

Lau Peters



Sint-Nicolaas Complex.

Although you may have walked past his work in Amsterdam, Lau Peters remains an unknown architect, due to how seamlessly his buildings blend into their surrounding neighbourhoods. His most prominent project is perhaps the collection of buildings that form the Sint-Nicolaas complex, which has been the subject of recent discussion regarding their further adaptation.

Early Life

Laurentius Theodorus Franciscus Peters was born in Amsterdam in 1900. His father, Johannes Peters (1867–1949) was a *zelfbouwer*, an independent carpenter who worked for small construction companies. The influence of his practical hands-on approach formed the foundation for Lau Peters' professional development.

“The architects who benefit us most may be those generous enough to lay aside their claims to genius in order to devote themselves to assembling graceful but predominantly unoriginal boxes.”

Ⓢ Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*

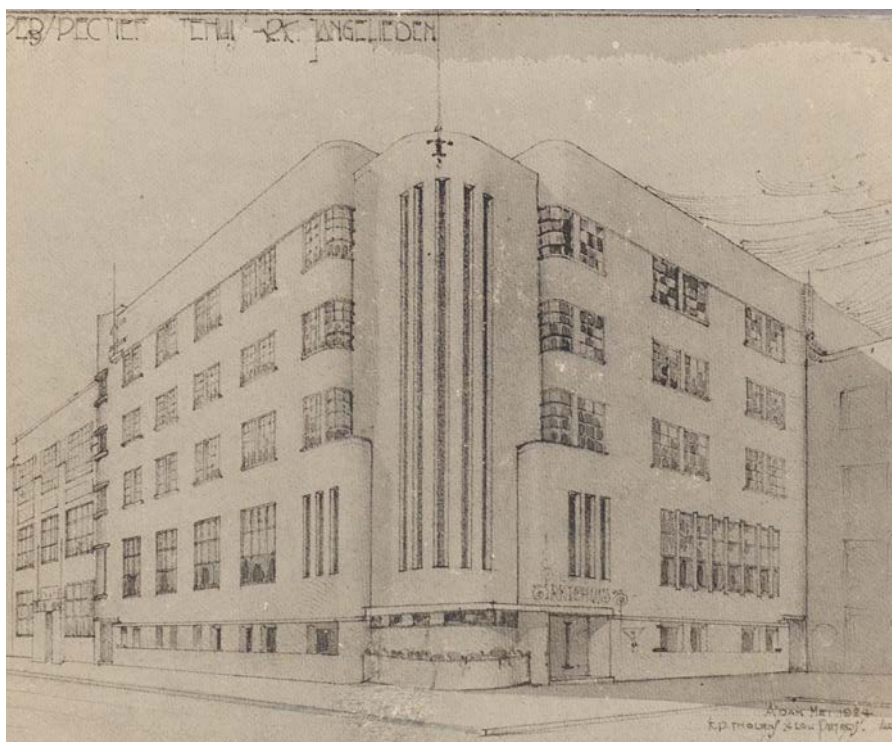
Coming from a working class family, his pursuit of the architectural vocation was unusual and yet, in many ways he did not follow the traditional trajectory of his contemporaries. Unlike other aspiring architects, Lau did not follow the mainstream curriculum offered at the Delft University of Technology. Instead, he was educated at a technical school. After completing his HBS (Dutch Higher Civic School), Lau studied architecture as his MTS subject (Secondary Technical School) in Utrecht. He first started to work as an architectural draftsman with Amsterdam architect Rijnja while completing evening courses in architecture.

Roman Catholic Collaborations

Lau Peters' family had a Catholic background, and his father was a member of Amsterdam City Council, representing the Catholic State Party. Lau continued his family's Catholic roots. He could be described as a moderate Catholic – he accepted the Church's ideas without question, yet he also did not limit himself by adhering to the ascetic lifestyle. His Catholic background played a larger role in his professional life than in his personal life, as Dutch society at the time was allocated along religious lines, and this was also true for architecture. Catholic architects were only hired by Catholic clients, supported by Catholic subcontractors. Therefore, his early work was embedded in this network.



Lau Peters, March 27, 1931.



Home for Roman Catholic Youths (Het Nieuwe Instituut).

From 1922–1924 he worked with KP Tholens, who has designed a number of Catholic Churches in Amsterdam. Their collaborative design drawing for a home for Roman Catholic Youths can be found in the National Archives. Peters' signature can also be found on Tholens' design for the Hanzebank in Alkmaar. The parochial nature of the Catholic community meant that projects were appointed by association, rather than merit. Although Tholens built the Augustine church on Postjesweg, Peters was a church board member, and therefore the latter was commissioned to build homes for the youth and the elderly for this church.

Several buildings within the Roman Catholic neighbourhood around the Stephanus Church on Kamperfoelieweg was also designed by Peters, even though the church itself was built by Tholens. This marked the end of the collaboration between Tholens and Peters, and Peters went on to establish an independent practice in 1926. Tholens continued his work for religious institutions while Peters shifted his focus to the private market. Based on the stamps on his drawings, he worked at Amstel 242 at one point of his early career.

Independence

As an independent architect, Peters continued his work for the Catholic Church. Along with P. Guypers, J. Bekkers and W. Blaisse, he was counted among their 'working members'. Lau Peters had a very charming and outgoing nature, which made him welcome in other circles. In the inter-war period, Peters designed multi-family residential developments outside the historic core. His homes can be found in the Plan Zuid neighbourhoods between the Amstel River and the Schinkel, the newly-incorporated districts in the west, and recently-annexed Watergraafsmeer in the east.

Lau was a good designer, with an eye for detail. Thanks to his unconventional background, his design process was done in reverse – the construction comes first, followed by the concept. A well-designed foundational unit was completed first, which was then replicated, and only at the end was the ensemble's aesthetic considered. This gives Lau's buildings a solid appearance, with conservative rather than artistic details, which are often repeated across his buildings. The Late Amsterdam School, a sober contrast to the whimsical expression of their predecessors, was often

a point of reference for Peters, and he also admired Piet Zandstra and Scandinavian design.

Lau saw architecture more as a practical necessity rather than a theoretical and academic discipline. Therefore he committed himself to building production and, unlike his contemporaries, he did not embark on the European architectural study tours. He visited Berlin and Rome, but for leisure rather than for work. He seemed to have little interest in exploring architecture outside of Amsterdam, yet he developed a familiarity with the architecture of Amsterdam. This can be seen in his numerous photos in the Amsterdam City Archives.

Personal Life

Lau Peters' father had an extensive business network, and many of these small construction firms also became Lau's first clients. Through this network, he also met the daughter of a well-established 'gentleman' contractor. They were married in February 1928, and had eight children afterwards. While Lau came from the working-class, his wife's family was affluent, and this socio-economic disparity of their

Lau Peters and his wife at the ground-breaking ceremony for Sint-Nicolaas Complex.



backgrounds had a role in their family dynamics. His wife wanted to live in the upper-class Apollo district, while Lau felt out of place there. To compromise, the family settled in the middle-class neighbourhood of Surinameplein, but would send their children to the prestigious schools in Zuid.

Lau was not particularly affectionate, though it was clear that he had wanted to elevate his family above his working-class origins, and to provide them with the means to support themselves. Lau was frequently late for dinner as he spent his afternoons networking, and dedicated Sunday afternoons to making sketches for his projects. Although he was not particularly attentive, Lau charted a course for each of his children to ensure they had a chance to succeed professionally.

As the firstborn son, Ted was assigned to follow in his father's footsteps as an architect. Ted recalls that his father did what he had to do to 'toughen' him up. Yet he also built up his son's independence by trusting him with tasks, such as making presentations to the City's beauty committee on his own.

Post-War Projects and Later Life

During the uncertainty of World War II, there was a decreased demand for new buildings, so Peters was commissioned by the city to measure monumental buildings. At the end of the war, there were fewer Catholic architects, which opened up opportunities for Lau Peters. He continued his residential projects during the post-war rebuilding in Amsterdam, with projects further out in Slotermeer and north of the IJ. This was also when his most prominent project was realized: The Sint-Nicolaas complex at Beatrix Park, comprising of the Lyceum, the Chapel, and the Monastery.

Lau Peters passed away in 1969. He is survived by his son, Ted, who had followed in his footsteps as an architect and was his father's partner in the Sint-Nicolaas projects.

1900 Lau Peters born

1922 Collaboration with Tholens
–24

1926 Independence

Period influenced
by The New Amsterdam School

1940 Second World War
–45

Period influenced
by Modernism

1969 Death

1926–1940

Projects from the Late Amsterdam School

Lau Peters' style had a versatility due to the historical context of his active years, bridging two generations of architects and two expansion plans. His earliest works were part of the realization of Plan Zuid, the 1915 southern expansion plan by Berlage, and its subsequent phase, the Plan West designed by Gratama and Hulshoff. These plans were inspired by the Baroque master plans implemented in North American and other European cities, particularly Haussmann's monumental boulevards in Paris. The structure was defined by axial thoroughfares, enclosed and enhanced by long street walls.

This departure from the distinctive verticality of traditional Dutch architecture was a result of the 1901 Housing Act. Increased housing demand led to a mass production of social housing, efficiently constructed with standardized floorplans. The aesthetic unity of the Parisian street-wall was discarded so that Dutch architects had an opportunity to express themselves and to make their mark. The continuous façade blocks were divided and assigned to various architects, who were asked to design the facades in their own style, while ensuring a visual continuity with adjacent facades. This characteristic principle of organized complexity was an interaction between the order regulated by the buildings' size and mass and the allowance of individual self-expression. This philosophy can be seen in the Golden Age canal homes, and continues to guide twentieth century domestic architecture.

Lau Peter's pre-war residential projects participate in this mundane monumentality of Amsterdam. He was influenced by the second generation of the Amsterdam School, which was a more restrained style compared to the whimsical facades of his predecessors. Lau's homes exude a stillness and a sense of permanence due to his consistent usage of brick walls, an echo of Dutch traditional architecture on a larger scale. The earlier generation of the Amsterdam School built a hint of movement into their facades, with rounded details that evoke the movement of wind and water, whereas Lau Peters' facades are characterized by a steady rhythm of doorways, stairwells and windows. A frequent feature in his work from this era is a white diadem of windows at the roof-line, this signature bringing a sense of levity to his sober work.

Projects from this era:

- 1927 Transvaal district
- 1928 Apollo district
- 1929 Mercator district
- 1931 Rivieren district
- 1932 West Indische district
- Stadion district
- Watergraafsmeer
- 1934 Rijn district
- 1935 Schinkel district
- Bos en Lommer
- 1936 Van Galen district
- 1940 Augustine church

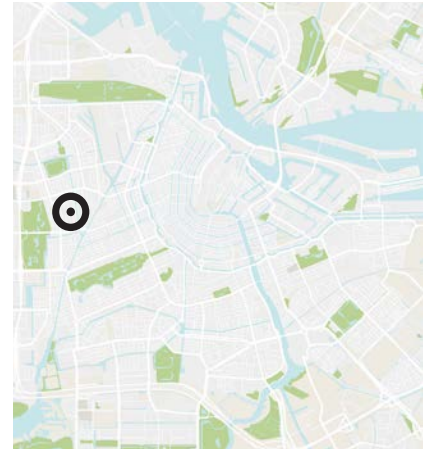
1925–27, Transvaal district:
two rows of multi-storey homes.



1926–28, Apollo district.

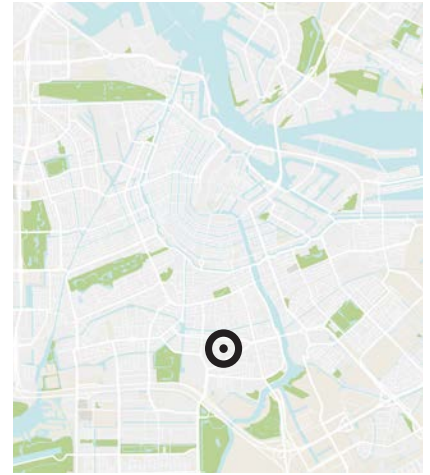


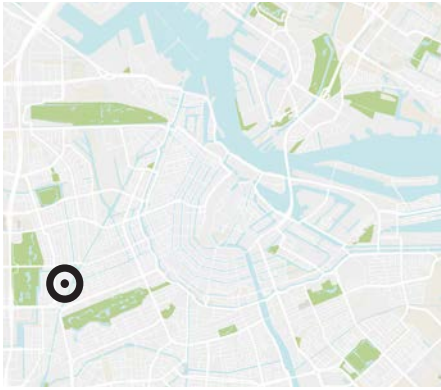
This façade along Admiralengracht, at 300 meters, is well over the length of an average city block. However, it feels neither oppressive nor monotonous. Segments of the façade has been assigned to various architects, who bring their personal expression through their choice of architectural features, such as windows, doors, balconies, and entrances. The façade is further broken up with vertically defined gabled segments. One segment transitions seamlessly to the next through a sensitive choice of features and materials that respond to adjacent segments. This creates a pleasing effect and walking along these facades are akin to enjoying a musical piece, played by a different instrument at each iteration. Lau Peters designed the first segment at Admiralengracht, starting from Davisstraat, and the segment along Marcopolostraat starting at Cabotstraat.

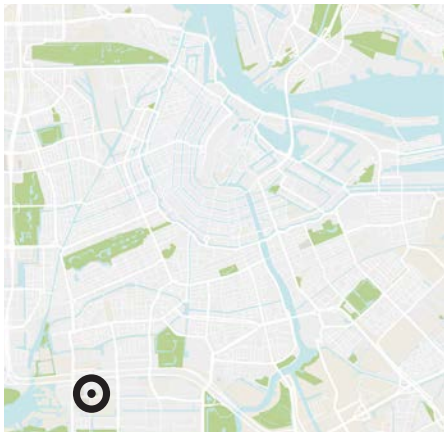


1928–31, Rivieren district.

Another example of Lau Peter's work within the context of organized complexity is his scattering of buildings around Rivieren district. His portion of the facades form a whole with the adjacent segments designed by other architects, all of which were built in the same style of the tightened Amsterdam School. He responds to the tower of the school at the corner of Dongestraat and Dintelstraat by placing an echoing tower on his building at the opposite corner. Here we also see the fractal domesticity of Amsterdam's public-private transitions, where intimate semi-private spaces – parks, playgrounds and sports fields – are enclosed by blocks, and a collection of these units combine to form a neighbourhood.



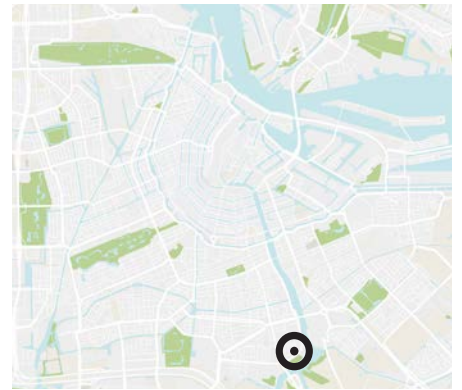


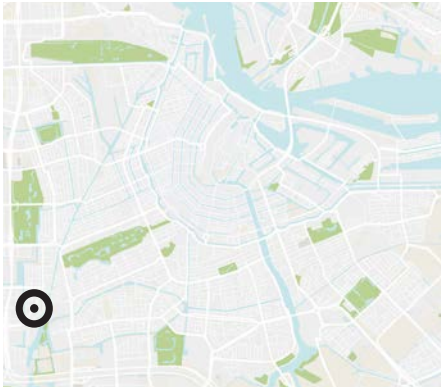


1930–32, Watergraafsmeer.

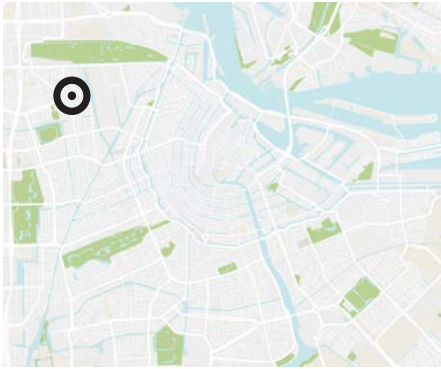


1934, Rijn district.

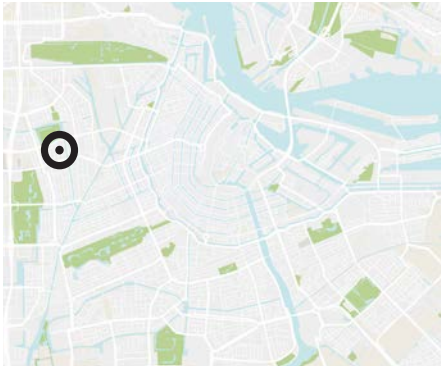




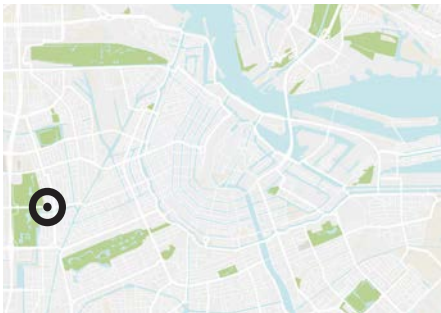
1935, Bos en Lommer 4-storey building with a mix of homes, shops and storage.



1933–36, Van Galen district formerly the Gijsbert Bakker Foundation, homes for senior citizens.



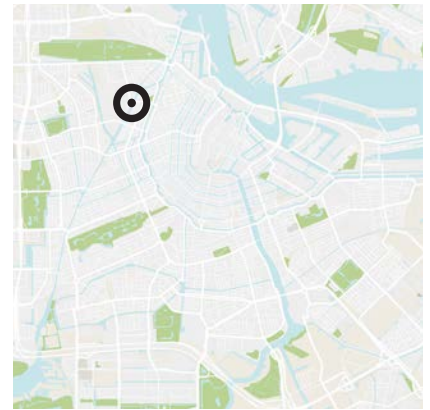
1940, Augustine church residential adapted from the Augustine church complex by Tholens.



1942

Transitional Period: Paint Factory

During the war there was a decreased demand for new architecture, although Peters did receive one assignment: The Wodan Paint and Lacquer factory, the supplier of the white paint for municipality road markings. One of the only remnants of the industrial history of Kostverlorenvaart, the front was used as an office while the production was in the rear annex. This building was described by *De Tijd* as “Dudokian”, and represented a visual stylistic transition for Peters: the brick facades had traditional echoes, while the steel frames foreshadowed his Modern post-war designs. This has been monumentalized in 2016.



1942 Paint Factory

1940 Second World War
–45



1950–63

Featured Projects from the Modern Era

The General Expansion Plan by van Eesteren provided the spatial backdrop for Lau Peters' post-war work. Although the AUP was completed in 1934, it was not executed until after World War 2. This was a general plan echoing the principles of Modernism. Basic functions of day-to-day life – living, working, recreation, traffic – were to be separated into zones. Urban design became more abstract, more closely associated with social sciences than architecture. Buildings were to follow the principles of light, air, and space. The traditional neighbourhood structure of green spaces enclosed by buildings was turned inside out – it was now nature that surrounded the buildings, which were spaced out to ensure circulation and south-oriented to maximize sunlight.

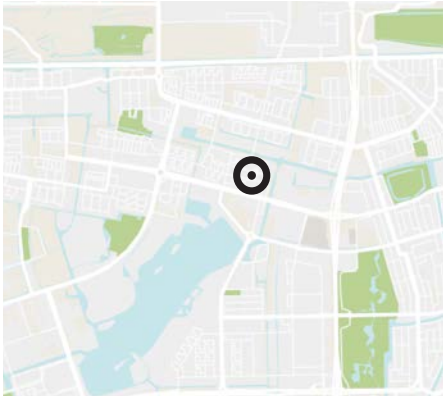
In the same way, Lau Peters' post-war work was influenced by the modernist principles of rationalism and functionalism, where every feature is justified by its contribution to the building. His architectural style evolved along with this change in philosophy, and we see an aesthetic departure from his earlier work. Facades were smoothed out, as brick was replaced by plaster, and windows were enlarged and installed in less substantial frames.

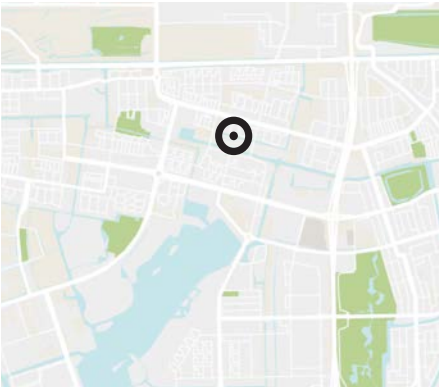
These post-war neighbourhoods were located further away from the city. Most are found in the West around the newly-created Slotermeer, and the completion of the IJ Tunnel in 1968 opened the north for development. These spacious new neighbourhoods had an airier typology. Buildings were a regular rotation of prototypes that were 'stamped' throughout parks, and neighbourhoods were self-contained units with their own schools, playgrounds, community amenities and shopping areas.

Projects from this era:

- 1953 Jan van Galenstraat
- 1954 Noordoost
- 1955 Sint-Nicolaas Lyceum
- 1957 Noorderhof
- 1958 Sint-Nicolaas Chapel
- 1960 Overtoomse Veld
- 1963 Church Jan de Doper
- 1967 Buiksloot
- 1969 Buikslotermeer

1953, Jan van Galenstraat
2-storey rowhomes.

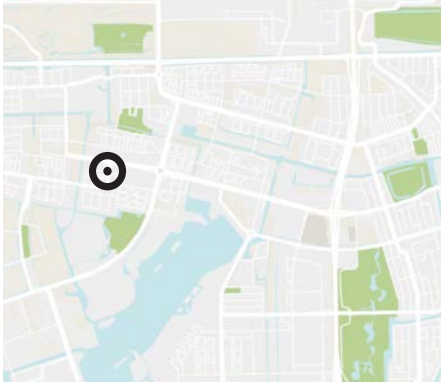




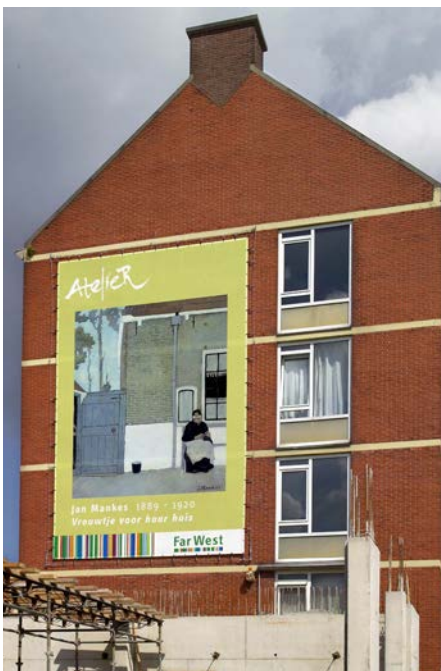
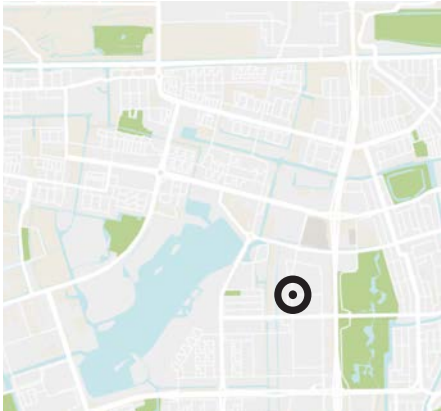
1953–54, Noordoost: Collaboration with A. Evers and G.J.M. Sarlemijn, street level amenities with homes above and 4-storey building with garden rooms and storage.

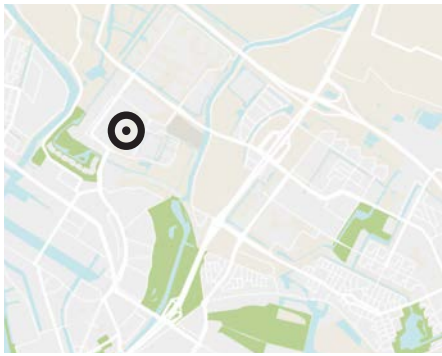


1954–57, Noorderhof 3- to 4-storey buildings with ground floor amenities and residential above.

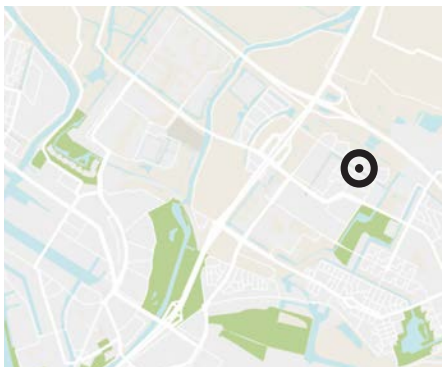


1960, Overtoomse Veld: 6-storey buildings with ground floor amenities and residential above.





1967, Buiksloot: 4-storey gallery homes with storage and garages.



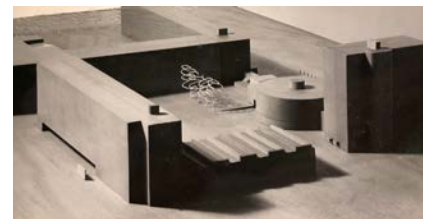
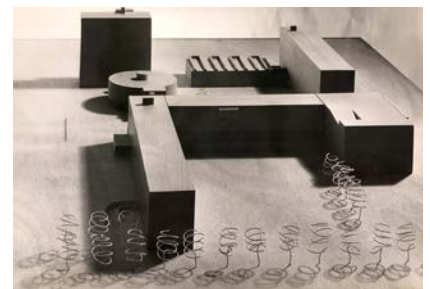
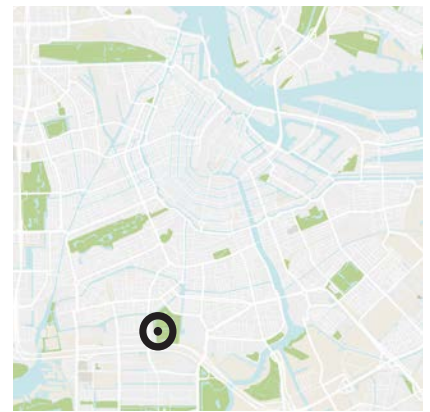
1967–69, Buikslotermeer:
3- to 4-storey building with gallery homes over garages.

Sint-Nicolaas Complex

After the war, Lau Peters continued to receive religious commissions, all of which were designed with a modernist approach. In 1955, he was tasked with designing the Sint-Nicolaas Lyceum on Prinses Irenestraat, an opportunity that allowed him to collaborate with his son Ted Peters, and also Ben Spangberg. The first part of the project, the A&B Wing, was completed in 1959, followed by the C&D Wing in 1961. When the Sint-Nicolaas Lyceum merged with the Pius MMS (later known as Pius Havo) in 1973, an overhead bridge was added to link the two school sections. It's noteworthy that the design of the monastery was primarily led by Ted (Lau's son).

The traditionalism of the religious educational function was juxtaposed by its modernist functional style. The entire building was approximately 13 meters tall with a partially-sunken basement. Each of the three floors had its own colour scheme, and corridors lined classrooms on one side, and expansive windows on the other, creating a light and airy interior. The distinctive relationship between the Roman Catholicism and modernist style was rare, as this was one of the few large-scale religious educational institutions built after the war. Therefore, Heemschut and Cuypers-genootschap – a preservation society for post-war buildings – have proposed to have this building designated as a municipal monument.

However, the school had begun to outgrow the original building. The 45 square-meter classrooms were too small



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to meet the current regulations, so in 2012 they were relocated to an adjacent new building on Beethovenstraat. A vote was conducted on the future use for the now-vacant school, and participants were asked whether it should be used as a museum, park or arts incubator. The incubator won by a wide margin and for a time, the building was home to Kunstvlaai, a hosting platform for artist-led initiatives.

The long-term future of the building is still in question. Shriya Malhotra of Partizaning, a participatory urban replanning collective, loved the simplicity of the building and its departure from the ego-driven modernism of its contemporaries. Due to its openness and flexibility, she believed in its potential to contribute to the area's liveliness and diversity. Klaas de Boer, the director of the Zuidas Development Office, also stated that there must be "room for the unexpected...only if there is no good alternative, demolition will take place".

However, former teachers who have spent significant time in the building believed that its fifty-year-old standards are no longer practical. High heating costs, asbestos and public pressure to expand Beatrixpark contributed to the final decision to demolish the former Lyceum. As a final tribute to its role in arts incubation, artist Marjan Teeuwen was commissioned to use demolition process of the building as a canvas for a temporary art installation, which she named "Destroyed House".





The Monastery and Chapel form the other portion of the Sint-Nicolaas complex, and, like the Lyceum, were juxtapositions between traditional functions in a modern setting. Due to increasing secularism in Dutch society, the religious functions were gradually lost over time. The monastery (1958) was the last one built in Amsterdam, and the last priest left in 1998. Advocacy groups urged for the two buildings to be monumentalized, but only the chapel was designated.

The chapel was a sparse, brutalist round volume, which was a departure from the typically-ornate Catholic buildings. The main chapel is located on the second floor, encircled by a wide walkway, and there were originally 14 chapels on the first floor so that all the priests can celebrate Mass at the same time. Since the departure of its religious functions, the chapel has been occupied by squatters, the Sandberg Institute, a

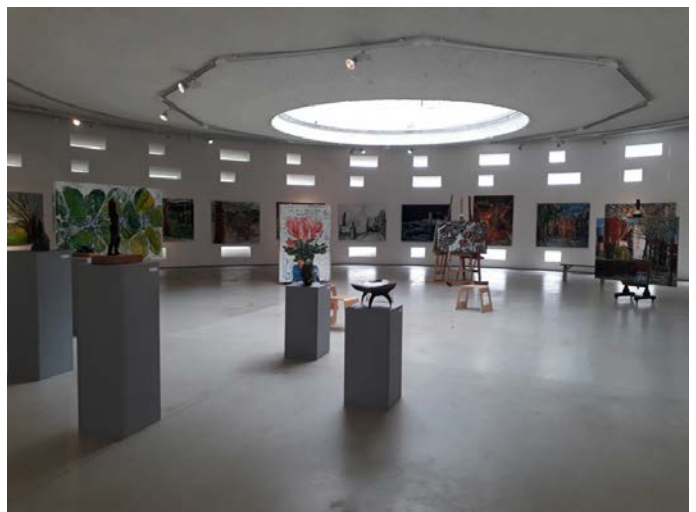
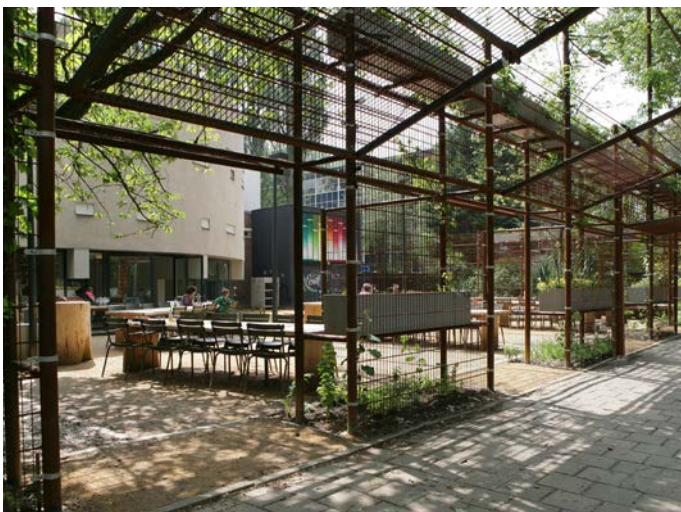


design museum, exhibitions, conferences, cinemas, and live-work spaces for artists.

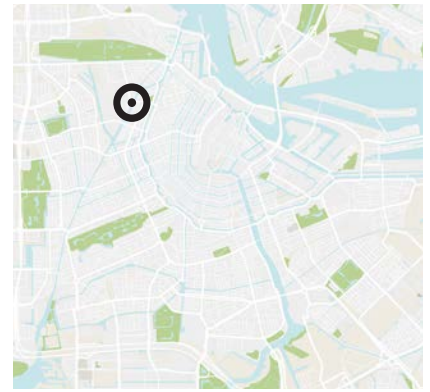
In 2007, the chapel was adapted into a restaurant by Studio Muller van Tol. The minimalist structure with a cherry blossom garden was a reflection of Restaurant As' simple menu which highlighted local produce. Deborah Schilperoort, the founder, said she was drawn to the contrast between the old and new, as well as its parklike setting within the business district. As this temporary use comes to an end, the city is now considering the chapel's future.

An October 2019 proposal to use the two buildings to establish a branch of the Conservatory has been shelved. The buildings are still awaiting a permanent purpose and are currently being used by the municipality of Amsterdam as temporary refugee housing.





As secularism continues to rise, older cities are confronted with the challenge of dealing with once-prominent religious institutions, how to adapt them in a way that recognizes their religious past while making the space available and relevant to current society. Although many elements from religion are now obsolete, there are functions that are still beneficial to a secular society, such as bringing people together, and creating experiences that allow us to transcend daily life. The adaptations of the Sint-Nicolaas Monastery and Chapel, and their ability to survive beyond their original functions, is a testament to the importance of these fundamental social functions.



1963, church Jan de Doper (demolished).

Conclusion

Unlike other European capital cities, Amsterdam has very few monuments. No single edifice monopolizes its skyline, instead it is a chorus of evenly distributed steeples representing its various faiths. Aside from the City Hall on Dam Square, there are few proclamations – statues, obelisks or memorials – advertising the heroic deeds of some monarch or saint. This reflects the lack of elitism in the Dutch social structure, and its middle-class composition.

Although Amsterdam lacks monuments, it certainly does not lack monumentality, thanks to its collection of residential architecture. Individually, they are unremarkable, but as a collection, they endow the city with an everyday yet practical monumentality. Lau Peters was one of the many invisible architects whose designs added to Amsterdam's monumentality while providing homes for its citizens. Although there is little information available on Lau Peters and the others in this legion of invisible Local Heroes, their work remains, providing a quiet companionship for our walks around the city, and as faithful narrators of the lives and ideals of past eras.

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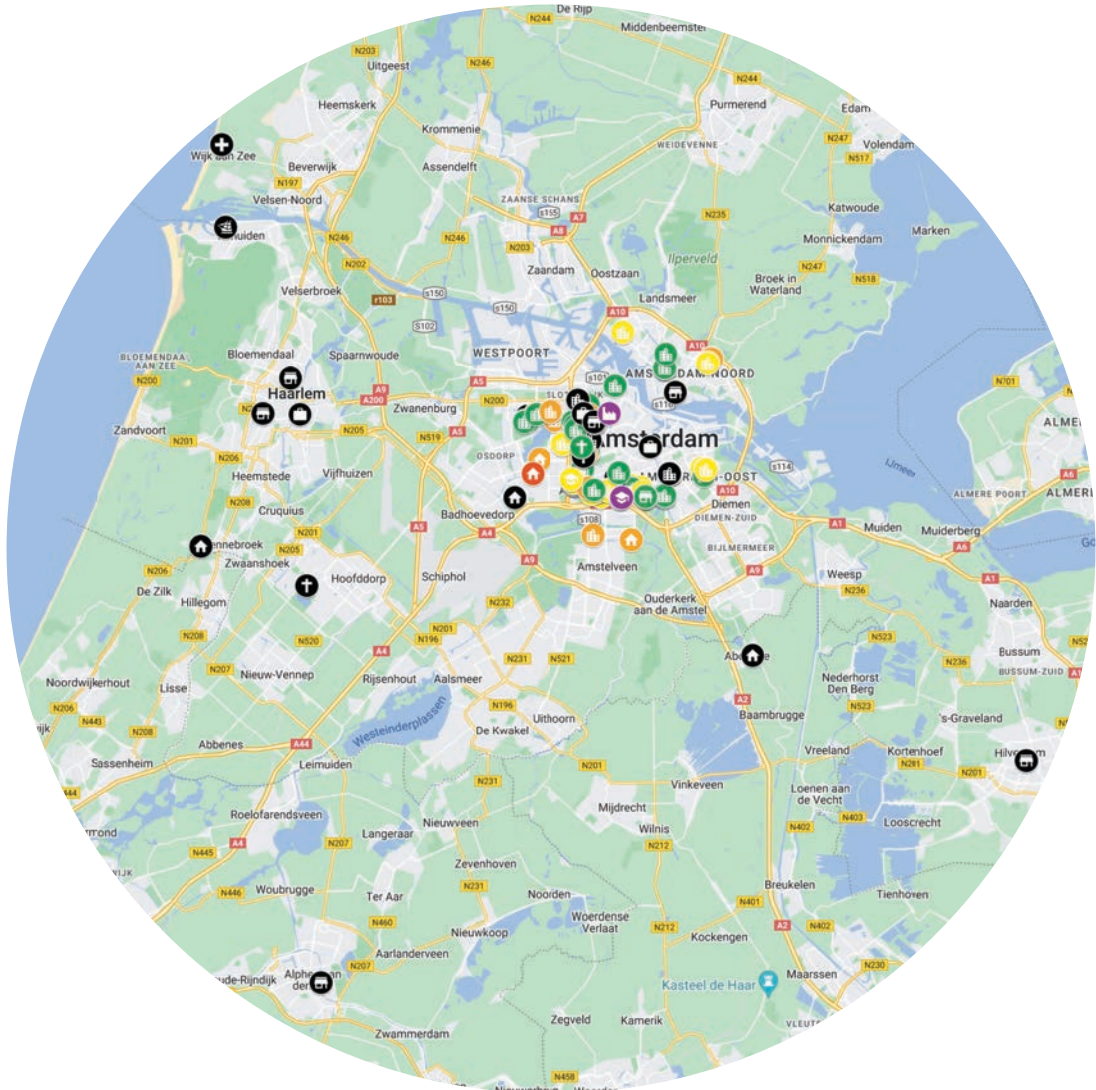
1960 Overtoomse Veld

1963 Church Jan de Doper

1966 Villa Braakensiekhof
1967 Buiksloot
1969 Buikslotermeer
1969 Death

Project locations

[Click here for an interactive map](#)



Thanks and Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Ted Peters, who followed his father's footsteps as an architect and carried on his legacy. Without his detailed records, we would not have been able to identify his father's work, or to give them their long-overdue recognition. Ted passed away in 2024, marking the loss of a truly remarkable architect. Without Ted's memories of his father, we would not have been able to know the enigmatic man behind the Local Hero.

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Ted Peters. Telephone interview on May 5, 2020 conducted by Jan Peter Wingender.

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Sint-Nicolaas Lyceum.

Sint-Nicolaaskapel & Klooster.

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Colophon

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