaar 1900 al. Hij behoorde tot een groep bouwers die aan de Nederlandse- en vooral de Amsterdams architectuur een geheel eigen gezicht hebben gegeven. Voorbeelden hiervan zijn het gebouw van Dake op het Damrak, het Telegraafgebouw op de Nieuwe Zijds Voorburgwal, het Weesperpleinziekenhuis, de Wolkenkrabber en de Beurs van Rotterdam, om maar een greep te doen uit mijn vaders werk. Als je architect wilde worden waren in

mijn jonge jaren de mogelijkheden beperkt. Ik had het geluk nog de School voor Bouwkunde in Haarlem te kunnen bezoeken, een voortreffelijke instelling waar de meeste vooraanstaande architecten van mijn generatie hun scholing hebben gehad. Maar ook andere kunstenaars, als grafici en beeldhouwers werden daar opgeleid. Mari Andriessen - herinner ik mij - was daar in mijn tijd en mensen als Merkelbach, Otto de Kat, Wageemaker en Holt. Het onderwijs was uitstekend; op de zestig studenten waren er vijftig docenten; kom daar nu eens om!

De school was gevestigd in het buiten 'Welgelegen' aan de Dreef. Tegenwoordig is dat de Provinciale Griffie. Het was een soort kunstnijverheidsschool voor bouwers.

Ze leerden je daar het vak van voren naar achteren: Ontwerp een hondehok, teken het uit, maak materiaalstaten, bereken de kostprijs, bestel het materiaal, voer het uit en bezie de consequenties van je ontwerpbeslissing.

Jammer genoeg viel de school in 1926 ten offer aan de onderwijsaanwijzing van Colijn; ik verhuisde toen naar de MTS voor Bouwkunde in Utrecht.

Toen ik klaar was ben ik de praktijk ingegaan, tekenen hoofdzakelijk maar ook de bouw in. Want wie nooit met een hei-

Handelsgebouw Aikmaar (1972).



Design characteristics

A number of remarkable design features can be found in Staal's work. Throughout his entire oeuvre he uses geometrically-shaped window openings, triangular, hexagonal or octagonal windows, arrow-shaped windows or a reclining hexagon with strongly beveled top and bottom. The hexagon is used in almost all of his projects, the octagon shape is very prominent in the facades on the Frederiksplein and in the Meander flats in Amstelveen. He also likes to accent the location of stairwells by a scattering of many little square windows, especially seen in the housing projects from the reconstruction period in Amsterdam West and elsewhere.

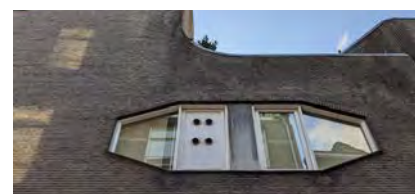
One can also recognize his work in the many beveled balconies, zigzag awnings, beveled surfaces and rounded facades in many of the projects. The use of pivot windows is also a phenomenon that can be seen in many (original) facades and is reflected in many design drawings. In that sense he is very consistent in his architectural vocabulary, and applies these resources from start to finish. Furthermore, the use of concrete is very characteristic in Staal's oeuvre. Staal often uses prefabricated gravel concrete in grid facades in the Metropool, the Schinkel office building, the Shell tower and in the subtly pleated floor belts of the (former) Shell canteen. He also uses the insitu concrete to gain the expressive columns of the Shell tower and Shell canteen.



Hexagon window in the gravel concrete ground level underneath the Shell tower in 2012.



Gravel concrete grid facade in De Schinkel office complex (1968) in 2016. Image: Bart van Hoek.



Typical coarse natural stone and brickwork in cross bond in project on Haarlemmerplein (2020) and Rozengracht project showing (affected) octagonal shaped window in 2020.

Staal's attention to detail and how he manages to fit his buildings into the sensitive Amsterdam context is very striking due to the use of refined and special materials. For example, the coarse natural stone slabs used in the exterior interventions of bank branches are very recognizable, ensuring an adaptation that is unmistakably 'new' while fitting into the historical context of Amsterdam. The masonry in Staal's work is also special and made with attention, often in cross bond with cutting joints, remaining consistent with historical facades in Amsterdam. It gives his designs a strong link with the historical context.

Featured projects

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Meander & Tower Flats Amstelveen

1957–1961

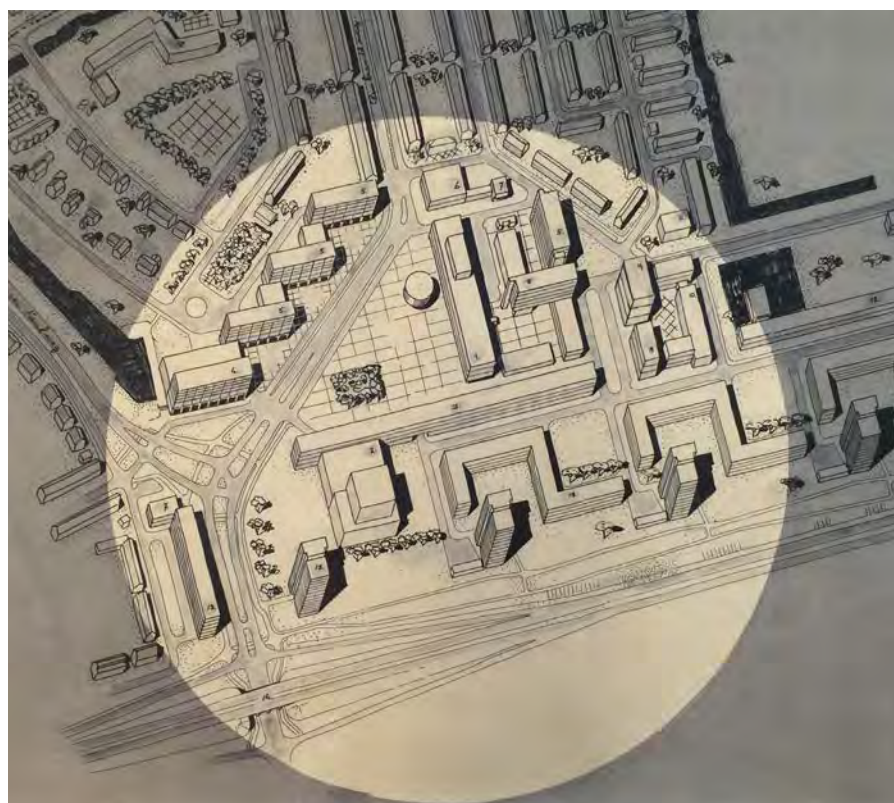
With Van den Broek & Bakema, Arthur Staal played a vital role in designing the current city center of Amstelveen. In addition to the C&A clothing warehouse that he designed with Piet Zanstra and an Amro bank branch, he built a large housing project along the current A9 highway (a motorway in those days). The project consists of a repeating ‘stamp’ of six 13-storey towers and four 4-storey meandering apartment buildings with approximately 560 apartments. Together the buildings enclose a parking square on the center side and a park-like public garden on the south side.

The plan contains many characteristic elements of Arthur Staal such as octagonal windows, chamfered balconies and distinctive brick structures. The emphatic horizontality in the tower facades was a previously proposed gesture for the towers on the Weteringschans.

The south-oriented towers have a symmetrical plan and a rational column structure. The Meander buildings consist of porch flats with garage boxes, storages and practice rooms on the ground floor. The floorplans of the Meander

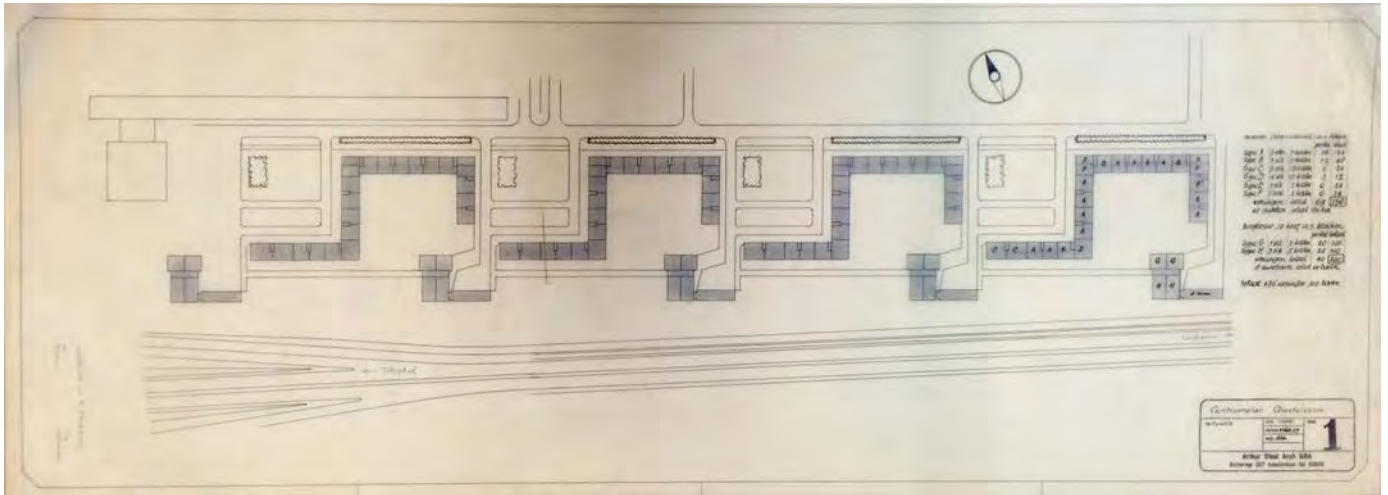


The tower flats along the motorway (1965).



The Meander & Tower Flats within the urban plan designed in cooperation with Van den Broek & Bakema (1959).

blocks show generous layouts of different types, ranging from 1-room to 4-room apartments and duplexes with a practice or work space on the ground floor. The project is still in good condition although here and there window frames and garage doors have been replaced and loggias have been closed off. The garden has become a beautiful lush linear park between the highway and the housing blocks.



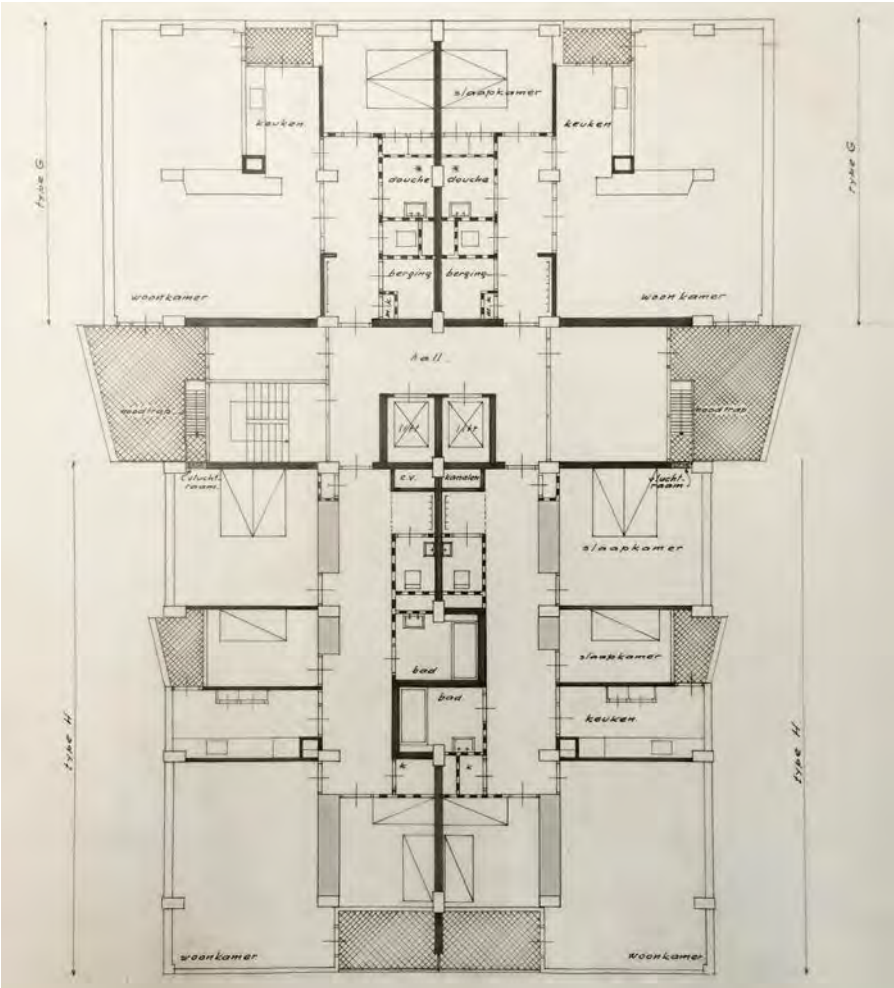
The preliminary lay-out of the meandering building and tower blocks (1957), with the blocks mirrored in contrast to the executed plan.

The six towers marking the skyline of Amstelveen (1965).

The most western tower shortly after completion in 1961. The horizontality in the facades Staal previously proposed for the (unbuilt) tower on the Weteringschans.

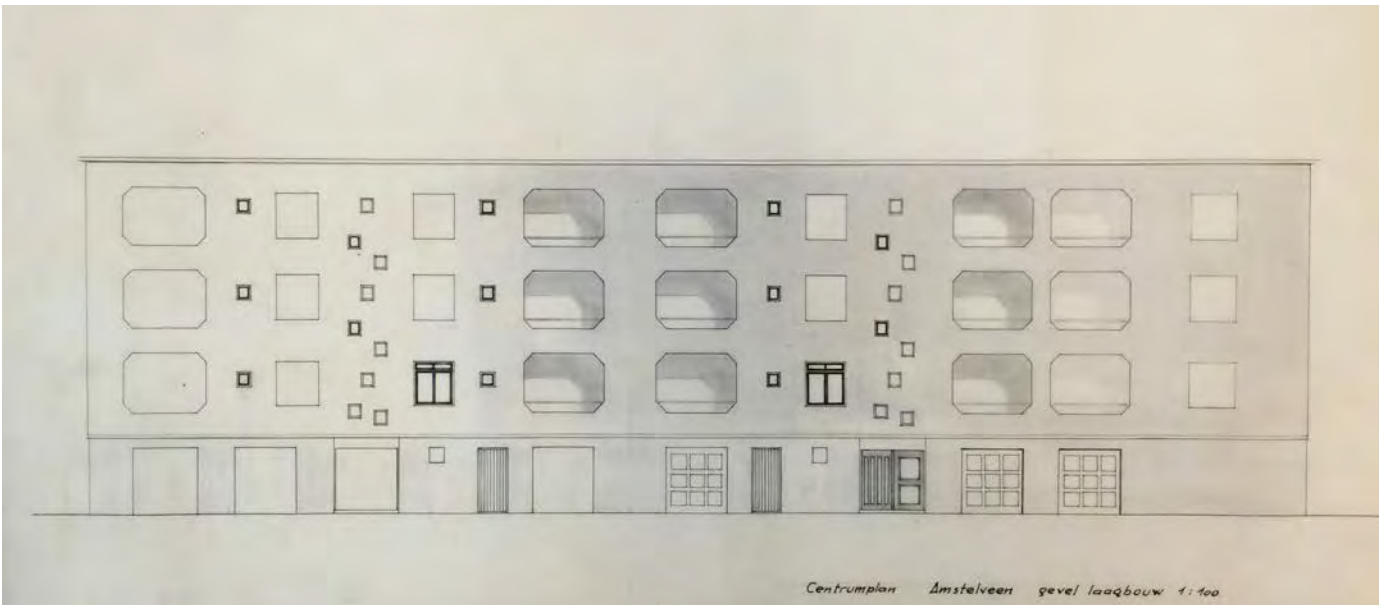
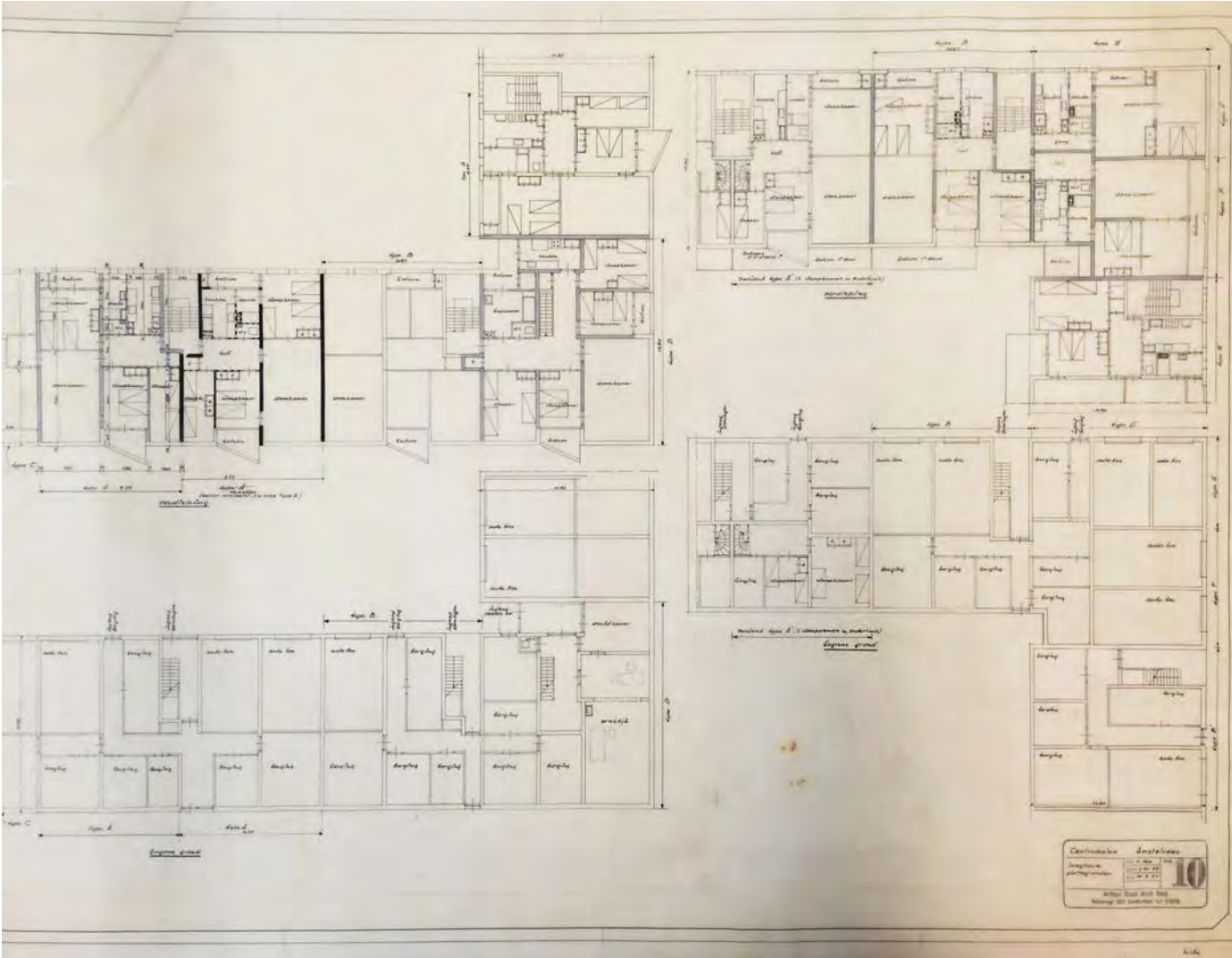


Image from the 1960s showing a tower and Meander buildings enclosing a parking square.



General floorplan of the towers, with rational column structure and typical balconies oriented to the south (1957).

Original floorplans showing ground floor and storeys with standard and corner apartments (1957).



Original elevation drawing of the low-rise Meander buildings (1957).

The Meander apartment building seen from the lush communal garden. Image: Bart van Hoek (2016).



The communal garden with the pond on the southern side of the Meander buildings (1976).

The Meander apartment building with a tower in the background. Image: Bart van Hoek (2016).



Detail of ground level showing the refined detailing of the garage boxes in 2020.



Metropool, Weesperstraat Amsterdam

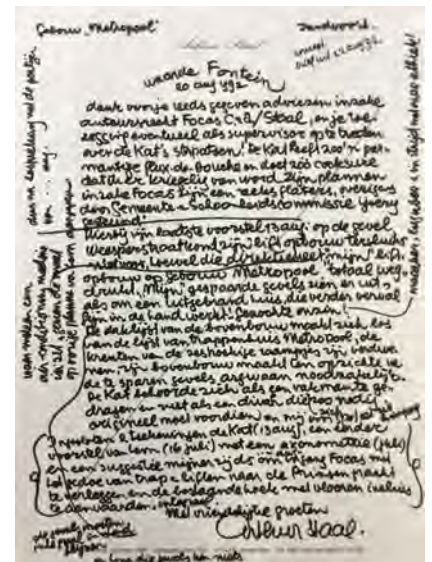
1960–1964

Arthur Staal has designed one of his largest projects with *De Metropool* [‘The Metropolis’] complex. The complex originally comprised offices (including *Het Financieele Dagblad* (a financial newspaper), a furniture showroom (Gispen), an ABN bank branch on the Nieuwe Keizersgracht and an office for the Van IJzer company on the Nieuwe Prinsengracht. Staal managed to match a large building volume to the context in a masterly way. He spans a slightly inward nodding volume with a sleek concrete facade grid between two head blocks on both canalsides. Using the head blocks, he created a connection to the adjacent historic buildings by moderating the volume of the complex. This ensured a smooth transition between the large-scale modern Metropool building to the small-scale historic homes along both canals. Striking are the triangular bay windows that protrude over the eaves and here too, Staal’s style features are clearly visible: hexagonal windows, an expressive canopy, a tight concrete grid and bent roof ends.

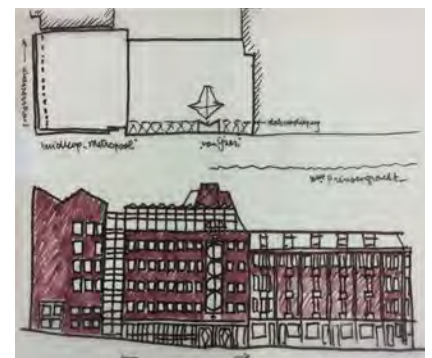
In the early 90s, the owners at that time wanted to demolish the *Kop van IJzer* [‘Head of Iron’, named after the firm IJzer], the south side of the Metropool building. Staal managed to prevent this in 1992 with summary proceedings. The Court of Appeal regarded the proposed demolition on the basis of copyright as a mutilation and prohibited this, but noted that certain changes to the facade were nevertheless permitted, based on reasonableness. After a court settlement, the ‘Kop van IJzer’ on the south side of the complex got demolished and replaced by a new construction, despite Staal’s alternative sketch proposal. Recently, the remaining part of the complex has been transformed to compact hotel lofts and workspaces meant for ‘laptop nomads’. Nonetheless, the exterior has been exemplarily preserved and the building got spared from further demolition.



Southern end of De Metropool, with Kop van IJzer which was demolished mid '90s.

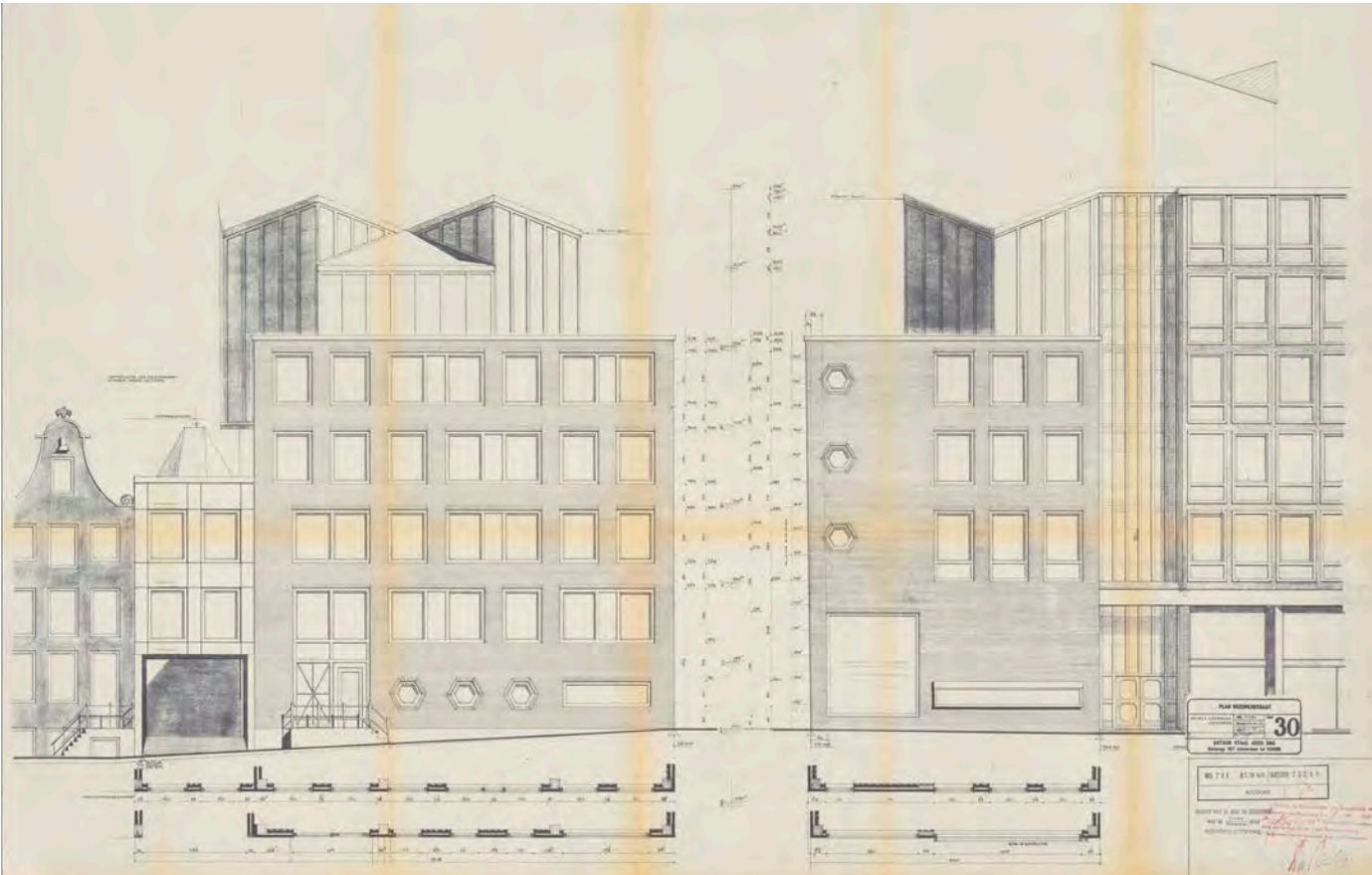
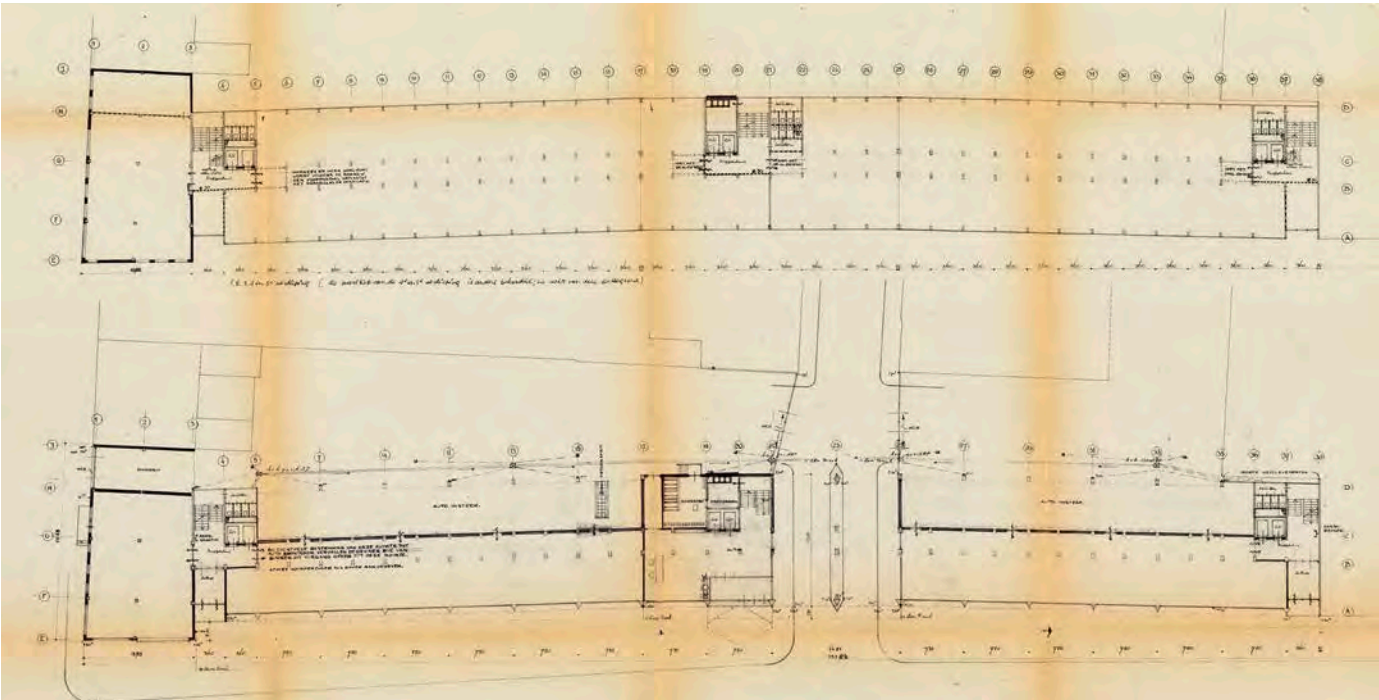


Handwritten correspondence from Arthur Staal to his lawyer, regarding the Metropool/Kop van IJzer case (1992).



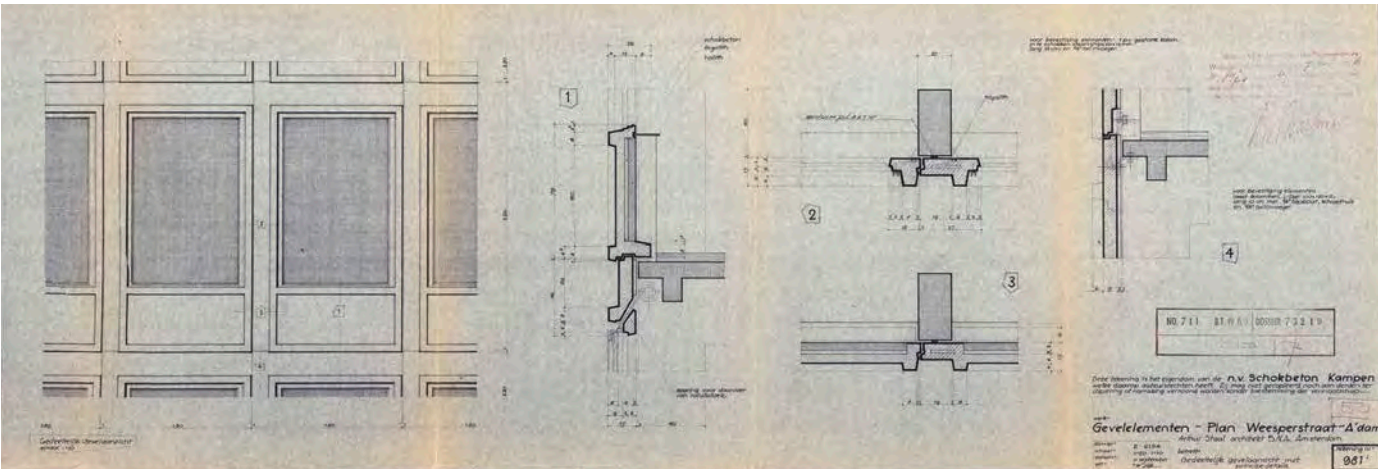
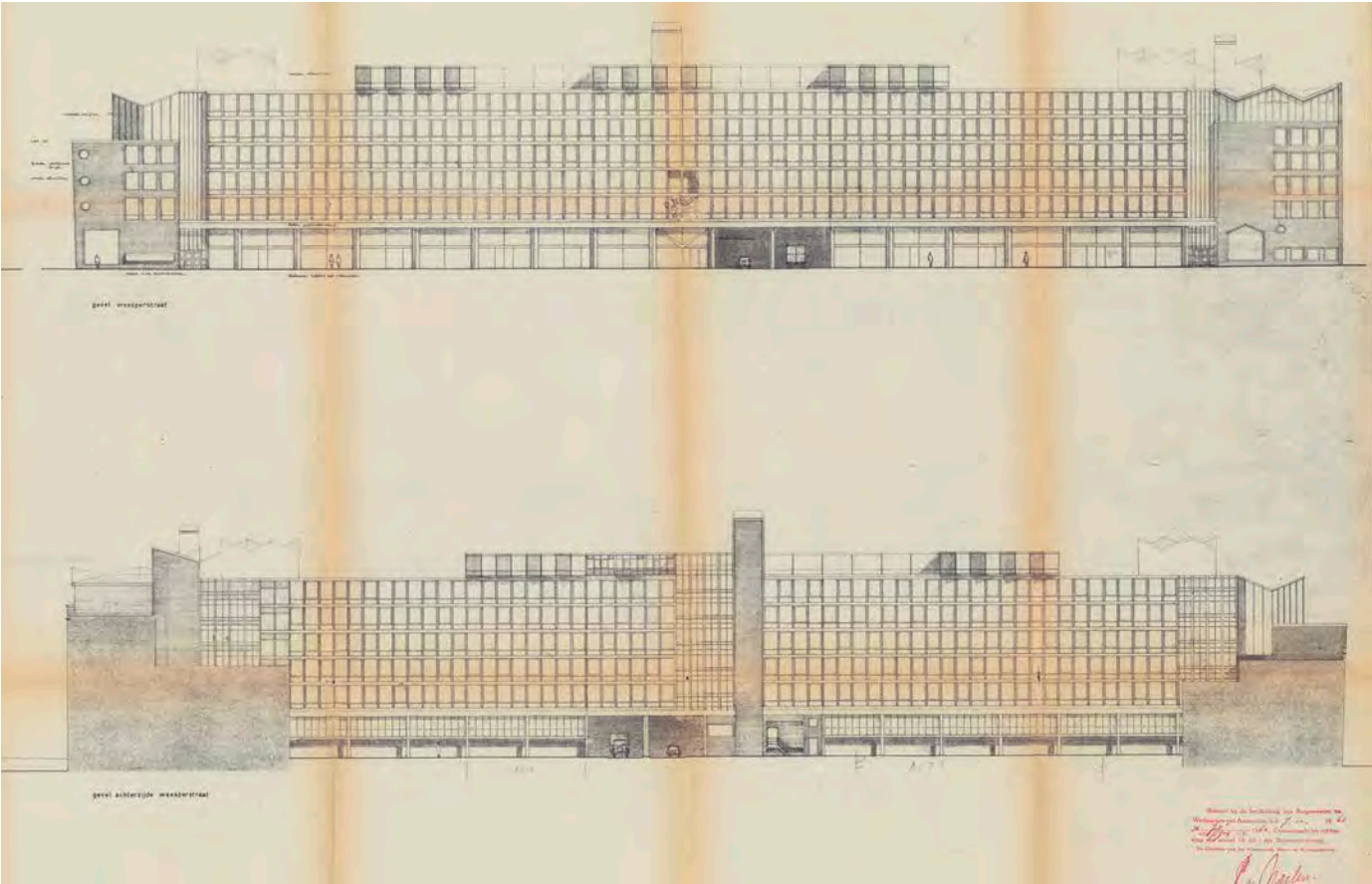
Sketches by Arthur Staal to convince the owners and prevent demolishing (1992).

Original plan drawings of ground floor and 1st-5th floor (1960).



Original drawings showing the north end of the Metropool, the connection 'head' to the adjacent historic building (1960).

Original elevation drawings (1960).



Original drawings of the pre-fabricated concrete facade elements with inlay of dark brown ceramic tiles (1960).

Underpass at the level of the Nieuwe Kerkstraat. Image: Bart van Hoek (2016).



De Metropool as a large building with 'heads' on either side to scale it down towards the canals (1969).

De Metropool with corner at Nieuwe Keizersgracht. Image: Bart van Hoek (2016).



Entrance hall of De Metropool in its original state (1969).



Office building, Frederiksplein, Amsterdam

1961–1965

After the competition for the town hall in 1937, Staal returned to Frederiksplein and designed and built an office building with shops to replace two historic buildings on the corner with Utrechtsestraat. The construction replaces a narrow building on the corner with Utrechtsestraat and an adjacent deeper building on Frederiksplein.

Initially, Staal wanted to replace the two historic buildings with a 'grand gesture', but he met opposition at the aesthetics committee. They suggested that he add more articulation, which led to the current composition of two distinct parts. On the corner plot, Staal designed a solid brick volume, with windows and a clear end facade on Utrechtsestraat, and around the corner the facade had a succession of bays. On the deeper plot, Staal then designed a refined slender facade with aluminum frames, whereby he manages to achieve an enormous richness in plasticity with varying depths.

By applying extensions to the roof and having facade lines run through, this managed to create a cohesive composition. The octagonal windows on the ground floor and the triangular closed 'bay window' protruding over Utrechtsestraat, make this an unmistakably building by Staal. The building is currently being restored by Office Winhov and adapted for the current owner Egeria.



The Utrechtsestraat with the office building with shops on the corner at the Frederiksplein. (1965) De Nederlandsche Bank ['Dutch National Bank'] by Marius Duintjer is visible in the background.

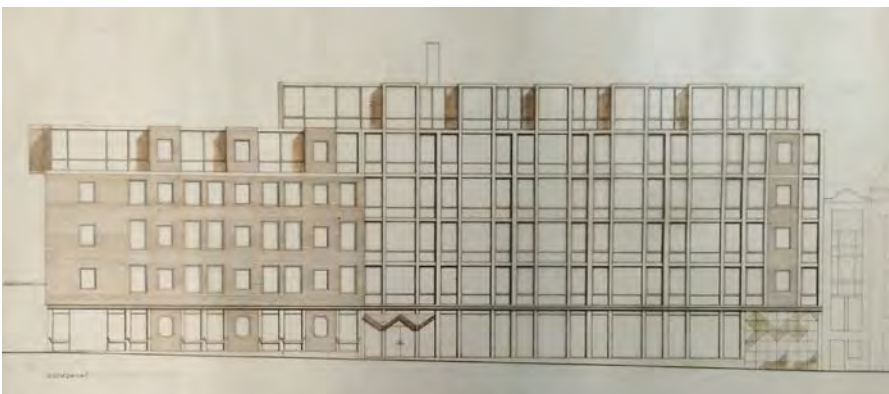


The Utrechtsestraat with the previous two buildings on the Frederiksplein, early 1900s.

The office building seen from the Frederiksplein after completion in the late 1960s.

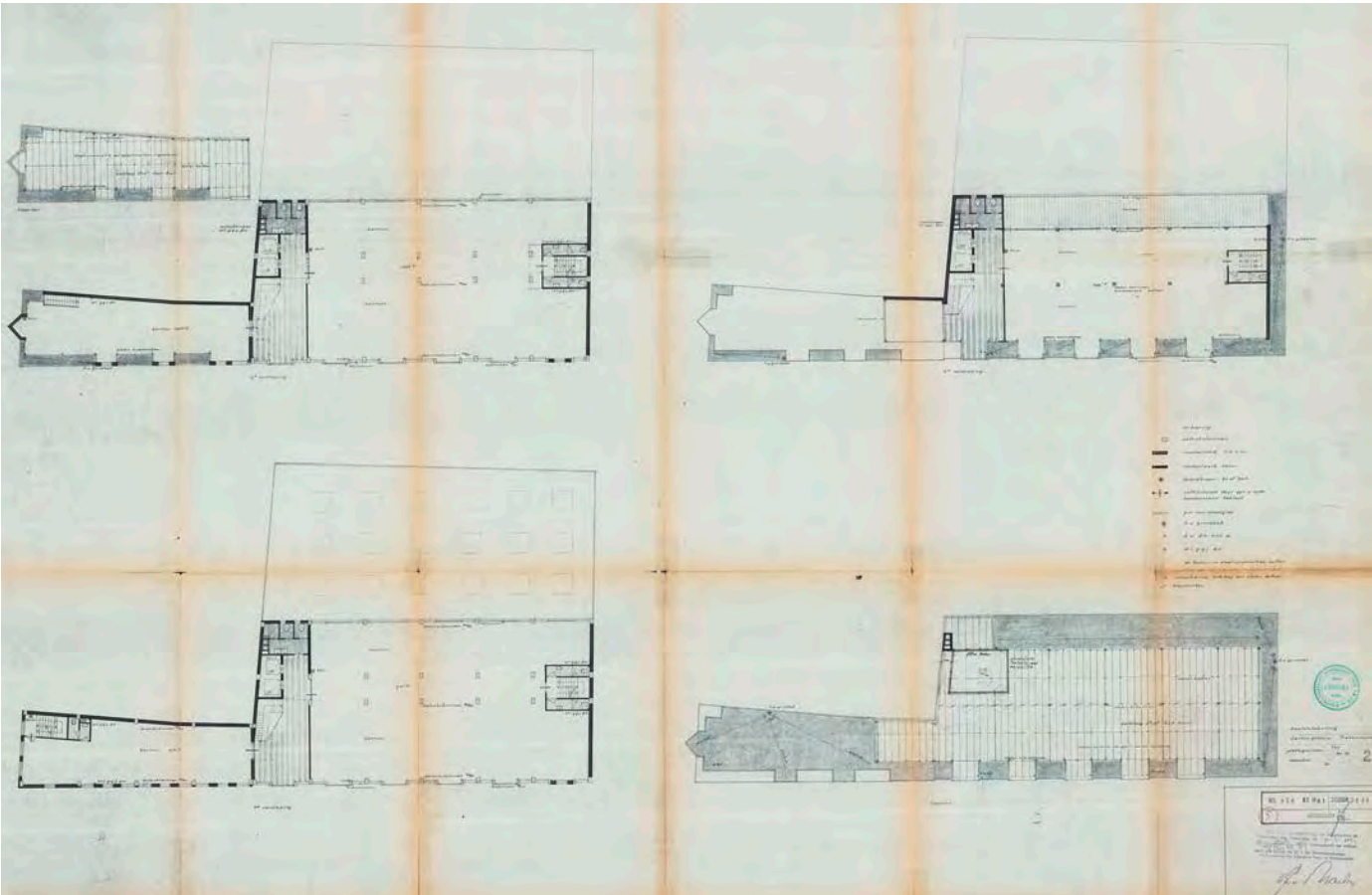


Preliminary facade proposal on the idea of a grand gesture (1961).



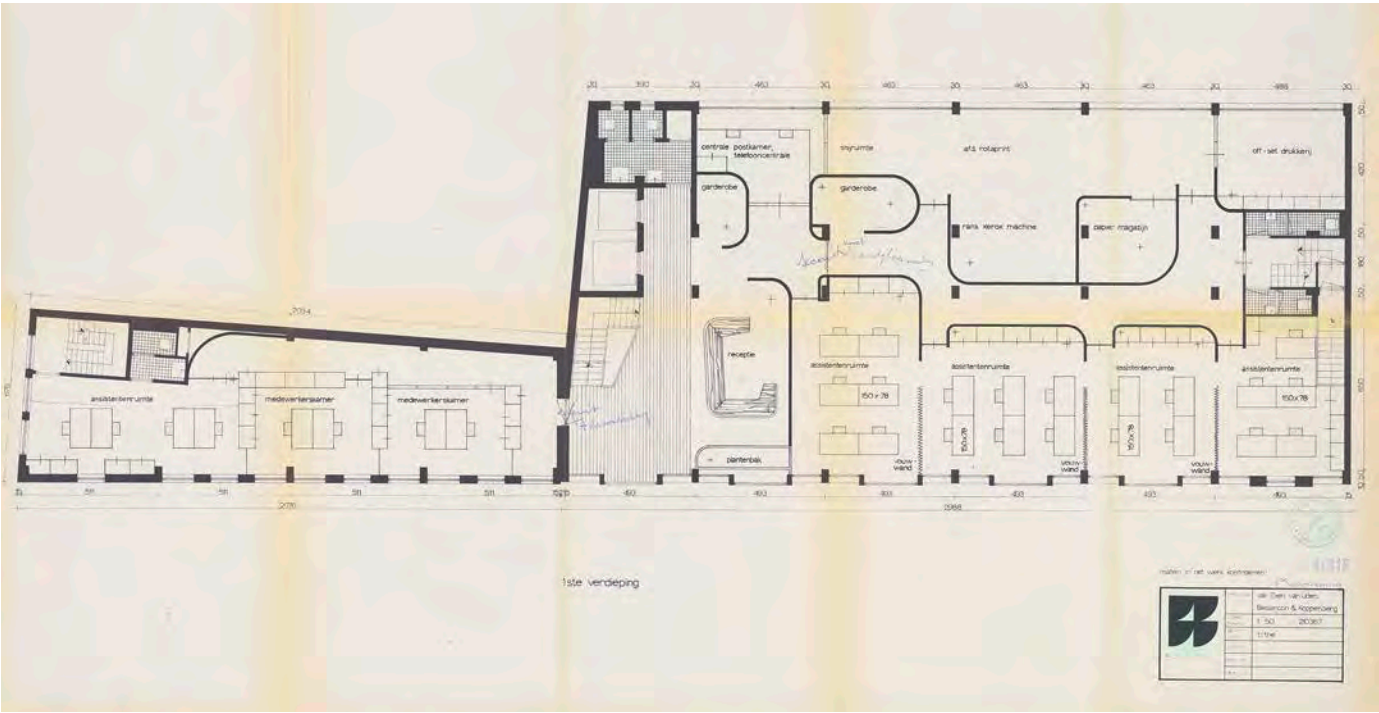
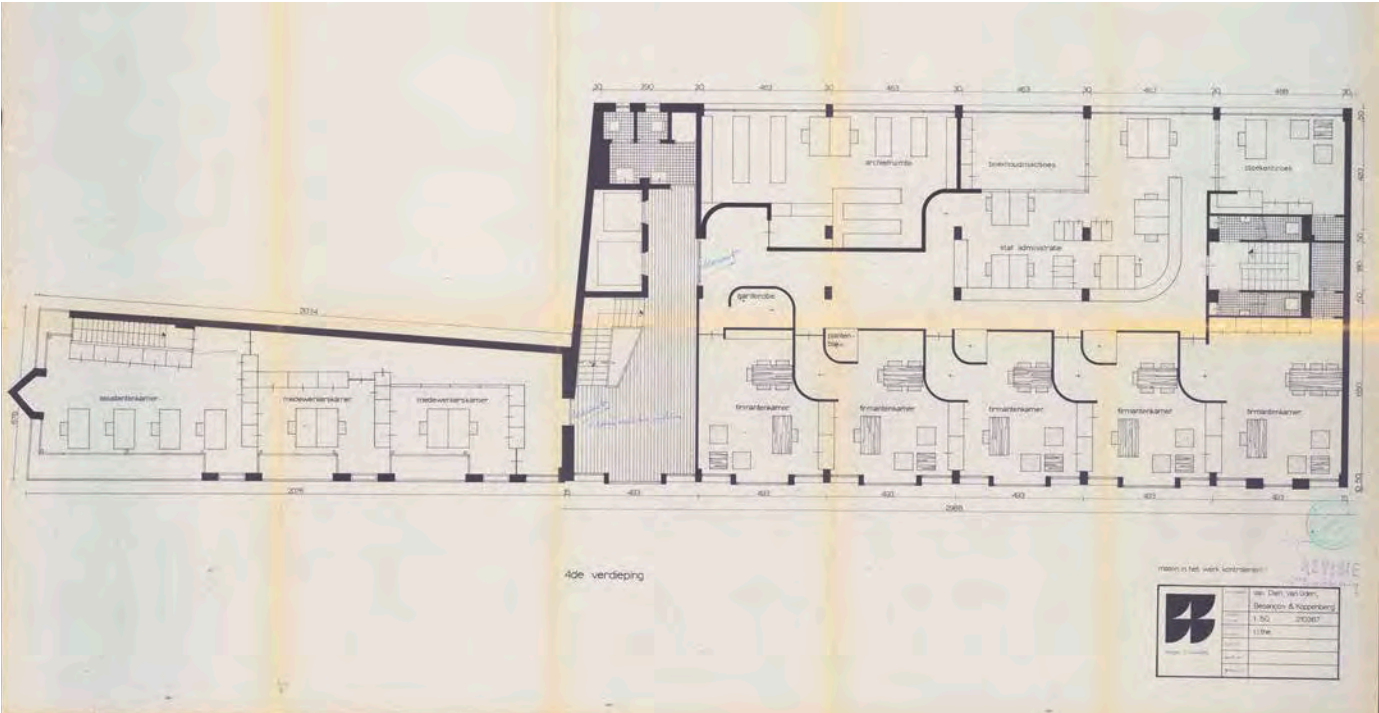
Drawing of the final proposal with the building divided in two complementary parts (1962).

Original drawing of the floorplans by Arthur Staal (1963).



Fredriksplein with the office building at the bottom and De Nederlandsche Bank in the top (late 1960s).

Interior floor plans of the first and fifth floor, with office lay out for the Wisseling partnership (by Bongers & Bovenberg, 1964).





The office building with shops on ground level at the end of the Utrechtsestraat. Image: Bart van Hoek (2020).



The elevation facing the Frederiksplein in the late 1960s, with some opened pivot windows.

Image: Bart van Hoek (2020).



Insurance office, Keizersgracht, Amsterdam

1965–1968

At Keizersgracht 277, close to his own office at number 207, Staal built an office building for the Crediet Verzekerings Maatschappij ('Credit Insurance Company') in the shape of a contemporary canal house as part of a series of linked existing canal houses. It replaced a building of the Creditvereeniging by architect F.W.M. Poggenbeek from 1899. It is a strikingly inconspicuous building with a number of subtle but delicate interventions. To start, Staal applies an asymmetrical facade arranged on a five-column grid, and he 'cuts' on the right side by running a shallow slot along the building's full height and marks the entrance to the building.

The ground floor is lifted above the basement level and can be reached by stairs, just like in historic canal houses. In the middle two bays, Staal pushes the grid one floor higher, creating a typical canal facade, ending with two protruding triangular ornaments, an abstraction of the classical facade termination. A dormer lies like an eagle eye on the roof on the bay of the entrance. In addition, Staal uses large aluminum pivot windows, which, when opened, gave an enormous dynamic to the otherwise quiet front. The building was recently renovated and the exterior largely remained in its original state, except for the pivot windows, which became tilted windows. The building is now part of the *5 Keizers* ['5 Emperors'] office complex of five connected buildings.



Office building at Keizersgracht 277 (1968).



The Creditvereeniging at Keizersgracht 277 by F.W.M. Poggenbeek at the beginning of the 20th century.

A series of connected canal houses in which Arthur Staal had to fit in his design. Staal replaced the third building from left at Keizersgracht 277.



The row of canal houses at Keizersgracht 271–277 (1975).



Office building in between canal houses on Keizersgracht (1968), with the pivot windows that gives the facade a very dynamic appearance.



Main entrance stair to the *piano nobile* with original glass front door and subtle house number 277.



Shell tower, Amsterdam North

1963–1971

Arthur Staal has had a number of loyal clients in his career. The oil company of Royal Dutch Shell was one of the major clients for which Staal has designed and built throughout his entire life. After the service station on the Hobbemakade, he designed a number of research laboratories, a medical centre, offices and the company canteen for Shell on their 'technology campus' in Amsterdam North. The 79-meter Shell tower is the most remarkable and prominent of these designs for Shell and has stood for a long time as a lonely beacon on the north bank of the river IJ. The tower's sleek facade, a grid of dark gravel-concrete, supported by four concrete pylons and topped with a prominent canopy, has been one of the tallest icons in the city for a long time, and for me personally it sparked an early fascination for architecture.

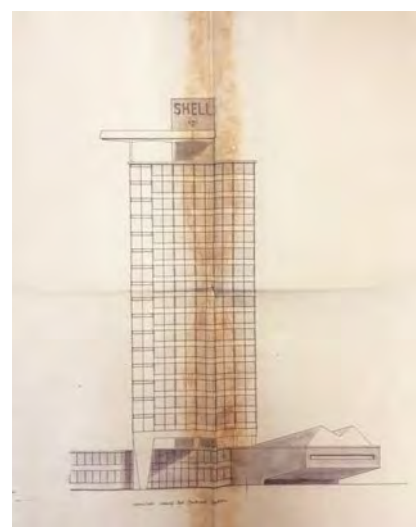


The Shell tower in Amsterdam North.



Preliminary sketch with the tower turned 45° above a low-rise volume. Image: Sandra Guarda, *The Importance of Being Overhoeks*.

The 15 stories on four expressive 'pilotis' are rotated at an angle of 45° ('overhoeks') above a low-rise volume containing the main entrance. The floor plan of the tower is a lift core with service surrounded by office spaces. The original facade consists of a concrete grid with frames with low parapets, with three compartments on each side with high parapets and low skylights. The concrete frames have an ingenious refinement with beveled corners. The tower was topped with an awning made of polyester in four parts with stylized shells cut out. An impressive 'cockpit' in copper underneath the awning provided a fantastic view over the city. Bearing in mind the



Preliminary sketch with a different awning. Image: Sandra Guarda, *The Importance of Being Overhoeks*.

pollution in the industrialized environment of Amsterdam North, the facades are clad with anthracite-colored elements of gravel-concrete. The use of insulating glass, provided with a very thin layer of evaporated gold, gave the tower a golden appearance. In addition to the Shell tower, on the other side of the Buiksloterkanaal, Staal built a canteen for Shell in 1976, with the same black gravel-concrete and expressive concrete pylons as the Shell tower. It is an almost structuralist, lifted single floor structure with a striking pyramid-shaped roofs. In 2014 it is transformed into a cultural center Tolhuistuin.



The Shell canteen building (1976) built close to the Shell tower.

After Shell had moved into a new research center at an adjacent location in Amsterdam North at the beginning of this century, the tower became vacant and one thought to demolish it. After a public pitch in 2012, the tower was transferred to a group of young entrepreneurs from the music industry. Together with Claus & Van Wageningen with OZ Architects, they have transformed the tower into what is now called the *A'DAM Tower*. The tower was stripped-to-the-bone and then rebuilt with a new concrete skin and magnified termination. The transformation of the tower has attempted to respect the original architecture of Arthur Staal and the



Shell canteen (1976) featuring cantilevered concrete structure and gravel concrete floor belts.

design process took place in close consultation with the Staal family, supervisors and monument conservation.

The *A'DAM Tower* is now open 24/7 and offers hotel accommodations, bars & restaurants and office spaces for companies in the music business. The major renovation was necessary to turn it into a public building, to make it more sustainable and especially because of the technical condition of the tower. In the evenings nowadays the tower becomes an exuberant 'light beacon' along the IJ riverbanks. The most striking novelty is the public observation platform on the top as a remnant of the old Shell 'cockpit'. Even after the transformation, the tower is an iconic and quirky building, but in my opinion it has become somewhat out of proportion compared to the original appearance, due to the oversized 'top hat' extension of the tower and the enlarged intermediate member. Nevertheless, the tower could be preserved in this way and given a new life.

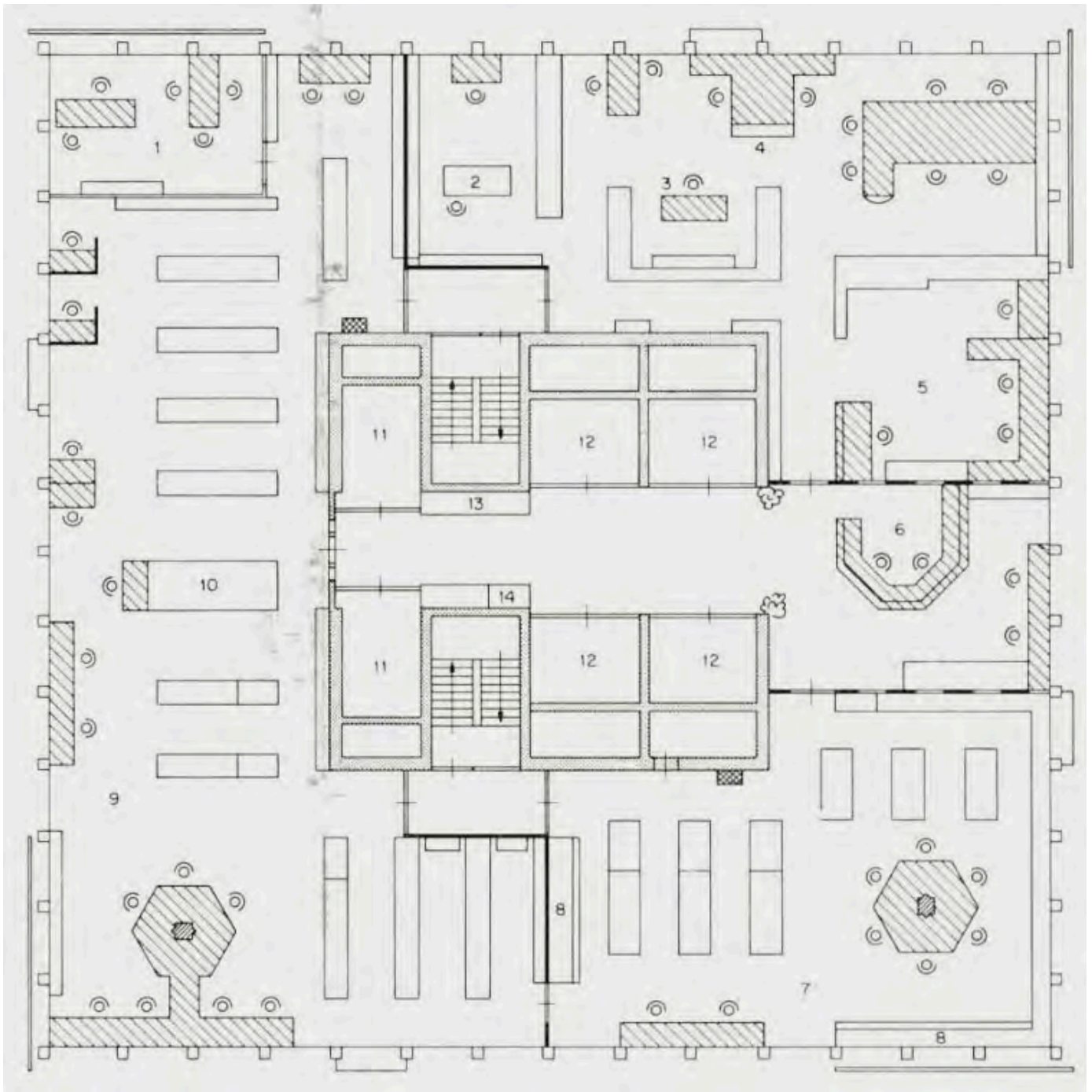


Roof of the Shell canteen (1976) featuring triangular, pyramid-shaped roofstructure.

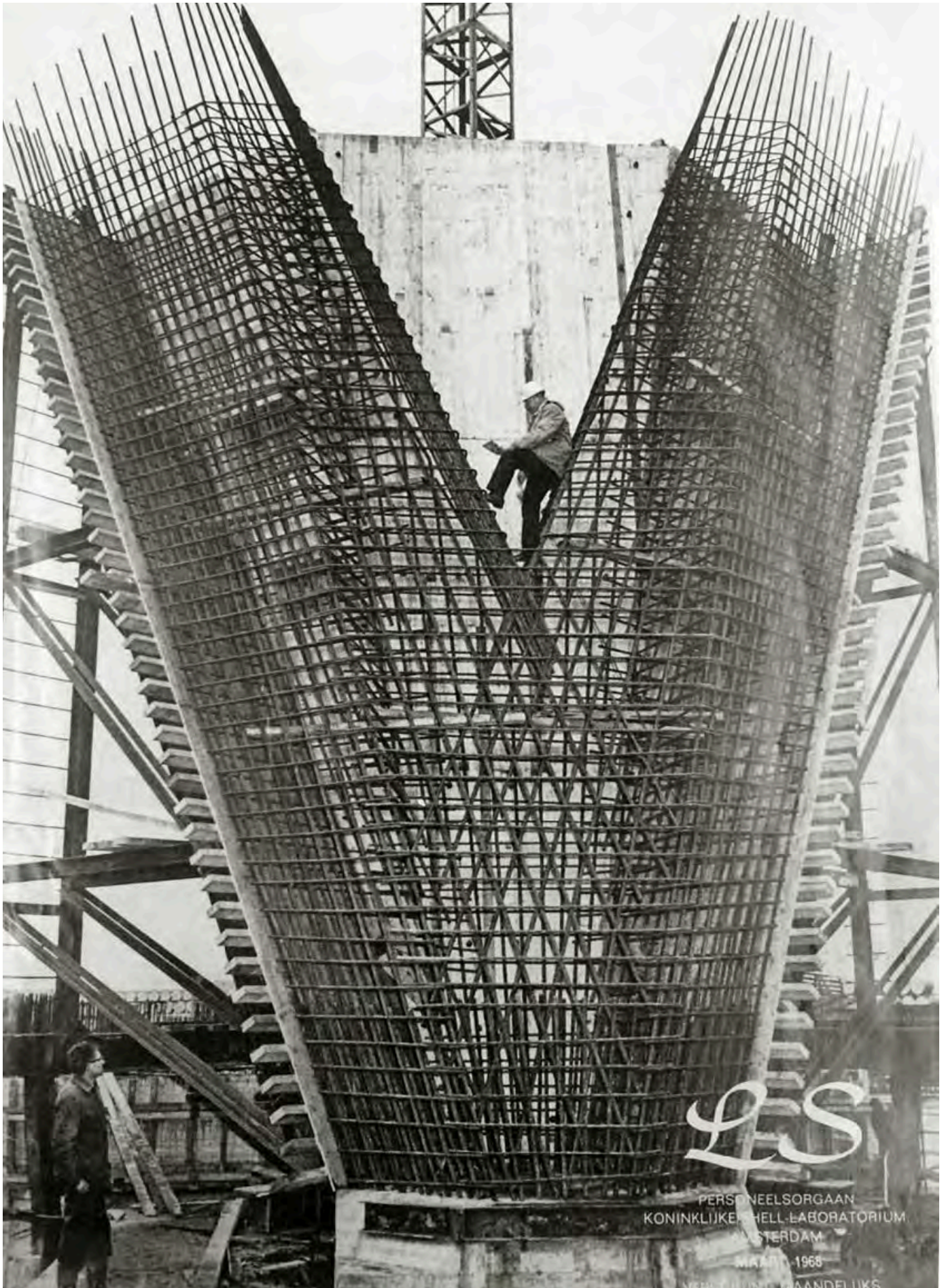


The Shell tower seen from the Buiksloter canal (1989).

General lay-out of the towers floorplan (1969).



Next page:
Overview of the reinforcement and dimensions of one of the legs as featured on the cover of the Shell company magazine *Lab Spiegel* from March 1968. Image: Sandra Guarda, *The Importance of Being Overhoeks*.

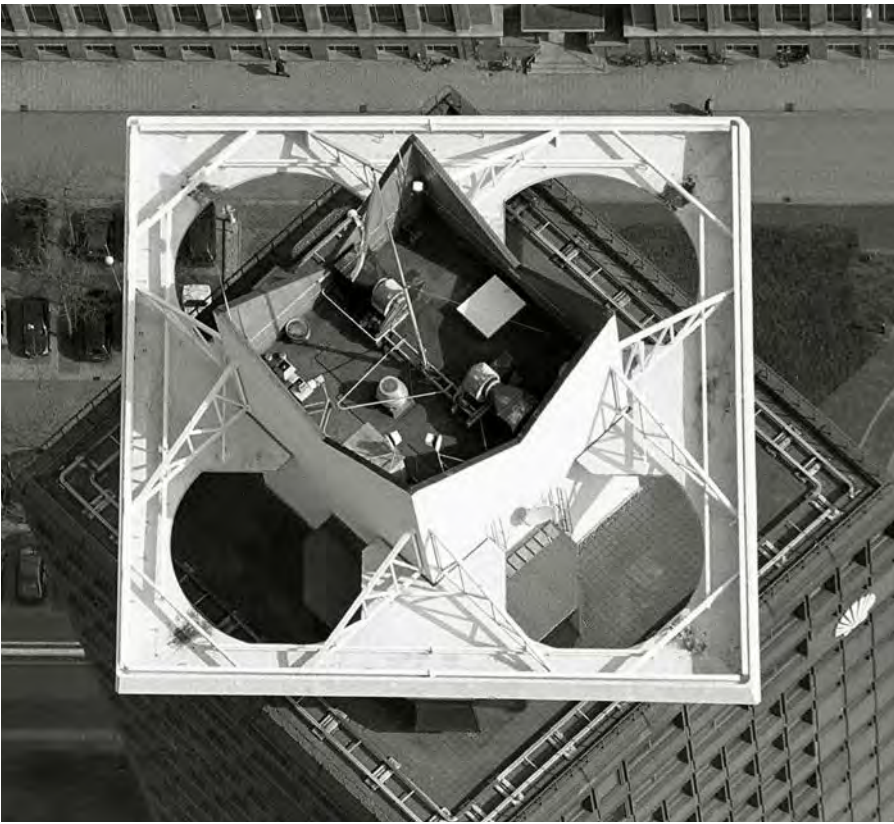


The Shell tower with the Shell Research laboratories (designed by Arthur Staal in 1969) in the early 1970s.



The Shell technology campus with the Shell tower in front and the Shell canteen on right the north banks of the IJ river (1976). Image: Sandra Guarda *The Importance of Being Overhoeks*.

The Shell 'cockpit' underneath the awning provided a magnificent view over the city of Amsterdam. Image: Marcel Lok (2012).



The Shell tower's original awning with stylized Shell figures, with the 'cockpit' underneath at the bottom.



Conclusion

Despite having a small office, Arthur Staal has left an extensive portfolio in which he designed and realized numerous comprehensive projects. The portfolio of his architectural firm includes 37 residential projects, 58 offices and other commercial buildings, 36 private homes, and several facilities for recreational, cultural and religious activities (although not all were implemented). He has worked from interiors and small structures to very large-scale projects.

One of the Staal's most important clients was the Royal Dutch Shell oil company, with which he had a long-term relationship between 1953 and 1976 and was commissioned for at least 11 buildings, including gas stations, a medical center, laboratories, offices and a company restaurant. His clients admired him for his charm and talent. He approached everyone in the same way with respect for every person, from the intern to the managing director.

Following in his father's footsteps – one of the most important architects of his generation – it is fascinating to see how Arthur Staal developed such a strong and distinctive oeuvre with his very own signature. Without a doubt, his travels around the Mediterranean had a great deal of influence on his personal development, although at a first glance you may not notice direct influences of Greek or Roman architecture in his work. But perhaps the Classical philosophy is reflected in his intentions to give everything a thoughtful form. Designing everything in detail with a reason, is therefore a legacy of these travels. Even now we can see that in his range of projects: from petrol stations to skyline-defining landmarks, no project was too small or too large for his attention to detail.

According to Karin Staal, daughter of Arthur, he was a very amiable man and very loyal in his friendships. He was a modest person who did not like to make a fuss. He rarely went to parties and drinks. He liked to listen to classical music and to walk through the city or in the dunes. That was what he liked to do. He needed a warm and harmonious family life. They lived in a simple apartment on the Lijnbaansgracht from which he preferred to walk to his office at Keizersgracht 207, if his schedule allowed him to do so.

“I am an individualist. That is why no more than five people work for me. Too many people makes me feel hunted. I prefer to do many things myself. Then I don't have to explain to someone else how I want it. Yes, you could say that I am an individualist.”

© Arthur Staal



Arthur Staal in the Middle East during one of his travels (1939). Image: Private Archive Karin Staal.

It is very sad to see that Staal's built legacy is vulnerable and that many of his buildings have not stood the test of time, are mutilated or even demolished. Arthur Staal was a humble man who wanted the work to speak for itself. His idiosyncratic work is mostly of high architectural quality, but due to a lack of appreciation and understanding, and the way people interact with certain distinct architecture from the recent past, much has 'disappeared'. An impeccable example is a sheer 'glass box' designed for an office & showroom for the Joosten motorboat company on Joan Muyskenweg 15. The building exists up to this day but it is hardly recognisable*. Also very few are left of his carefully designed interiors, often decorated with natural stone and other luxurious materials and equipped with good furniture and art works.

*Click [here](#).



Interior of the Amro bank branch in the Waterlooplein project, with refined white marble and hexagonal shaped windows in the elevation (all demolished).

Office & showroom for Joosten (1965) on Joan Muyskenweg 15.



However, there are still buildings which are in good hands that receive respectful treatment and keep the intentions of Staal alive, like is the case with the Metropool, and in the current transformations of the building on the Haarlemmerplein (by architect Ana Rocha) and the renovation of the office building on the Frederiksplein by Office Winhov. I sincerely hope this issue of Local Heroes will contribute to the increase in interest and appreciation of the work of Arthur Staal and that the work will be treated with more awareness and respect.



Canal house of Arthur Staal and his family on Lijnbaansgracht 324–326 (left of the alley). Image: City Archive Amsterdam, C.P. Schaap (1961).

Shell tower with laboratories after completion in the early 1970s.



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