

‘The Tumbling Child Belongs in the City Scene, Like Herring Carts’

Playgrounds and Equipment by Aldo van Eyck

• HARM STEVENS •

On Friday, 21 June 2013, some of the original playground equipment designed by Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) was presented to the press and others in the Rijksmuseum gardens. In a short address on that occasion, the architect Herman Herzberger expressed his belief that people ‘think in terms of objects and are capable of preserving objects’. But, he added, ‘the space has actually gone’. The lost spaces he was alluding to were the Amsterdam children’s playgrounds where the slender aluminium playground equipment was originally placed.

How such historic spaces change and eventually disappear altogether is clearly illustrated by a series of photographs of a stretch of Zeedijk, between house numbers 104 to 120, in the Amsterdam City Archives. Arranged chronologically, these photographs present a picture of the metamorphosis of this urban landscape between 1950 and the early 1980s (figs. 1-10). First there is undeveloped land behind a brick wall built to keep trespassers out (see figs. 1, 2). These photographs date from the early 1950s. Occupation, deportation and the Winter of Starvation had left behind decay and deterioration in several places in Amsterdam’s inner city, particularly in the Jodenbuurt, the Jewish quarter. Years after the Liberation there were still undeveloped plots of land like this little area

Detail of fig. 13

to the west of Zeedijk. Numbers 110 and 114 housed the families of Isaäk Polak and Jakob Gross. Save for one child from the Gross family, these Jewish families were deported and murdered in the extermination camps of Sobibor and Auschwitz.¹

The photographs show how new life was breathed into this ‘guilt-ridden landscape’ by building a public playground. This transformation was put into effect between 1956 and 1958, when the City of Amsterdam’s Dienst Gereedmaken Terreinen, the department responsible for urban regeneration, used a 1955 design by Aldo van Eyck for a playground in Zeedijk (see figs. 3, 4).² This new amenity joined a steadily growing network of public playgrounds scattered across the city that had been started in 1947. Each and every one was laid out to a design by Van Eyck, who had initially been employed by the city council, and later worked for it as an independent architect. It was above all the playgrounds in the Nieuwmarkt district, which included Zeedijk, that came closest to the description Van Eyck later gave of the sites on which they were built: ‘in surplus or forgotten places, on insignificant patches of dusty grass, but also on empty plots where houses that had belonged to people deported during the war had been demolished for fuel’.³



Figs 1, 2
Zeedijk between
house numbers 104
and 120, before 1956.
The houses num-
bered 106 to 118 had
been demolished
for an as yet to be
built playground.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.





Figs. 3, 4
Zeedijk, playground
under construction,
1956/57.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.





Figs. 5, 6
Zeedijk, finished
playground and
mural, 1958 or
shortly after.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.





Fig. 7
Zeedijk, playground,
12 October 1972.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.
Photo:
J.M. Arsath Ro'is.

Fig. 8
Zeedijk, playground,
1974.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.
Photo: Taeke Henstra.



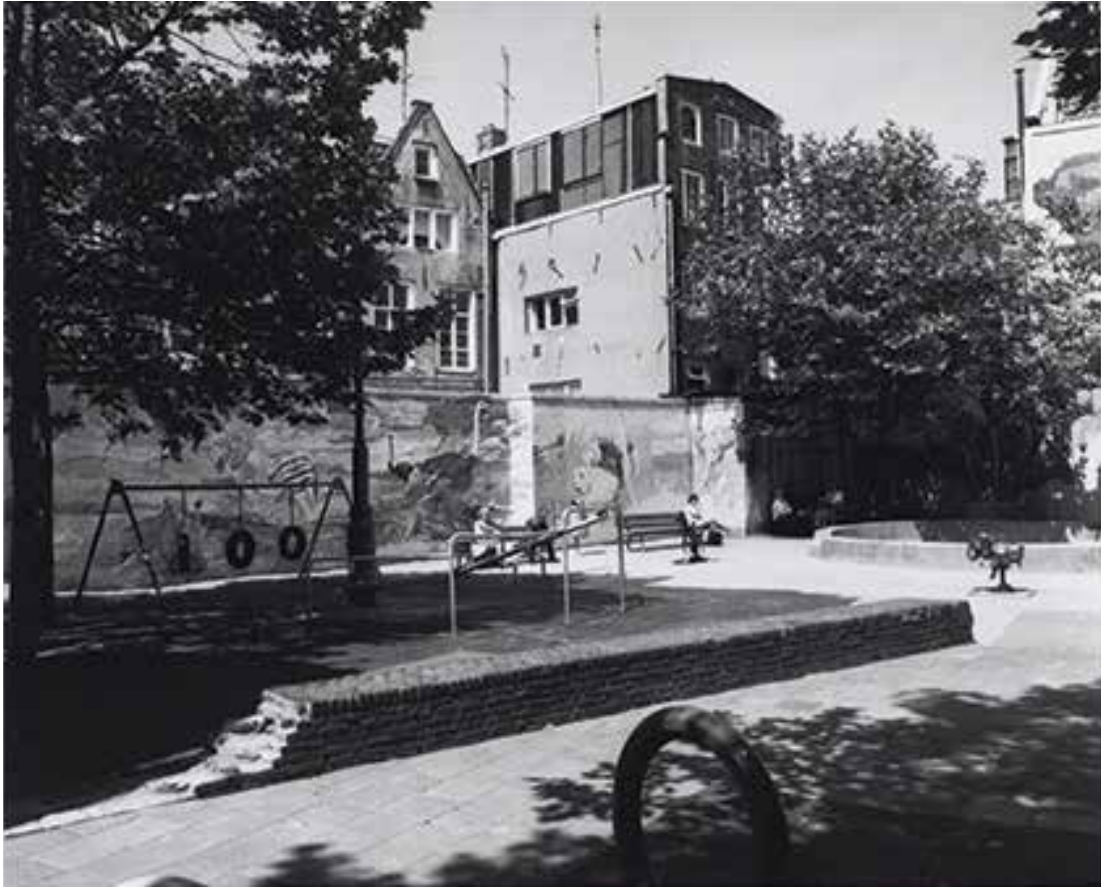


Fig. 9
Zeedijk, playground,
3 June 1981.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.
Photo:
J.M. Arsath Ro'is.

Fig. 10
Zeedijk, playground
and mural, 17 April
1980. Amsterdam,
City Archives.
Photo: Martin Alberts.



The transformation of these spots in the inner city can be seen as a fitting urban development response by the city council and the young architect to the ‘questioning children’ Karel Appel had painted in a mural in the town hall’s canteen in 1949. It was an allusion to the faces of the hungry children the painter had seen from the train shortly after the end of the war, while he was travelling through a devastated Germany.⁴ Appel and other Cobra artists – Van Eyck was closely linked to the ‘Experimentele Groep Holland’ (Cobra) – took inspiration from children’s drawings and the idea of play as a creative and cultural force. In the years after the war, however, interest in the child was a far broader cultural and social phenomenon. As the innocent victims of the Second World War, children in the post-war

period came into the category of collective care and interest. A question dominating the agenda of governments, aid organizations, artists, designers and town planners in the years immediately after the catastrophic war was how to give children a voice and a place in a world dominated by adults.⁵

Van Eyck’s ground plan for the playground in Zeedijk consisted of a set of elements that had essentially been the architect’s fixed repertoire since 1947, when the first playground was built in the Bertelmanplein in Amsterdam South: a concrete sand-pit, some aluminium monkey bars and spring riders, divided into areas demarcated by different types of surface. But in 1958 another important dimension was added – the mural designed by Joost van Roojen (b. 1928).

Fig. 11
ALDO VAN EYCK and
JOOST VAN ROOJEN,
*Model of Zeedijk
playground and
mural*, 1955.
Wood, paint, metal.
Copyright Aldo van
Eyck Archives.



The photographs in the City Archives, taken shortly after the completion of the painting in June 1958, show how a totally new reality came into being in the middle of the chaos of the old city (see figs. 5, 6). The bright sunlight accentuates the balanced geometrical order with the children playing, adults relaxing and passers-by standing out clearly within it. The contrast with the desolate, barren land (marked on either side by huge hoardings advertising meat products from Gelderland and cigarettes) in the first photograph could hardly be more marked. In conjunction with a presentation scale-model that Van Eyck and Van Roojen made (fig. 11), the photographs of this historic place in the heart of Amsterdam in the summer of 1958 show what the town planning idealism of Aldo van Eyck generated with the

aid of the imagery of the mural. A 'space for the child dictated by the whole colour-shape-panorama' rose out of the rubble.⁶ The playground in Zeedijk was an 'emblematic piece of urban art from the 1950s'.⁷ As a successful example of the collaboration between architecture and the visual arts this radical inner city regeneration was part of the 'synthesis of the arts' that was propagated in the Netherlands from 1955 onwards by the 'Liga Nieuwe Beelden, an artists' collective Van Eyck was affiliated to. Inspiration for these post-war synthesis ideas was found in the pre-war avant-garde approach of De Stijl, Bauhaus and the Russian Constructivists.⁸ In 1961 Van Eyck and Van Roojen, who were brothers-in-law, were awarded the Sikkens Prize for the 'integration of colour in the built space' in the



children's playground in Zeedijk. In a speech accepting this award, Van Eyck emphasised that the synthesis of the arts followed above all from the relationship between 'artists as people; not between the arts as categories. It is ... practice, not theory: a creative dialogue – or duel – between particular people in a particular place at a particular time.'⁹

This playground functioned in its original form for just a few years. In the 1970s – Zeedijk had by then been overrun with heroin addicts – Van Eyck's 'cheerful evocation of the new reality'¹⁰ fell prey to the mercilessly advancing chaos of urban decay. The topographical photographs in the city archives speak volumes. First there is the graffiti of the early 1970s – 'Ajax' and 'Cruyff' and 'Geen metro door de Nieuwmarkt' (No metro through Nieuwmarkt) chalked on the walls (see figs. 7, 8). In 1980 Van Roojen's geometric, abstract mural disappeared altogether behind an aggressively figurative panoramic painting. The playground was enclosed by a realistic safari scene with ostriches, a pair of lions, a hippopotamus, a zebra and a life-sized African elephant that seems to be charging into the sandpit from the high north wall (see figs. 9, 10). Apart from the sandpit, all that remained of the original design were the interlinked tumbling bars around the streetlamp. The low dividing wall was partially demolished and a number of new play elements were added, including a plastic seesaw in the shape of an elephant.

The story of the Amsterdam playgrounds has a sad side, as Van Eyck remarked at the end of his life. 'It has become clear, in any event, that an urban ingredient as vulnerable as playgrounds cannot survive without constant attention and special care.'¹¹ The loss of the Zeedijk playground is typical of the fate of many of the seven hundred or so playgrounds that Van Eyck created all over Amsterdam

between 1947 and 1978. Over the last few decades they were radically changed, demolished and replaced with a new layout – or they disappeared altogether.¹² The Buddhist temple built in the style of a Chinese palace that now stands on the site of the Zeedijk playground is a telling illustration of the fact that from the outset the playgrounds in the inner city were intended as 'temporary amenities'.¹³

With a limited repertoire of permanent individual components, Van Eyck managed to create coherent, carefully-constructed, small-scale urban compositions. The historic photographs are just one source of information; anyone wanting to get a clear image of these spatial creations, which have disappeared from the urban landscape, can turn to the original designs. These plans provide an amazing insight into the accuracy and intensity with which Van Eyck worked out his compositions on the drawing board (fig. 12). Meanwhile, the individual components, the building blocks Van Eyck used to construct the playgrounds, still remain here and there. Aside from the sandpits put together in different configurations from preformed concrete segments, the spring boards and the play tables, dozens of pieces of aluminium playground equipment have also survived in public spaces – particularly in the post-war expansion districts of Buitenveldert and Nieuw-West. But their numbers are diminishing – only two examples remain of the large steel dome climbing frame – because of its size Van Eyck's most monumental play equipment design (fig. 13).¹⁴

In 2012, in collaboration with Amsterdam City Council's Nieuw-West district, the Rijksmuseum was able to include seven historical items of aluminium playground equipment in its collection.¹⁵ In this district, too, neglected maintenance and large-scale urban renewal projects had seen the

Fig. 12

ALDO VAN EYCK,
*Design for
Anselmushof
playground,
Slotermeer, 1956.*
Copyright Aldo
van Eyck Archives.

Fig. 13

ALDO VAN EYCK,
*Sketch for aluminium
climbing dome, 1960(?).*
Copyright Aldo
van Eyck Archives.





Fig. 14

To a design by Aldo van Eyck, *Tumbling Bars and Bridge*, c. 1961. Aluminium, from front to back: h. 100 cm, 91 cm and 87 cm (bridge). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. NG-2012-73-4.

Fig. 16

To a design by Aldo van Eyck, *Climbing Dome*, c. 1955. Aluminium, h. 122 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. NG-2012-73-5.

Fig. 15

Braillehof, playground, 1962 or later. Amsterdam, City Archives.

original profusion of playgrounds sadly depleted. The playground at the Witte Klok in Osdorp is the only one in this district that still exists in its original form – there are only fragments of the others left.

The playground equipment selected for the Rijksmuseum was situated in places that were short-listed for dismantling, reorganization or clean-up.¹⁶ The equipment was in various playgrounds in the western suburbs of Sloterveer and Osdorp, districts that were built between 1951 and 1954 and between 1958 and 1962 respectively, as part of the General Expansion Plan. These are two tumbling bars of different heights and a bridge (fig. 14) from the playground in Braillehof (fig. 15), which were made in 1962 to a 1961 design. The small dome climbing frame (fig. 16) stood in Viveportenstraat. The playground there was designed in 1964 and built in 1966.



Fig. 17

To a design by Aldo van Eyck, *Climbing Tower and Funnel*, c. 1955. Aluminium, h. 160 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. nos. NG-2012-73-1, 2.

Fig. 18

Climbing tower in Overhaalstraat (seen right in the picture), 22 March 2002. Amsterdam, City Archives. Photo: Martin Alberts.

The climbing tower (fig. 17) was part of a playground in Overhaalstraat (fig. 18), which was designed in 1964 and constructed a year later. The funnel frame was in the playground at the Cromme Camp (fig. 19), designed in 1963 and completed in 1965. The small climbing arch (fig. 20) is the oldest; it was part of the playground in Jan Cupidohof (fig. 21), which was designed in 1955 and built a year later.¹⁷

The very basic design for the tumbling bars and the bridge was made as part of the first playground designs in 1947. This also applies to the climbing arch, variations of which are part of the earliest generation, which mainly consisted of smaller pieces of equipment. The designs for the dome, the funnel and the tower are from a later date, probably after 1956.¹⁸

Fig. 19

Climbing chute on the Cromme Camp, 27 August 1976. Amsterdam, City Archives.





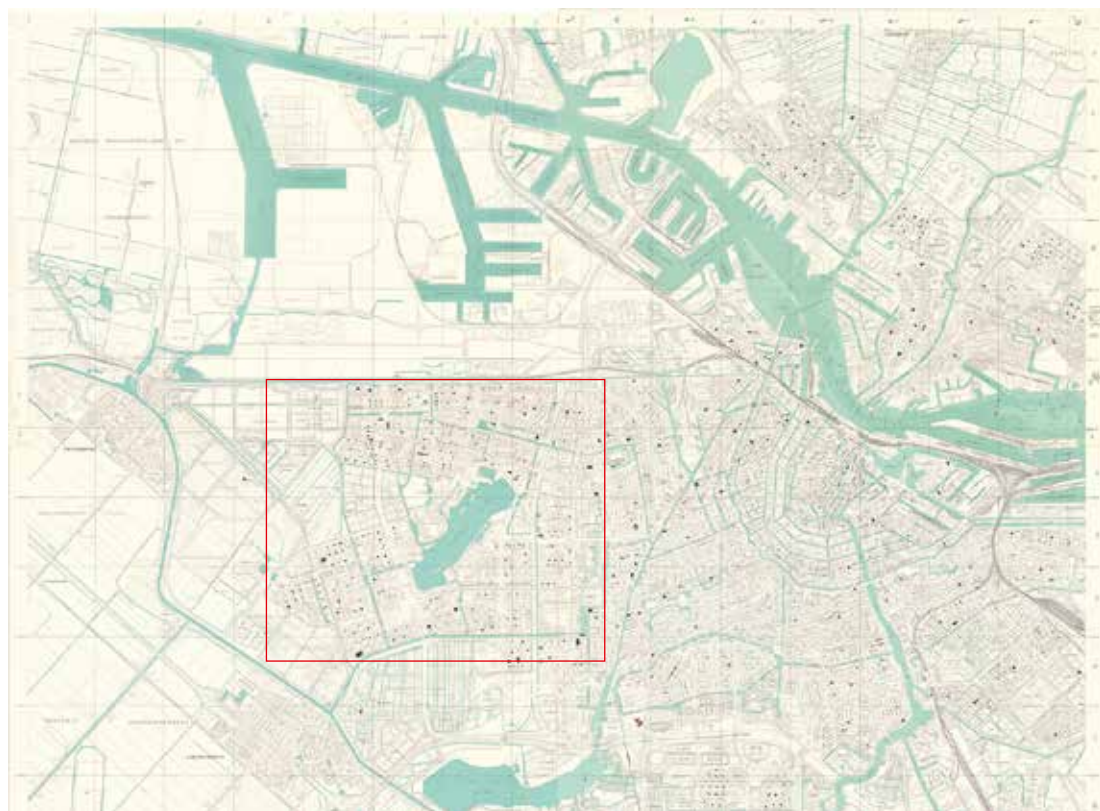
Fig. 20
Climbing arch
in situ, summer 2012.
To a design by Aldo
van Eyck, after 1947.
Aluminium, h. ?? cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. NG-2012-73-3.

Fig. 21
JAN CUPIDOHOFF,
playground, 1956
or shortly after.
Amsterdam,
City Archives.

Fig. 22
Map of Amsterdam
with the playgrounds
designed by Aldo van
Eyck marked in black.
Copyright
Francis Strauven.

The map of the area around the Sloterpolder in Nieuw-West (fig. 22) shows how the original network of playgrounds was laid out according to a pattern aimed at an even distribution between the large-scale blocks of houses. The outlines of the places indicated in black, moreover, show that Amsterdam City Council used the playground designs in this new city expansion, with its characteristic, recurring placement of blocks of houses, in series. An aerial photograph of the area around the Cromme Camp, dating from 1973, in which the funnel frame now in the Rijksmuseum can be seen, also shows the pattern of playgrounds between the typical ribbon buildings (fig. 23).¹⁹ By installing individual items of play equipment Van Eyck ensured some variation in each place, as the 1956 design for three playgrounds in the western suburb of Geuzenveld shows (fig. 24).

Over time the aluminium playground equipment has become the most iconic image in the design repertoire from which Van Eyck constructed the playgrounds. The simple fact that the climbing and tumbling equipment rise relatively high above ground level, certainly from a child's-eye view, makes them instantly recognizable beacons in the urban landscape. It was clear that Van Eyck recognized the value of these individual pieces. In 1962 he spoke about the tightly-knit network of playgrounds that had been created in the previous fifteen years. 'It might be said that there is no more to be done. But despite the opposition that is to be expected, I would like to go further: I want to try to make the network even denser, by once again combing the city, this time in search of places that are just big enough for one single play apparatus. If I am able to find 500 such places, that



would give us, between every two play gardens, five or six public playgrounds and in between them even more places with one or two play apparatus.²⁰

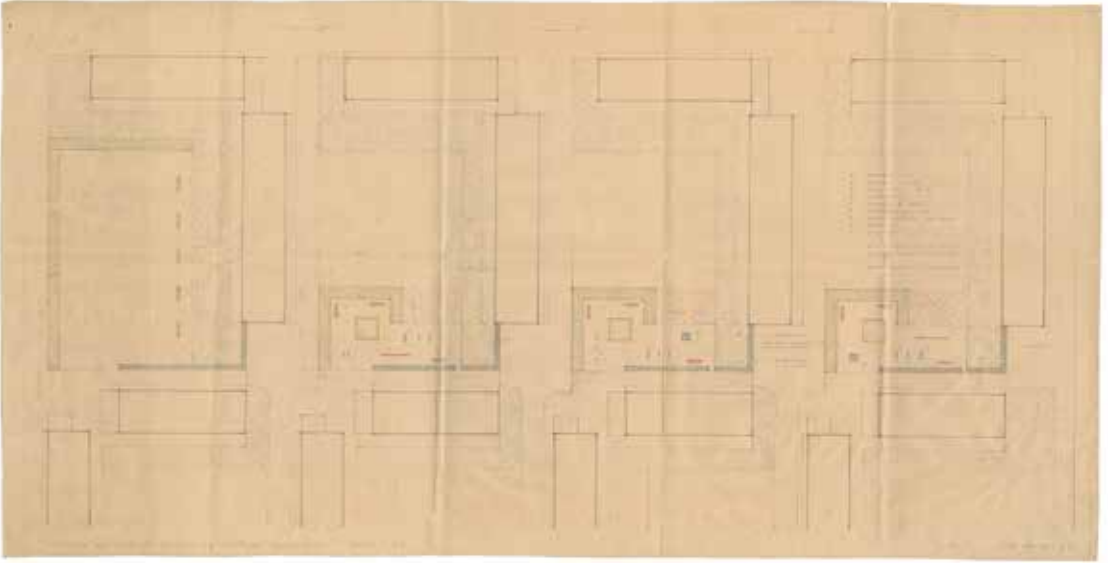
According to the architect the playground equipment he had designed belonged to “families” of abstract elementary shapes.²¹ The elementary, abstract quality was important because a child can make anything from a simple shape. As Van Eyck said, ‘If a play apparatus represents an animal from the start, the form dictates its construction so much that it puts an end to pure play. ... The elementary archetypes such as the dome, igloo and arch are perfectly satisfactory because a child can sit on or under them, and can discover all sorts of things in them.’²² The archetypal shape should not impose a single function but offer a whole range of functions that would

encourage children to make their own discoveries. An item of playground equipment, Van Eyck reasoned, should be real as a telephone box is real because you can phone from it, as a bench is real because you can sit on it. An aluminium elephant is not real because an elephant ought to be able to walk – an elephant is unnatural as a thing in the street.²³ The shape of playground equipment was geared to the fundamental tendency of children to jump, climb, swing, crawl, stretch, dangle and turn somersaults.

‘Fifteen years ago,’ as Van Eyck said in 1962, ‘we still thought we had to create complicated things for play. Now we set up a simple tumbling frame, and we see the children somersaulting round it like flywheels, talking as they go! It’s wonderful – a human flywheel right there on the street. The tumbling child belongs in the city

Fig. 23
Aerial photo with the Cromme Camp lower left, April 1973. Amsterdam, City Archives.





scene, like herring carts.²⁴ The playground was the instrument that made the children discover their city and the city its children; a reciprocal relationship that benefited both.

From 1954 on, the playground equipment was made of anodized aluminium. From that same year the firm of J. & K. Smit's Aluminium Verwerkende Industrie in Kinderdijk became the permanent supplier to Amsterdam City Council.²⁵ The equipment was made by placing the aluminium tubes in a mould in order to weld the parts together.²⁶ The beads were very carefully polished to create a smooth transition between the parts and ensure that the whole apparatus

looked like one strong unit. Joints were also made by fitting one end of the tube to an (internal) sleeve of a smaller cross-section at the other end (fig. 25). These ends had a stamped number to make assembly easier. A mortise and pin arrangement secured the joint. The pin was countersunk into the surface of the tube to ensure the whole structure was sufficiently smooth (fig. 26). Before the mortise joint was made, the dome was in three parts, shaped to fit individually into the anodizing bath. This electrolytic process creates a hard, durable oxide layer on the aluminium surface.²⁷ The ends of the tubing were set in cement, which was then concealed under the tiles or other type of paving so that the

Fig. 24

ALDO VAN EYCK,
Design for playgrounds in Abraham van der Hartstraat, Geuzenveld, dated 10 January 1956. Copyright Aldo van Eyck Archives.

Fig. 25

Connector between two sections of the equipment. Photo: author.

Fig. 26

Detail of the equipment with the mortise and pin arrangement.





Fig. 27
The playground
equipment in the
Rijksmuseum gardens.

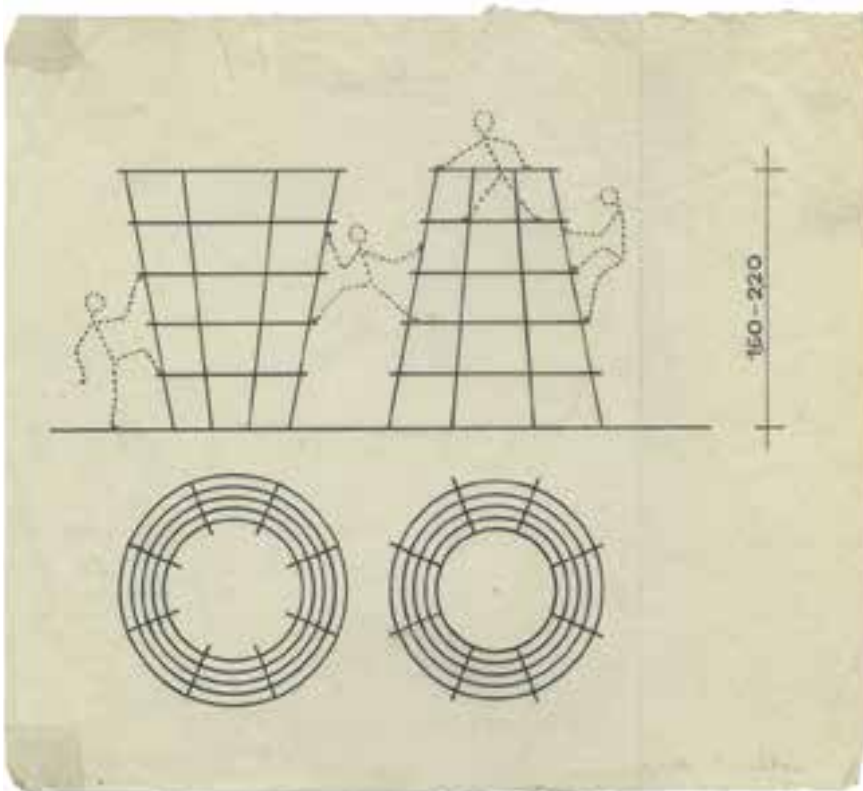


Fig. 28
ALDO VAN EYCK,
*Design for climbing
funnel and tower,*
1956 or later.
Copyright Aldo
van Eyck Archives.

structure was anchored solidly in the ground.

The playground equipment (with the exception of the climbing arch) has been given a place in the Rijksmuseum gardens (fig. 27). Based in part on an exploratory study into Van Eyck's original playground concepts, Sander Rombout of Copijn Tuin- en Landschapsarchitecten designed an area consisting of three rectangular surfaces of soft paving stones in the classical Dutch 30 x 30 cm size, with six pieces of playground equipment on them.²⁸ The climbing funnel and dome are placed so close together that children can swing or scramble from one to the other, exactly like those two items of equipment shown in mirror image in Van Eyck's original design drawing (fig. 28).

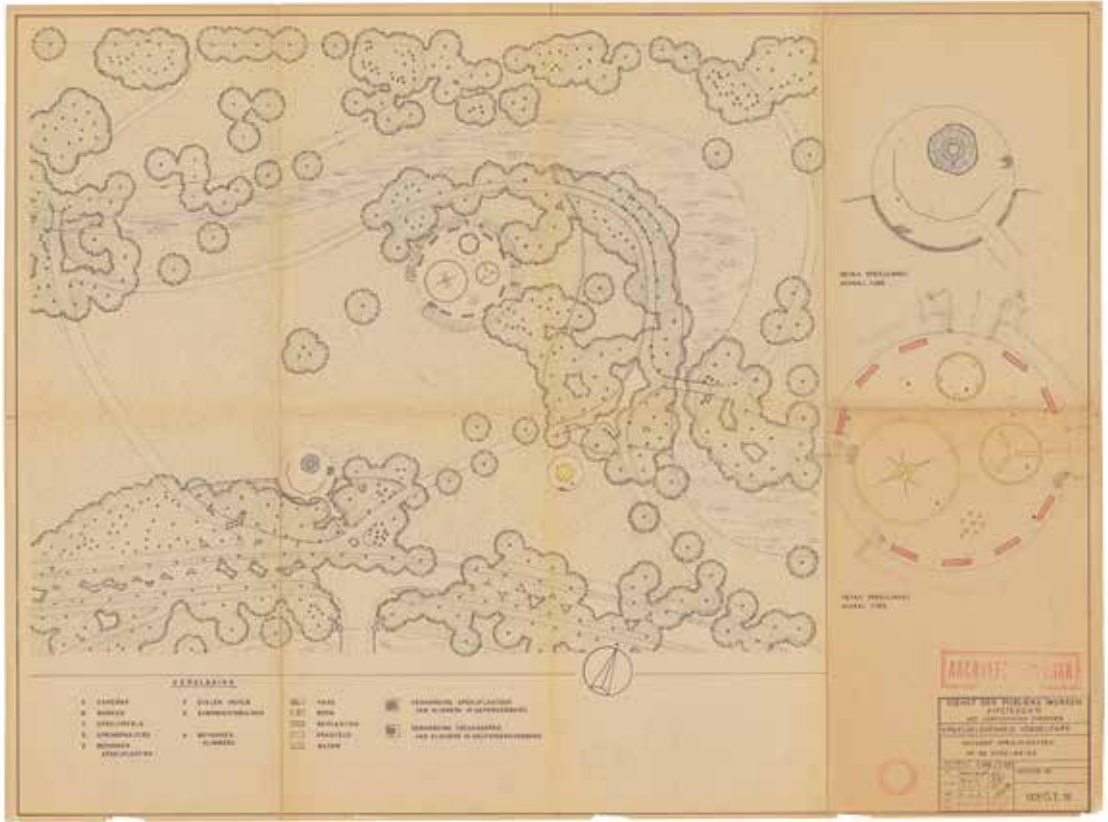
The playground equipment in the semi-public area of the Rijksmuseum gardens can, of course, be used – that, after all, is what it was designed for, so children may climb, somersault, dangle and swing on these museum objects (fig. 29). It means that the equipment maintains its original function, but at the same time this historic playground equipment, which bears the scars of around half a century's use, will keep alive the memory of the modern infrastructure for children at play in the post-war city. The aluminium play sculptures have proved to be the most enduring remains of the 'spaces for children' that Aldo van Eyck laid out as a network of meeting places throughout Amsterdam after 1947. They belong to a family of associated forms, designed by Van Eyck with the same devotion to the cause of the (playing) child as his pioneering design for the Amsterdam Orphanage, which was built in the same period as many of his playgrounds. In the Orphanage, too, the user, the child, occupied centre stage. Herman Herzberger described this building as a grandiose 'model of architecture' and 'a manifesto against the lack of interest that architects

always had in the people who inhabited their creations'.²⁹

The playgrounds have played an important role as a human-scale alternative to large-scale monotonous functionalism in architecture and urban planning – but also in a much wider cultural discourse in the post-war Netherlands. The influence of the playgrounds on the earliest phase of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* New Babylon, which Constant created from 1956 to 1974 as an all-embracing 'sketch for a culture', as the future living environment of *homo ludens*, is particularly noteworthy. It has been said that Constant's *Ambiance de jeu* (Ambiance of Play) of 1956, which marks the beginning of New Babylon as a spatial structure, can be regarded as a 'playground design in the spirit of Van Eyck's projects'.³⁰ At an earlier

Fig. 29
The author's son playing on the climbing dome, 2013.
Photo: author.





stage Van Eyck had helped his friend Constant to win commissions for playground equipment. In 1961, for instance, Van Eyck included a design by Constant in a design for a playground on the playing field in the Vondelpark. His angular, spiderlike construction of reinforced concrete was rather incongruous among the smoothly-rounded concrete of Van Eyck's familiar sandpits and play tables (fig. 30).

Fig. 30
ALDO VAN EYCK,
Design for playgrounds on the playing fields, 1961.
Copyright Aldo van Eyck Archives.

NOTES

- 1 Information taken from the Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands (www.joodsmonument.nl).
- 2 L. Lefavre and I. de Roode (eds.), *Aldo van Eyck, de speelplaatsen en de stad*, Rotterdam 2002, p. 134. The date of the design and construction of the Zeedijk playground were taken from a list compiled by Francis Strauven ('Speelplaatsen 1947-1978 in Amsterdam'), which is reproduced in this publication.
- 3 V. Ligtelijn (ed.), *Aldo van Eyck. Werken*, Bussum 1999, p. 68.
- 4 J. Fineberg, 'The Paradigm of the Artist/Child', in M. Baumgartner (ed.), *Klee and Cobra: A Child's Play*, Ostfildern 2011, pp. 24-28, esp. p. 27. The mural was papered over in response to protests by council officials, a measure which Van Eyck appealed against in a protest manifesto. See A. van Eyck, 'An Appe(a)l to the Imagination', in V. Ligtelijn and F. Strauven (eds.), *Aldo van Eyck: Collected Articles and Other Writings 1947-1998*, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 62-63.
- 5 J. Kinchin and A. O'Connor, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000*, New York 2012, p. 151.
- 6 Ligtelijn (ed.), op. cit. (note 3), p. 72.
- 7 F. Strauven, 'Miskende parels in het stadsweefsel', in Lefavre and De Roode, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 66-83, esp. p. 82.
- 8 J. Fritz-Jobse and F. van Burkom (eds.), *Een nieuwe synthese. Geometrisch-abstracte kunst in Nederland 1945-1960*, pp. 28-29.
- 9 Ligtelijn, op. cit. (note 3), p. 169.
- 10 Strauven, op. cit. (note 7), p. 80.
- 11 Ligtelijn, op. cit. (note 3), p. 69.
- 12 Strauven, op. cit. (note 7), p. 81.
- 13 Ibid., p. 82.
- 14 Both these large domes are in the Vondelpark, one by the pond and one in the playground near the exit to the Amstelveenseweg.
- 15 Our thanks in particular go to Paul Lappia, an official from the Nieuw-West district. It is largely due to his dedicated involvement that the play equipment could be transferred to the Rijksmuseum.
- 16 Memo 'Verwervingsverzoek speeltoestellen Rijksmuseum', drafted by Paul Lappia, 16 July 2012.
- 17 For the date of the design and completion of these playgrounds, see the list compiled by Strauven in Lefavre and De Roode, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 132-42.
- 18 I. de Roode, 'De speelobjecten: duurzamer dan sneeuw', in *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 19 The round area lower left in the photograph is a roller-skating rink.
- 20 A. van Eyck, 'On the Design of Play Equipment and the Arrangement of Playgrounds (Translation of a Lecture Given at Marcanti, Amsterdam, 1962)', in Ligtelijn and Strauven, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 112-19, esp. p. 112.
- 21 Ligtelijn, op. cit. (note 3), p. 81.
- 22 Van Eyck, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 114-15.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., p. 114.
- 25 De Roode, op. cit. (note 18), pp. 86-87. Until 1955 the equipment was made of galvanized steel, but this material has a major disadvantage; it soon rusts and flakes.
- 26 Information from Arjan van Schaik, managing director of BOER Speeltoestellen, which as the successor to Aluminium Verwerkende Industrie still makes Van Eyck playground equipment under the name 'classic play'.
- 27 L. Selwyn, *Metals and Corrosion: A Handbook for the Conservation Professional*, Ottawa 2004, p. 46.
- 28 S. Rombout, 'Studie collectie Van Eyck, Tuin Rijksmuseum', November 2012.
- 29 Herman Herzberger in foreword in F. Strauven, *Het Burgerweeshuis van Aldo van Eyck. Een modern monument*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 3.
- 30 M. Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, Rotterdam 1998, p. 28.