

## Riddle as Method, Transparency at Play: Aldo Van Eyck at Baambrugge — Laura Harty

Juste ce qu'il faut de souterrain entre le vin et la vie.

Tristan Tzara, note written on the birth of Tess van Eyck (1948). In Aldo van Eyck, *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, and Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, The City and the Artist* (1962), eds Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: Sun Publishers, 2008), 27.

The fulfilment of the wish, therefore, like the fulfilment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*  
(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 4–5.

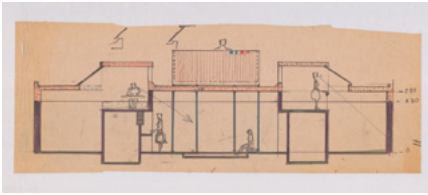


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A fish stares out from a black ground (Fig.1). Beneath his scales, contradicting them, we see a boy, thumb-sucking and sullen. He has been caught or trapped, swallowed up. Enclosed in a slice of white, the fish is equal in size to the boy, its body overlaid on his. The boy crouches for comfort, glazed with boredom. Diagonal scores read like basketwork, catching and containing him. Nearer to us are a series of lighter shapes, stones perhaps or illuminated heads turned towards the action. The boy is the action, clearly. Perhaps hiding, perhaps playing for time. Still but flickering, such an image lodges, ambiguous, unreconciled. Back-lit or in silhouette, the hierarchies of the print alternate, their frequencies jarring.

This plate was one of four etched by David Hockney between May and November 1969 to illustrate 'The Little Sea Hare' within an edition of six fairytales for the Petersburg Press.<sup>1</sup> Numbered 191 by Grimm and allocated type 554 by Aarne-Thompson, the tale involves winning a princess with a riddle. In Hockney's take, the princess has no real intention of being 'won', for in this telling, '[i]t's as though she wants something, yet ... doesn't want something'.<sup>2</sup> It is not a husband that the princess desires but rather a child, ideally in the absence of any suitor who might subdue or quieten her. In Greek the word for riddle (*gríphos*) is also the word for a fishing creel, or basket. A riddle therefore is a challenge and a trap, a means of holding distinct and uncomfortable things together. Both a place and a period, actively ambivalent, a riddle becomes operational over time. Nearly always initiated as an opening, a riddle set out its stakes, sets things in motion. A riddle is where we begin.

'She could see her whole kingdom from twelve windows, one in each wall in the room. From the first she could see more clearly than other people;



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from the second even better; and from each window still more, until from the twelfth she saw everything above and below the earth.’<sup>3</sup> Under pressure to relent, the princess sets the paradoxical demand that any claim to her hand be made by one who can remain invisible. Those that fail are decapitated, heads mounted on stakes. ‘So here she is, anyway, up the top of a tower looking out of the windows, and the boy who wants to marry her hides, first of all in an egg, but she looks through a window and she can find him.... Then he hides in a fish, but she still sees him and finally he changes into this sea hare ... and hides himself in her hair’.<sup>4</sup> Solved by an act of miniaturisation and displacement, subverting the transparent foil, the little sea hare denies the princess her power and sparks her temper. Smashing the glass to pieces, the prince claims his prize and her kingdom.

The story itself is well-travelled, emerging initially in 12th-century Persia via Nizāmī’s *Seven Beauties*, spreading to Europe by the 18th, as documented by De La Croix and later the Grimms, Lang and others.<sup>5</sup> Challenges, towers and triumph are common to all. The various versions are often ambiguous in their designation of the princess as a hero or villain. This difficulty of categorisation is itself reflected in the variety of parts transparent bodies play in the texts, often switching allegiances, shifting sides: transparent eggshells, pellucid fish scales and skin-crawling nits.

We can read such riddles as rehearsals to some extent, a probing at and testing of the limitations of the status quo, an exploration of what it might take to stand up and provide alternative spatial configurations. The various versions of the story, commonly known as ‘The Riddle Princess’, question the equivocal nature and status of interior space, exemplified by surfaces that dissolve, undo and disappear. The issues are hitched to conflicts of bodily and territorial autonomy, to questions of pride, of lineage and of shame. As Marina Warner suggests, such storytelling is a foundational aspect of society, a place to voice and to participate, a refuge of forceful imaginaries, a stage to trial and share, to gather support.<sup>6</sup> In a riddle the goal is evident, not the method, not the approach, not the range and extent of challenges which will stand in the way. In no way is the route made plain. Around firesides and tucked into bedtimes, the riddle picks at, points to and counters damaging ideologies, aiming (to some extent) to unmask hierarchies and deliver change.

Sitting at the frontier of fancy and knowledge, the strangeness implicit in the riddle jostles us to attention, it piques and it pulls. The riddle is odd. The riddle wants to find out.<sup>7</sup> Aiming to reveal something critical, it sets a challenge, expects a solution. The resultant attempts and flawed efforts secure and protect the ultimate deliberation. The riddle implies delay. Various complex and multifaceted interpretations offer ‘The Riddle Princess’ up as a vehicle of further exploration, capable of engaging with conflicting societal desires and political pressures of the age. Best known today through Puccini’s *Turandot* (daughter of Turan) and Brecht’s satirical comedy *The Congress of Whitewashers*, it is within the use of transparency as foil, feature and focus that the riddle rests.<sup>8</sup>

While Puccini concentrates on the love story, Brecht’s play charts a corruption of intellectual energy. In both, the riddling reverses, whereby the princess must herself solve a given puzzle, as well as yield her territory. In the *Whitewashers* riddles are used to divert and titillate Turandot. Spoof elitist intellectuals, named by Brecht as the ‘Tuis’, preoccupy the princess while the kingdom’s cotton harvest is being co-opted and misappropriated. The Tuis’ scandalous misuse of the riddle modulates and masks a terror which is going on beneath the surface (and behind the severed heads). As Munka Du, one of the Tuis, declares: ‘Just as swimming pools exist for swimmers, explanations exist for believers.’<sup>9</sup>

In the Grimms' telling, the morality of the tale is tied up with its solution and the dissolution of the glass shield. The very premise of the tale is to unseat the princess, to dethrone, unmask and delimit her. The flaw in the princess's premise is that she looks forward only. She places her faith in an external protection, a material capacity. She rarely shifts position. The princess fails to recognise that she could not always be on the lookout, whether through lack of attention, or maintenance, or simply care.



In Hockney's version (as with all, ultimately) the prince violates the princess, secreting himself in a place that no glass or mirror can render visible. 'Instead of putting him in her hair, I put him as though he's inside her ... like a child' (Fig.3). Through layered etchings and aquatints, Hockney's prince is sequentially revealed while the princess is ultimately exposed. For Hockney the challenge questions the limits of intaglio, the determination of line, the capacity of the press. His efforts seek to retain latent ambiguity within the riddle, presenting solutions which complicate the surface, inverting and upending the plate, proceeding blind. In Brecht's version, the inability of the princess to see beyond the rhetoric permits it to continue unchecked. For Brecht, riddles act as an opiate, a placatory nod to the potential of ideas, fundamentally achieving little. Employed as an act of critical distance and of ridicule, the riddle exposes and makes transparent the risks of careless conformity to the audience, while the princess remains less discerning. In both Brecht and Hockney, the role of transparency is activated and complicated. Offering a means to open up questions of integrity, of inequality, of contradiction and tension, the agency and obfuscation of transparency are challenged. In both, transparency without reflection is a hazardous plaything. For both, transparency is the apparatus and the agenda of the tale.

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### Geometries of departure

A game, a pastime, an enigma, a conundrum. The answer to any riddle lies not in the question itself, but in what the question makes possible. As a device it plays with conceptual boundaries, always aimed at resolving irreconcilable contradictions or incongruities, for a riddle is an operative device, a generator of thoughts and a prompt to action. While its senses range from counsel to conjecture, interpretation to debate, a riddle never indicates its own solution but rather sets the solution in motion. Its component parts recited by different parties, the riddle is offered as a reciprocal genre, always carried by distinct and active performers. It invites response. As an indirect communication, riddles, like the best of all storytelling, 'reveal meaning without the error of defining it'.<sup>10</sup>

While the term 'paradox' has frequently been used in discussions of the work of Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck, I want to suggest that 'riddle' may be more appropriate – not least because it suggests a method that resolves into an action, an approach. A paradox flickers in incessant ambivalence, but it is not associated with knowledge production in the way that the riddle can be. The riddle seeks an answer, and this answer must be reasonable, albeit often only in retrospect. An act of setting out then, the riddle forms a method, a particular procedure for accomplishing or achieving something, albeit ambiguous and consciously so. For an architect versed in the contradictory, committed to the kaleidoscopic, the riddle as method offers a geometry of departure. With this in mind, we return in time to 1958, when Van Eyck designed a house which itself exists primarily as a riddle:

It would, I'm sure, have looked the way it was made and worked the way it looked! A singular rectangular volume with four covered exterior spaces contained within its perimeter and in each corner a miniature unit – one for each family member. All four are accessible

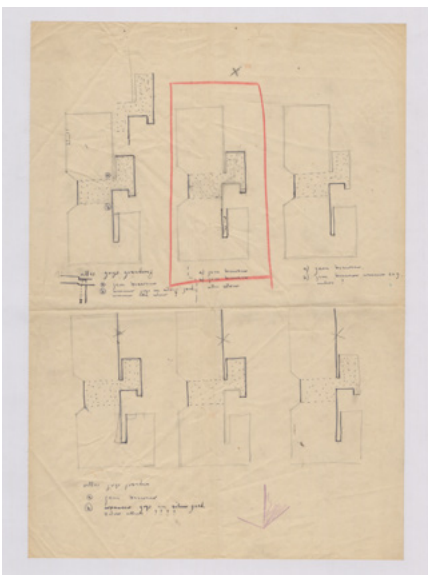
from the inside via a two-storey tower leading from the central space, as well as directly from the outside, unnoticed, so each can come and go freely.

Looking outwards in whatever direction, part of the house is always incorporated in the view; and, after sunset, light may be on in the room opposite, a sign that nobody is there – city-like. To be able to say this is where we live – but over there too, calls for interiorization of the exterior; drawing into the house what belongs to it outside. Enclosure through transparency – no paradox – is extended outwards but the house remains a contained – introvert – place.

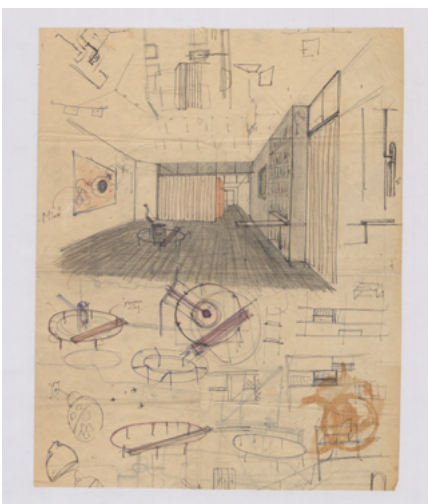
Each of the towers has a window looking inwards so, with lights on, the living room will never be completely dark.

A light steel framework with a glass brick screen on all four sides – two inside and two outside – and lamps between them – passes right across the house ‘through’ sliding doors from loggia to loggia, articulating it in depth five times. The wooden cylinder on the roof – reached by a ladder up the chimney – conceals a sunbath. We – the whole family – virtually lived in it, but build it we never did.

It was a theory extracted from experience, one which a hope was subsequently brought to life, if only partially, in other works.<sup>11</sup>



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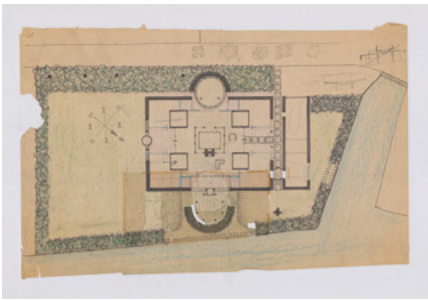
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While living in a third-floor flat on the Binnenkant in Amsterdam with his wife Hannie and two young children, Van Eyck's drawing board became an experimental site of engagement with the potentials and pitfalls of transparency, a perspicacious proposal for what might exist based on components, arrangements and imaginings of that which already did exist. From their vantage point overlooking the Oude Waal canal, this was a family whose collective gatherings occupied the centre, rather than the periphery, of the plan. The apartment was initially acquired and reconfigured in 1947, its narrow girth redefined by two parallel opposing curtain rails which offered a configurable anteroom between study and living areas. Splitting the depth of the apartment in three below a door-height datum, one rail was hung with woven material and the other with heavy, transparent plastic drapes (Fig.4). Above was a ceiling of painted matt aluminium, a background which Van Eyck used often for models, which, together with the rippling polymer, produced a reflective and shimmering core that caught reflected light bouncing in across the canal. Hung with a Mondrian, a Klee and a Miró, the living space gave access to worlds beyond the window-frame (Fig.5). In 1948 a second child arrived, and while the plan stayed fixed for a time, the published version of it does not pay heed to the subsequent, and necessary, alterations. In these, a further bedroom is inserted in Aldo's drawing room, dividing it in length and rotating the desk through 90 degrees. This compression ensured bedroom traffic must bypass the drawing board, the surface of which would become a daily presence.

It was on this that the plans of the Viertorenhuis, or Four-Tower House, at Baambrugge played out.<sup>12</sup> Taking heed of the lessons and proportions of the Binnenkant itself, it interleaved and developed the Amsterdam span plan with the abstract preoccupations of what Van Eyck called the 'Great Riot'.<sup>13</sup> We will see how these dimensional and spatial imperatives played an active and participatory role in the stratification of volume which emerged, the coordinates of which became 'based on a geometrical grid composed of two measurements: a b a b a longitudinally and b b a b b laterally'.<sup>14</sup>

Some 10 kilometres south of Amsterdam, along the river Angstel, the selected site at Baambrugge sat upstream from the 13th-century Kasteel



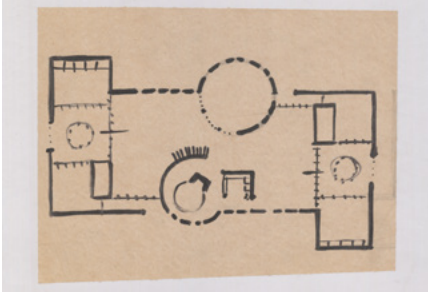


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Loenenslott and opposite a baroque teahouse by Daniël Marot. Built on the waterfront of merchant houses, the latter – a quintessentially Dutch typology – was performative in character, providing a place from which to see and be seen. The Van Eyck proposal, however, retreats from view (Fig.6).

### Riddle A

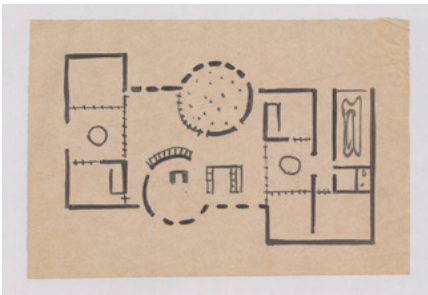
I regard it as a principle of architecture ... that you can best provide for a basic reality by providing for the twin reality from which it was arbitrarily split. Always aim at the twin image, at the apparent opposite. If it is a real split phenomenon you're concerned with, aim at this half, if you don't want to miss that half – do this both ways simultaneously.<sup>15</sup>



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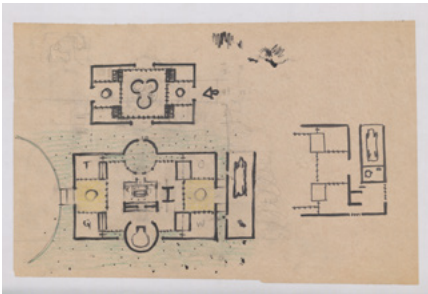
In the first existent sketch (Fig.7) of the house at Baambrugge we see two rectilinear blocks bookending a wider linear space. Each block is split in three, two interiors and an exterior, entrance or exit courtyard. Dimensionally familiar from the Binnenkant flat, the space between these blocks has its own opposing enclosures, one at the bottom of the drawing, which is occupied, and another at the top, which appears empty. In the plan there is already a staircase and a fire pit with a circular enclosure, some means to climb up and some place to sit down.



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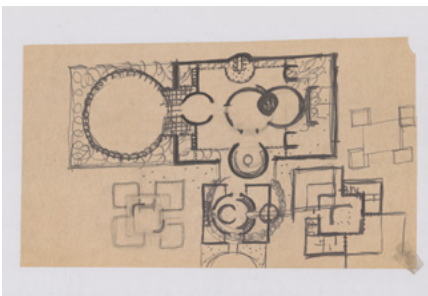
The second sketch tightens the intermediate space, becoming clearer about the walls, determining which might become solid, perforated or glazed (Fig.8). The stairs here are directly visible from the entrance, lit by a courtyard that remains out of sight. Three square rooms have their own entrance from the common area and escape or exit via an external space. A fourth, at the bottom right of the drawing, connects through to a subsidiary volume and a back door, a studio perhaps, accessed directly from a carport with ancillary services. It is necessary to have a vehicle to navigate between Amsterdam and the city – there is no direct train and the bus is infrequent.



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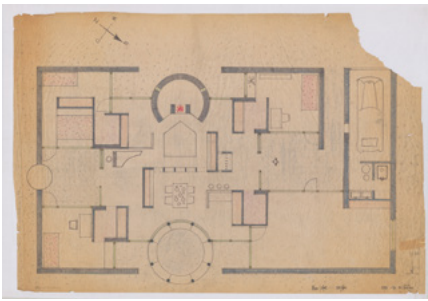
In the third sketch, a sheet with three drawings, we have a further consolidation which incorporates composite figures of two, three and four more explicitly (Fig.9). In two attempts, four corners bracket an interior. These walls are held apart and distinguished by their relationships to distinct courtyard types and particular members of the family – children towards the garden, work and parents' bedrooms guarding the entrance. Different means of interiorising external space or externalising interior space are attempted as we circulate inside either plan. In both proposals, the interior is a kernel, a private space at the centre, distanced and distinguished from the external perimeter by further elements of enclosure. Distinct elements, curvilinear above, rectilinear below, protect a space of gathering, a table in the middle, bodies moving through and settling in. A diagram rather than a drawing, this sketch is smaller than the others. Not overlaid on, but departing from, it becomes a statement of intent, a clarification.



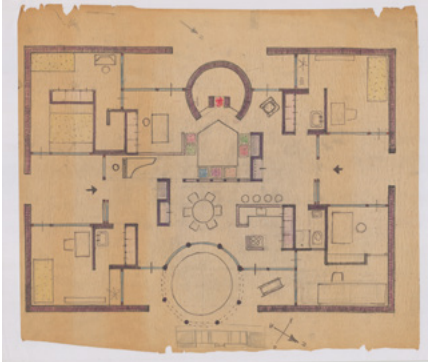
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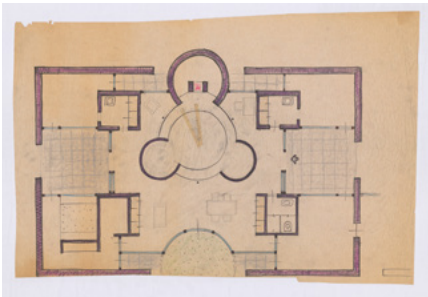
Corners taped and torn, this drawing is an overlay, a working over, a working out (Fig.10). It shows a traced and altered plan, roughly to scale, and around it a constellation of emergent ideas, sequentially revealed. This drawing has been returned to at least three times, in distinct media, rotated, reformulated and reconsidered. In each case it pulls down, it builds up, it exchanges square for round.<sup>16</sup> Five distinct plans, pinwheeling bedrooms around a central core, show attempts made in a range of ways. In the plan adjacent to the lawn, five circles appear, each one pinching



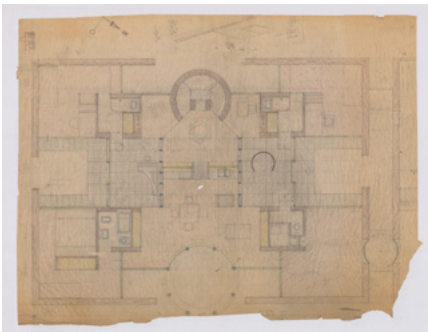
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the edges so as to make private corners between. In others, corners are broken out or displaced from, so that no single form becomes fully resolved, but rather opens into another.

Set. Launch. Hold. Draw up tomorrow.

#### Collection No 3658.5

Back again. Scaled up and larger, a pergola provides a re-entrant recess on the northeast side, while the hearth protrudes as an enclosed cylinder on the southwest (Fig.11). The parking garage now incorporated in the volume is, in later formulations, sliced off and rendered as a subsidiary volume in material and form. More mobile and unsettled, furniture elements punch through the plan defining edges and shifting symmetries. Here, for the first time, appears a harpsichord, quieter than a piano, too big for the Binnenkant. The drawing here begins to be a promise. Things are put on to it, or rather into it, real things which reach beyond the representation.

#### Collection No 3658.6

Chiefly an overlay derived from the previous drawing, this version is looser, with further inhabitation, an extended kitchen and zones for working plotted into the fourth quadrant (Fig.12). The pergola and hearth shift from their axis and the conversation pit receives more animation. Due to the pinwheel, one bedroom and the workspace are larger than the children's rooms. Note the spiral movement in the master bedroom on the south corner, allowing for an anti-clockwise curl into bed from the living area in the evening, and a clockwise about-turn each morning.

#### Collection No 3658.9

An anomaly, a calm evacuation of the unsettling jostle of the previous two versions (Fig.13). The central axis is aligned and all the bedrooms settle into place, although the eastern ones remain larger, the master bedroom retaining its spiral. The distinction between square courtyards to north and south with linear porticoes to east and west is further articulated. A trifoliate hearth appears oddly misshapen, with graphite hoverings non-committal.

#### Collection No 3658.12

Drawn with a ruler, 1:20, materials categorised by colour, this seems serious (Fig.14). Green for glass, red for masonry, blue for partitions. Real pieces of furniture now migrate into the fiction. The smaller bedrooms increase in depth marginally, but it is the centre of the plan that receives most clarification. Sliding external paving under the entrance doors and out west beneath the harpsichord, we see a pulling into order of the central belt, aligning the east-west axis and defining a clear role for the translucent screens. A stratification of volume, this move anchors the plan centrally, while insisting on a rotational movement to navigate and sequence the spaces. This drawing is interestingly worn at the bottom edge, where the body and arm repeatedly lean over the board, to offset and reposition a straight edge. The structural intent is here rehearsed and refined through the very making of the drawing, its back-and-forth alignments coordinating overhead beams with supporting walls, floor tiles with mullions and door frames, body with building. The drawing has been consolidated by means of the ideas extant in previous sketches, combed through, tugged at and detangled.

In his study of striped fabrics, Michel Pastoureau writes:

The comb and the rake, which both create stripes, entirely symbolise that setting-in-order function that the movement from trace to mark symbolises. To stripe is to make traces and rank, to inscribe and to

orient, to mark and organise. It is also to fertilise, because all order, all orchestration, to return to a musical term, is a factor in creation. The comb, the rake, and the plow, which stripe all they touch, have been symbols of fertility and richness since earliest times. Like rain, like fingers, other fertility symbols having to do with tracks and stripes. What is striped is not only something marked and classified. It is also something created, constructed like fabric and all structures imitating fabric, like the plank, the fence, the ladder or shelves, like writing as well: putting in order knowledge and fields fertile with thought, writing is often only a long succession of lines upon its medium.<sup>17</sup>

A riddle might be said to construe such a setting in order, but it does so often by means of significant detours, diversions and interpolations. As we have seen in the preceding sketches, necessary segues and sidesteps form a key element of its value. These kinds of interludes, to some extent, operate as frustrations, delays which stage the ultimate solution. The riddle in this way is a tactic to accommodate and activate such moments of detour as necessary deliberations. Collated and considered collectively, such misguided attempts represent effort and seed the ultimate solution. Hatching, swimming, jumping, the three detours in Grimm's 'The Little Sea Hare' levitate the plot. It is through the jump that the riddle is solved. Van Eyck saw and celebrated the jump: 'You have to jump sooner or later; you'll have to risk it. That is the moment of realization – the jump, the risky jump.... The art is in the jumping: how you take off, when and where'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Tau**

A mark, a sign or figure, the Tau takes its name from its form, the name for the Greek letter 'T'. A truncated cross, also known as the Crux Comissa, it is associated with the figures of St Francis and St Anthony, comforting and weight-bearing, but also with an alternative mathematical description of a circle, a counter to Pi. Often associated with control, the Tau directs chaos into order.

The Tau was a symbol of resurrection, used in parallel with the now more commonly recognised Latin cross, which gradually superseded it. The Tau staff, however, with its pastoral associations, acted as a tangible and familiar icon, a symbol and instrument of proselytism, a repellent of evil, an extension of agency, a means of moderating and managing the faithful herd.

The Tau also guides us back to the motif of transparency, with which we began. So, we discover in the 11th-century examples of croziers presented in *Voyage dans le cristal*, a 2024 exhibition at the Musée de Cluny, barrel or oblong pieces of quartz being utilised as the horizontal element of the Tau.<sup>19</sup> In three examples sourced from Sens, Fontevraud and Cologne respectively, we counter-intuitively find that the weight-bearing element, the lintel, the point of loading, was made from a transparent material, a halide quartz of remarkable lucidity, clarity and transparency. Imagine the Tau in the hand, the body leaning on it to relieve an aching hip, a tired knee. When instead held aloft, back-lit and in motion, as indication, performance or act of divine guidance, the transfer between the hand and the vertical rod might dissolve, decoupling body and staff, between which could be seen a shaft or beam or manifestation of light held in space – an emanation, sequestered, controlled and manipulable.

Even if not exactly common, quartz exists in every continent, is familiar to many even if only as a sparkle or a glint underfoot. As matter and mineral, it was known to almost all prehistoric civilisations. The long lineage of fascination with, collection of, and thinking through this material

is evidenced by medieval manuscripts, the collections of many museums and the recent excavations of ancient lapidaries, both in the curtilage of Cologne cathedral and at the Theatre of Alexandria. It is probable, as suggested by the quantity and diversity of luxurious glyptic work, that this material generated, formulated or somehow promoted apotropaic and prophylactic powers. Held above the breastbone, strung round the waist, encircling a finger, enclosing a sacred cavity, the transparent solid acted as portent, protection and portal.



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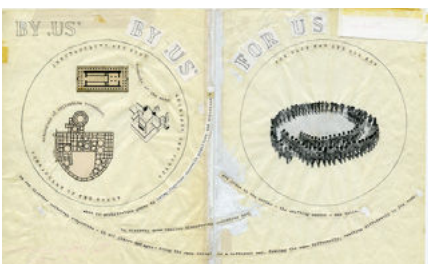
A reliquary forming part of the Cluny exhibition, an extraordinary crystal monolith, exhibits four mortices which are drilled from its perimeter, hollowing out an enclosed and voided cross. These evacuations, excavations, removals, or incisions, which may initially have accepted wooden or metal rods, are used here to protect and enclose two sheets of illuminated parchment, illustrating on one side the martyrdom of Christ at Calvary and on the other the ascent into a celestial realm (Fig.15).<sup>20</sup>

The house at Baambrugge has begun to illustrate a similar volumetric approach, in which the entrances or courtyards, porticoes or bays, are let into the primary enclosure, slicing through the volume to welcome and accommodate, to contain and release. The resultant inside faces of this augured solid are both interiors (within the bounding walls) and exteriors (to each of the coupled bedrooms). Both seal and passage, these recesses interiorise the exterior as the riddle demands.

#### Riddle B

Enclosure through transparency – no paradox – extended outwards but the house remains a contained – introvert – place.<sup>21</sup>

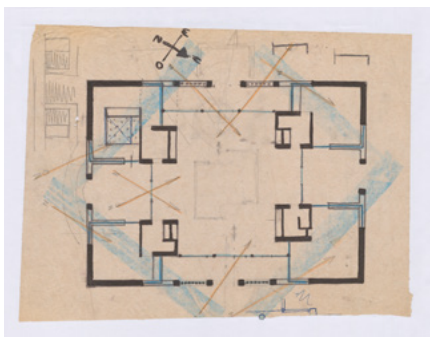
The form of the Tau, with its directional branching, remains distinct from the trifold options of a Greek cross. Moving along one arm of a Greek cross plan you may proceed in three directions, one of which lies straight ahead; but with the Tau, your body must turn. In plan or elevation, the Tau implies a rotation, a pivot. One can extend this thought into the figure of Baambrugge, which, despite its formal containment, demands an extended and prolonged navigation. Here glass-block screens deflect and deny any direct linear course, each progression resulting in a further choice, a reorientation and future selection.



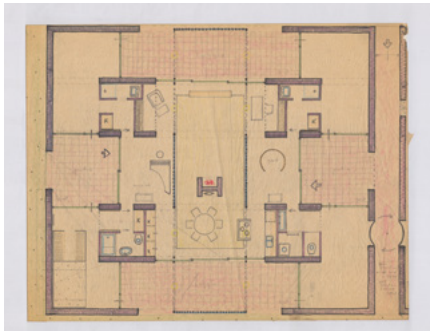
16—

In this manoeuvre we might detect a relation with Van Eyck's diatribe at Otterlo Congress in 1959, which critiques architects who 'give the pretence of moving more effectively, but in reality move securely and profitably along the old circumscribed groove'.<sup>22</sup> His aim in both this talk and the memorable diagram that accompanied it was to enlarge and intensify experience, to attend to richer and more diverse realms of architectural invention (Fig.16). Van Eyck was repeatedly struck by, and vocal about, the deficiencies of modernist architecture and planning sanctioned by CIAM, which provided impoverished habitats for living. These projects, which he experienced directly through post-war rebuilding in the Netherlands, rendered acceptable or even aspirational what he thought to be a deeply inadequate and profligate version of modernism, hollowed out and impenetrable. 'The outside-inside spatial continuity story is a farce. Without appreciation of the value of extending the outside into the inside ... neither outside nor inside means nothing at all, boils down to abstract rubbish'.<sup>23</sup> This rejection of spatial continuity as a premise and driver accords with Van Eyck's own capacity to work with the 'turn', usurping simultaneity to offer a sequence of spaces in which memory and anticipation play a part. The task of the 'turn' is pivotal to the planning of Baambrugge too, insisting on consecutive visual experience rather than simultaneous visual expression.





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#### Collection No 3658.10/11

A solar order engages with a geometrical one, diffuse trails of blue crayons leant on and dragged across the page, imagining future back-lit corner pavilions, sun moving through the seasons (Fig.17). Orange arrows slice deeper, piercing the centre. At 1:50, these paired drawings shift the axial plane, diagonally pairing two larger bedrooms with two smaller ones. Drawn over, in conversation, relational, such butter-paper ponderings also still and combine time. The drawings thus far are more than a sequence, they are a consolidation, a 'gathering body of experience'.<sup>24</sup>

#### Collection No 3658.

Now settled and coherent, each family member's autonomy and reciprocity respected, equal space is set aside for all (Fig.18). Six overhead beams define a bias, a structural rhythm between which barrel vaults span. The resultant orientation, running northeast-southwest between patios, is undercut by a central space, pulling in the opposing direction to incorporate loggias. It is through enclosing frameworks, rather than masonry, that this central space gains its identity, its autonomy and its connectivity. The lightweight steel frame both permits enclosure and sanctions expansion, extending beyond the glazed envelope (note the coupled columns) to interiorise a portion of the loggia, defining a sequence of three distinct rooms in a single circuit. Acting in counterpoint, the hearth and towers act as fixed and functional components, the most static elements of the plan, yet each also define movement. The hearth ladder permits a scramble to the rooftop solarium, while the towers operate as gates, regulating and organising entry to the more private spaces beyond. Syncopated and animated by the light steel framework, the most open space is secreted deep within the radiating offsets of the plan. Here the shelves are populated, fire lit, music on.

#### Hide and seek

Hiding is a primary function of life, a necessity bound up with its economy, that is to say the laying down of reserves. And since interiority so obviously exercises the functions of darkness, we should give equal importance to that which brings light...<sup>25</sup>

As Francis Strauven has noted, the interior of the house at Baambrugge is structured as an urban square.<sup>26</sup> The innermost realm of the building therefore is secured by this intrinsic externality. A riddle in conception and use, the rectilinear slice through the square plan straddles indoor and outdoor spaces, the innermost portion sunken by two steps. 'Whereas the orphanage design developed as a free, typological dispersion which was unified by a geometrical structure', Strauven writes, 'the ground plan here consists of a simple geometric configuration which was then transformed into a diversified, dynamic pattern'.<sup>27</sup> Such a pattern was, in some way, a residual presence of the city on the riverside plot, consolidating and synthesising this exterior experience through a process of interiorisation. Activating such a riddle as both design objective and theoretical prerogative, the diversified, dynamic pattern at Baambrugge houses a solution. Alternatively known as the Viertorenhuis, or four-tower house, the role of the towers at Baambrugge is critical to its capacity to interiorise, to hide and to seek.

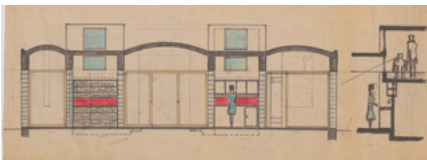


19—

What might it take to hide? In 'The Riddle Princess' hiding is the task that plays with and challenges transparency. For Van Eyck, interiorisation seems to achieve the same goal. Cut perpendicular to the river, the series of sectional perspectives is revelatory in considering the role of the hidden, or interiorised, in this riddle of transparency (Fig.19). The most refined of these show ten distinct rooms, ten spaces articulated by the strategic interweave of the plan, punctured and overseen by two towers

(the others are behind the section line). In the reading of this deep space, we acknowledge the capacity of transparent screens to obscure as much as they disclose. The towers both frame and permit this view, breaking the span, letting light into the centre, defining a minstrel's gallery. They also pull the eye otherwise. In the sectional perspectives we are drawn out, in three directions, but also up, by the towers and down by the recessed floor.

Sections manage these levels, and indicate alternative structures. The offset and the stopping short of the roof planes register the distinction of the towers and demand some effort from Van Eyck. Many versions are drawn, some more modular, each with clear constructive intent. The resultant towers destabilise as much as they anchor. They are a place to be forgotten and a place from which to watch every move. They run the interior through the imagination. One way they do so is through their openings, for in the sections we see paired turret windows, one over and one under the roof plane. In a single view the occupant will see deep space and shallow space, looking simultaneously inside and out. Like the princess, hidden high in her tower, such windows might be seen to show everything, both 'above and below the earth'. The openings focus out towards the sky and simultaneously into the interior's depth, splicing them together in a single view. 'All at once what is there on either side is there side by side.'<sup>28</sup> This mutual reading gives the house both wings and claws, piercing the sky and settling into the soil. The towers, in this way, register the interior as something equally subterranean and aerial.<sup>29</sup> It is in the sections, and sectional perspectives, that figures appear in the drawings – invisible in plan, but present in view. In these we often find a figure peering down from the towers into the central space. From one side of the drawing we see another face, looking back at us. The drawing, shared between the family, finds room for all: the seekers, the hidiers. Leaning over the drawing-board, wondering about the scheme, they find themselves included.



20—

Such occupation, and the resultant negotiation of plan and section, internalise time. As generative principle, spatial enclosure and structural capacity, the durational nature of the plan 'opens time ... renders it transparent'.<sup>30</sup> At stake was a commitment to the family unit, and the potentials of architecture to service and expand its possibilities. Both moored and errant, such transparency surpasses visibility. Van Eyck uses Pieter De Hooch's *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard* (1663) (Fig.21) to illustrate further thoughts on such transparency. He writes:

Varying spatial depth and perceptible distance through transparency  
Beyond a spatial limit close by, one or several further away  
On this side of a space limit which is further away one or several closer by.  
Modulation of spatial depth and perceptible distance from place to place  
as well as from one place, i.e. both consecutive and simultaneous.<sup>31</sup>

While this text was only published on the completion of the Hubertus House in 1982, it is clear that Van Eyck's thoughts on transparency drove and sustained his work from the mid-50s. His formulation of the in-between, which incorporates ideas of the interior of time and aspects of labyrinthine clarity, is the precursor and locus of his thinking on transparency. Each of these ideas features already in his collection of writings *The Child, the Artist and the City*, collated from a series of lectures delivered at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Washington in 1960–61, following his contribution to the Otterlo conference 1959.<sup>32</sup>

The Hubertus House text reorientates and reformulates ideas and preoccupations long at play in Van Eyck's work and is, by implication, a counter or retort to the more famous essay on transparency by Colin

Rowe and Robert Slutzky, written in 1955 but published in 1976.<sup>33</sup> Rowe and Slutzky's article is seen to be the definitive theoretical legacy of the widely influential architecture school of the University of Texas. In this canonical text two distinct conditions of transparency are defined within artistic and architectural practice – 'literal' and 'phenomenal'. Where the former is identified as an 'inherent quality of substance' that relies on materiality to determine effect, the latter is considered an 'inherent quality of organisation'. Rather than being applied to or represented within a design, this mode of transparency acts as a compositional demand, requiring a 'contradiction of spatial dimensions ... a continuous dialectic between the fact and the implication'. As opposed to the 'fact' of literal transparency, phenomenal transparency offers a theoretical position and a practical site of operation in which the sequential and the simultaneous come to appearance through dialectical configuration. Case studies are provided by Le Corbusier's Villa Stein de Monzie at Garches, and the unbuilt proposal for the League of Nations on Lake Geneva.

### Riddle C

Configuration of intermediary places clearly defined. This does not imply continued transition or endless postponement.... On the contrary, it implies a break away from spatial continuity.... I suggest articulation of transition by means of defined in-between places which induce simultaneous awareness of what is significant in either side.<sup>34</sup>

Closed and crenellated, the Baambrugge is no natural descendant of the planar logics of Garches, and yet in the tuned tensions of its plan and section a similar approach to transparency is played out. For the project, despite its general coherence, resists singular definitions, integrates both ambiguity and estrangement. Not only do its transparencies show and hide at the same time, but they become the very method of overlaying figure and substance, individual and family, part and whole. Van Eyck's transparency is certainly an ambivalent structure, both riddle and method, a relational agglomeration which is also always indicative of interiority. Here, too, transparency is achieved through the resonant articulation of spaces clearly defined, carefully modulated interactions delineated in their position, plane and proportion.



21—

Critically for Van Eyck, the riddle of transparency embodied at Baambrugge co-opts and subverts any forced reading of transparency as guarantor of spatial continuity, offering something richer, stranger and deeper. The qualities of space both before and beyond each transparent plane of this Four-Tower House are recognised, distinguished and elaborated by and through the relationships established in plan and section. Here, variety is central, difference intentional. The distinct qualities of each space become enhanced and developed by their opposites, each equally valid and available for inhabitation otherwise, dependent on context, condition or company. As in 'The Riddle Princess', transparency within the Viertornhuis comes to be to do with time, and with the body. The drawings discussed play with transparency as a riddle, using its limits and capacities to conceptualise and communicate the varied complexities of human plurality. Such an attempt seeks to substantiate and legitimise transparency as a means to consolidate the puzzle of living, between their interior, exterior and shared worlds.

### And in the end?

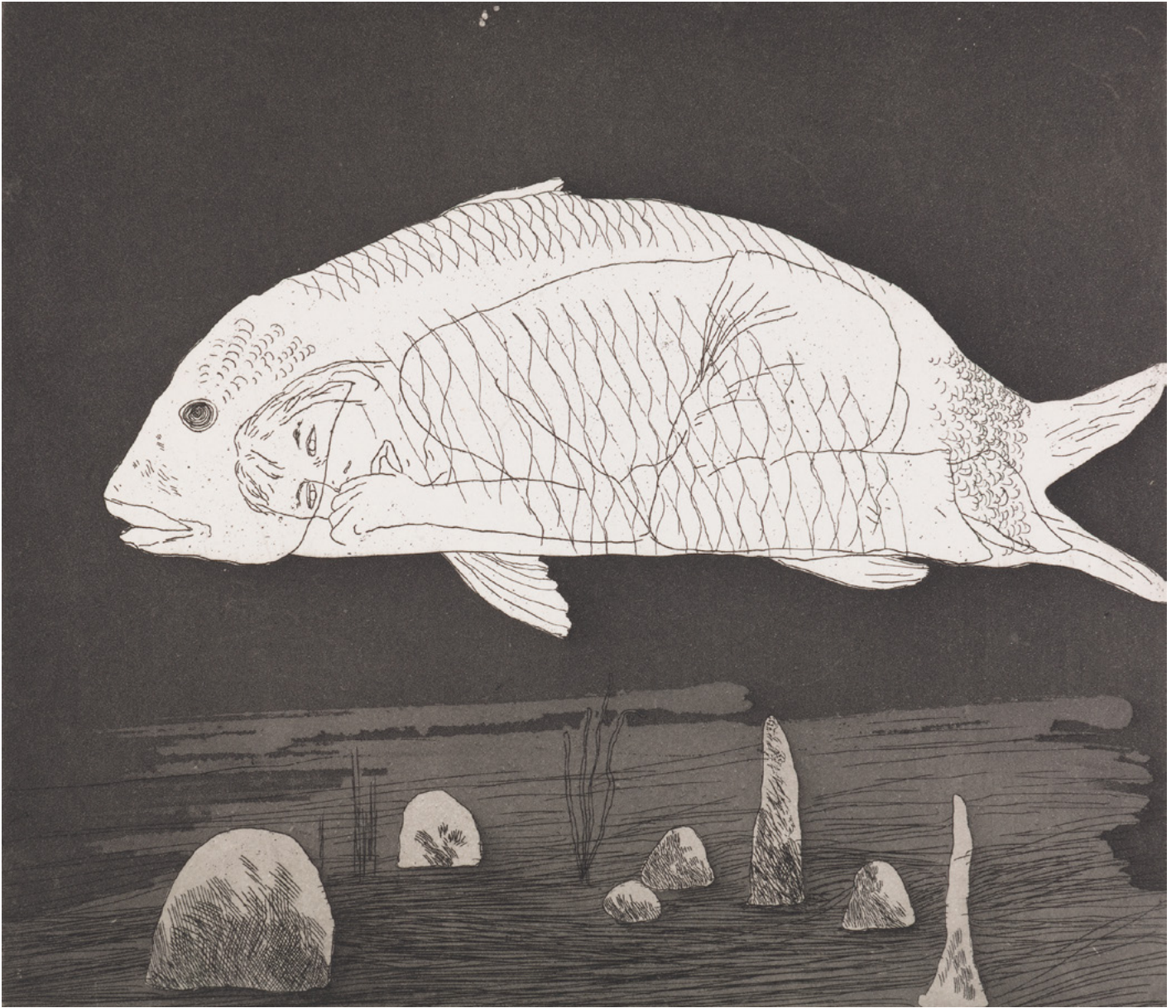
To live in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.<sup>35</sup>

A riddle is child's play. However, the project for Baambrugge undercuts the always present temptation to read such a statement reductively. As a challenge that also plots a story, a riddle must be solvable, although not immediately and not by all. The bivalence of Baambrugge – to one extent informed by patterns of the past and on the other by its resolute reconstitution of these principles for the purpose of the present – has the ambivalence of a riddle at its core. Part postulation, part performance, as our discussion has shown, the scheme's succinct encryption erupts into being, resolving complexity with clarity and continuous refinement. Through activating an ambivalent transparency, the plan combines the centrifugal forces of worldliness and connection with the centripetal desire for interiority and repose. Stubborn, hard-won and resolute, it objects to the use of transparency as a modernist veneer, instead activating it as riddle, as method in order to enrich experience, to expand possibilities, and to ward off instrumentality.

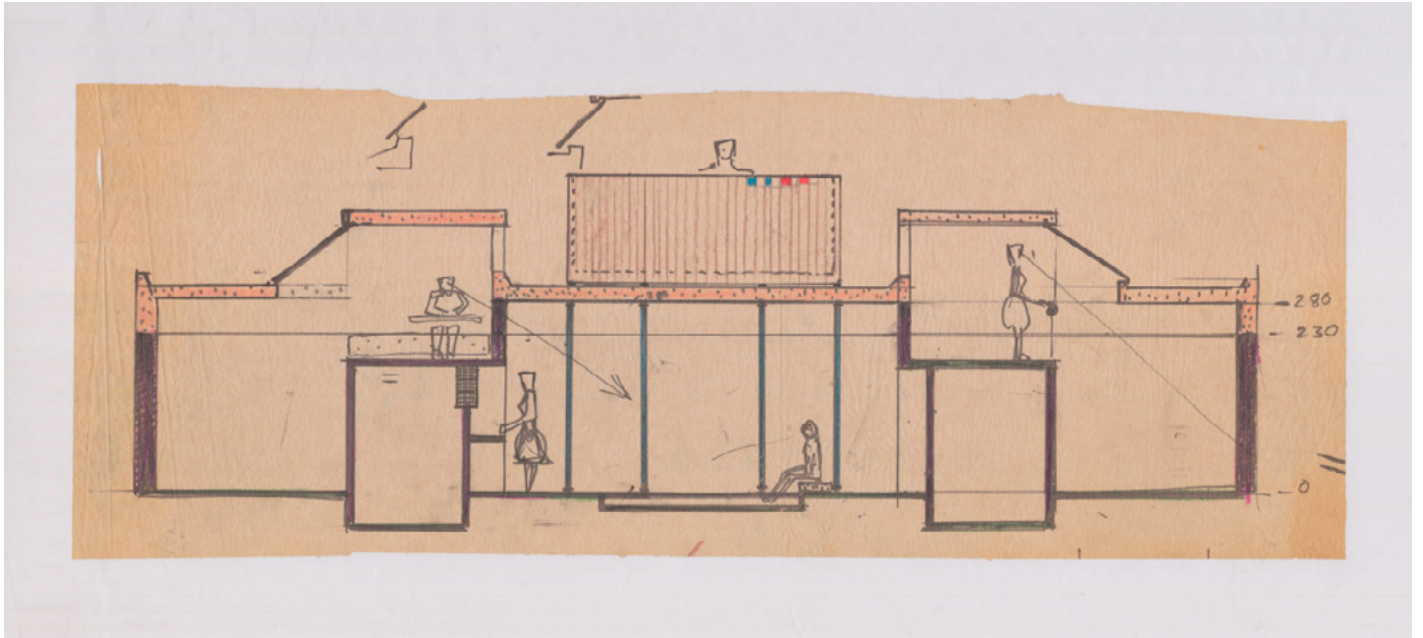
Failing to secure planning permission from the council of Utrecht, the house remained unbuilt. The spell is broken, the towers fall. Van Eyck, like the princess, yields his kingdom, but maintains his line.<sup>36</sup>



- 1 A sea hare is an aquatic gastropod, but the creature appears as a head louse in some versions of the story.
- 2 David Hockney and South Bank Centre, *David Hockney: Grimms' Fairy Tales* (London: South Bank Centre, 1993), 10–11.
- 3 David Hockney, *Six Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm with Original Etchings by David Hockney* (London: Petersburg Press, in association with the Kasmin Gallery, 1970), 4.
- 4 Hockney, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, *op. cit.*, 12.
- 5 Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *Courtly Riddles: Enigmatic Embellishments in Early Persian Poetry* (Leiden University Press, 2010), 74.
- 6 Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 7 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Beacon Press, 1955), 105–18.
- 8 Bertolt Brecht, Tom Kuhn and David Constantine, *Collected Plays: Eight* (London: Methuen, 2004).
- 9 Bertolt Brecht and Henry J. Schmidt, 'Brecht's "Turandot": "Tuis" and Cultural Politics', *Theatre Journal* (Washington, D.C.) 32, no.3 (1980), 289–304. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3206885> [accessed 03.06.25].
- 10 Hannah Arendt, Foreword to Isak Dinesen, *Daguerreotypes, and Other Essays*. trans. P.M. Mitchell and W.D. Paden (University of Chicago Press, 1979), xx.
- 11 Aldo van Eyck and Vincent Ligtelijn. *Aldo van Eyck, Works* (Birkhäuser Verlag, 1999), 111. See also Alejandro Campos Uribe, *Aldo van Eyck: le Musée imaginaire, La casa de Aldo y Hannie van Eyck en Loenen aan de Vecht*, Ph.D. (Universitat Politècnica de València, 2018), A–8.
- 12 'Het viertorenhuis, Baambrugge' is the name given by Van Eyck to the scheme in the Dutch edition of *Aldo van Eyck: Werken/ Samentelling*, ed. Vincent Ligtelijn (Bussum: Thoth, 1999), 111–13. The term is translated as 'The Four-Tower House, Baambrugge' in the English edn. Van Eyck and Vincent Ligtelijn, *Aldo van Eyck, Works* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1999), 111–13. In this article the house will be referred to generally as Baambrugge, except when referring to the tower aspect in particular.
- 13 The Great Riot was Van Eyck's term for the proponents of what Umberto Boccioni called 'a new sensibility', and included, among others, Paul Cézanne, Le Corbusier, Tristan Tzara, Piet Mondrian and Paul Klee. For Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, Mondrian and Klee – whose works hung on the walls of the Van Eyck family home – formed part of the 'Parisian' attempt to recognise and work with the picture plane as an active and participatory component of any 'stratification of volume'.
- 14 Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of Relativity* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 1998), 328.
- 15 Van Eyck, 'A Home for Twin Phenomena', ch. 3 of *The Child, the City and the Artist* (1962), one vol. of *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, eds Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven (Amsterdam: Sun Publishers, 2008), 61.
- 16 Laura Harty, *Aldo van Eyck: Direct, aedificat, mutat quadrata rotundis*, 14 February 2025. Written in response to inclusion of this drawing in *Soane and Modernism: Make it New* at Sir John Soane's Museum. <https://drawingmatter.org/aldo-van-eyck-diruit-aedificat-mutat-quadrata-rotundis/> [accessed 03.06.25].
- 17 Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 90.
- 18 Van Eyck, 'The moment of realization' (talk at conclusion of Otterlo Congress, ed. Van Eyck 1961), in *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, *op. cit.*, 205–7.
- 19 *Voyage dans le Cristal Catalogue d'exposition: Musée du Moyen Âge – Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2024).
- 20 Isabelle Bariès, Stéphane Pennec, 'Reliquaire', in *Voyage dans le Cristal Catalogue d'exposition*, *op. cit.*, 228.
- 21 Van Eyck and Ligtelijn, *Aldo van Eyck, Works*, *op. cit.*, 111.
- 22 Van Eyck, 'Is architecture going to reconcile basic values?' (1959 talk at Otterlo Congress, ed. Van Eyck 1961), in *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, *op. cit.*, 202–5.
- 23 Van Eyck, 'Letter to Sigfried Giedion on the dissolution of CIAM' (undated ms, written shortly after 10 December 1960), in *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, *op. cit.*, 208–211.
- 24 Van Eyck, 'INDESEM 67 – international design seminar – at the Dept of Architecture of the Delft Polytechnic, 1967', intro. of lecture, DVD with publication of *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, *op. cit.*, 733.
- 25 Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of Repose: An Essay on Images of Interiority*, trans Mary McAllester Jones (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2011).
- 26 Strauven, *Van Eyck: The shape of relativity*, *op. cit.*, 328.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 327.
- 28 Van Eyck was one of seven architects who contributed to the July 1990 exhibition 'Contemporary Visions' on the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh at the Glasgow School of Art. An interview by Richard Murphy features in: Murray Grigor, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Richard Murphy, Edward Cullinan, Leon Krier, Aldo van Eyck, and others, *The Architects' Architect: Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Bellew in association with the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society, 1993).
- 29 'There is the spatial sensation which makes us envy birds in flight, there is also the kind that recalls the sheltered enclosure of our origin.... To be Caliban it is necessary to be Ariel.' Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, The City and the Artist*, *op. cit.*, 67–68.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 31 Herman Hertzberger, Addie van Roijen-Wortmann and Francis Strauven, *Aldo van Eyck: Hubertushuis* (Hubertus House), (Amsterdam: Stichting Wonen/Van Loghum Slaterus, 1982), 81–3.
- 32 Laura Harty, *Template and Talisman, DMJ 2*, 'Drawing Instruments: Instrumental Drawings', eds Mark Dorrian and Paul Emmons (2024), 111–13.
- 33 Colin Rowe, 'Transparency Literal and Phenomenal, Part I', in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 22–55, and Colin Rowe, 'Transparency Literal and Phenomenal, Part II', in *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays*, ed. Alexander Caragone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 72–106.
- 34 Van Eyck, *Aldo van Eyck Writings*, *op. cit.*, 63.
- 35 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, 52.
- 36 In many projects that follow, from the Congress Centre in Jerusalem (1958) to the Roman Catholic Church in The Hague (1969), from the Sonsbeek Pavillion (1965) to the Hubertushuis (1981), the central preoccupation of opening that which would close remains. In each, this riddle is central, a productive force that drives invention and retains a generative potential.



David Hockney, *The Boy Hidden in a Fish*, from illustrations for *Six Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm*, 1969. Etching, Edition of 100. 34.3 x 38 cm © David Hockney. Photo: Richard Schmidt.



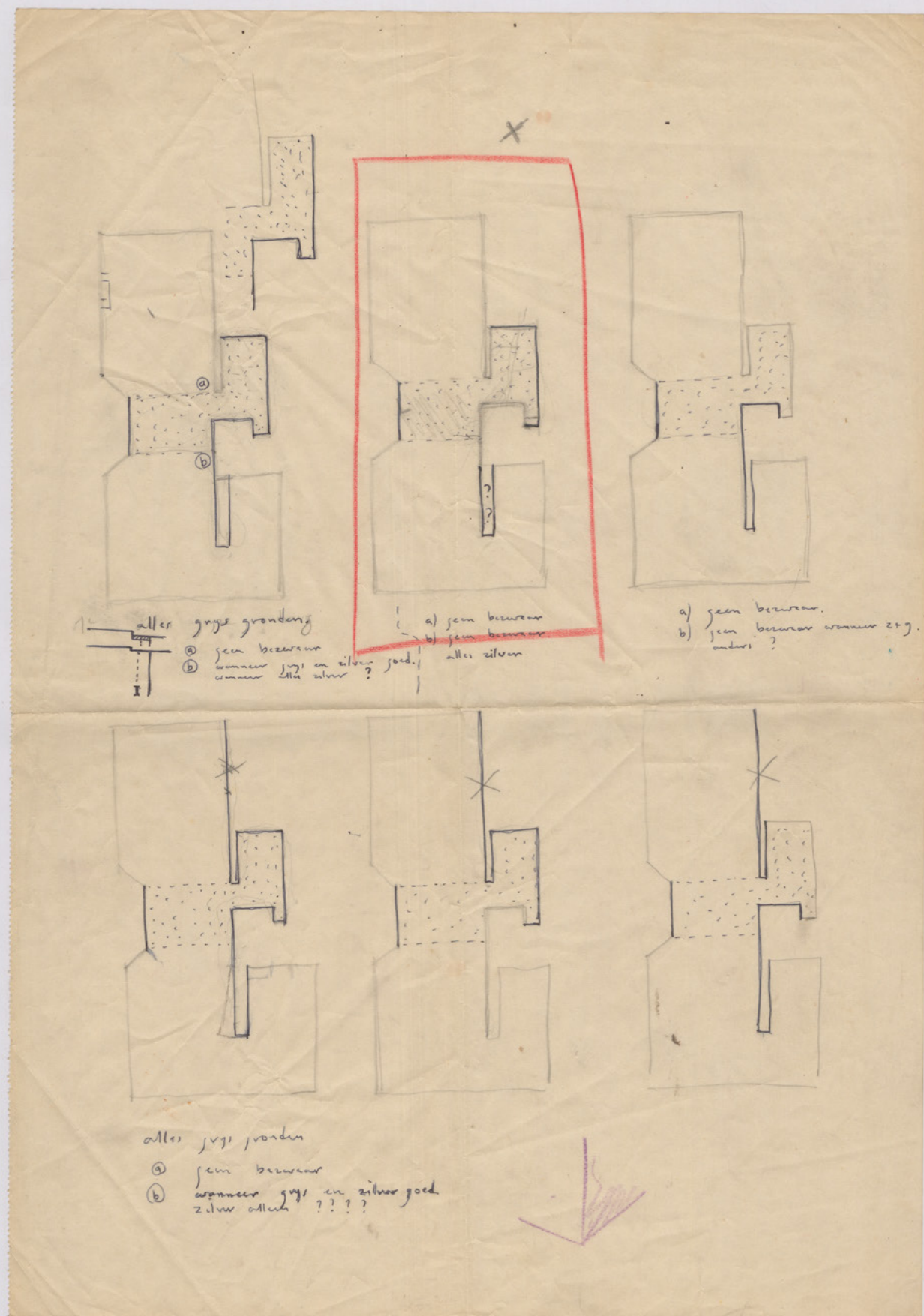
Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK038 Section 2, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Pencil, felt pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 34.5 x 93 cm. DMC 3658.29, Drawing Matter Collections.



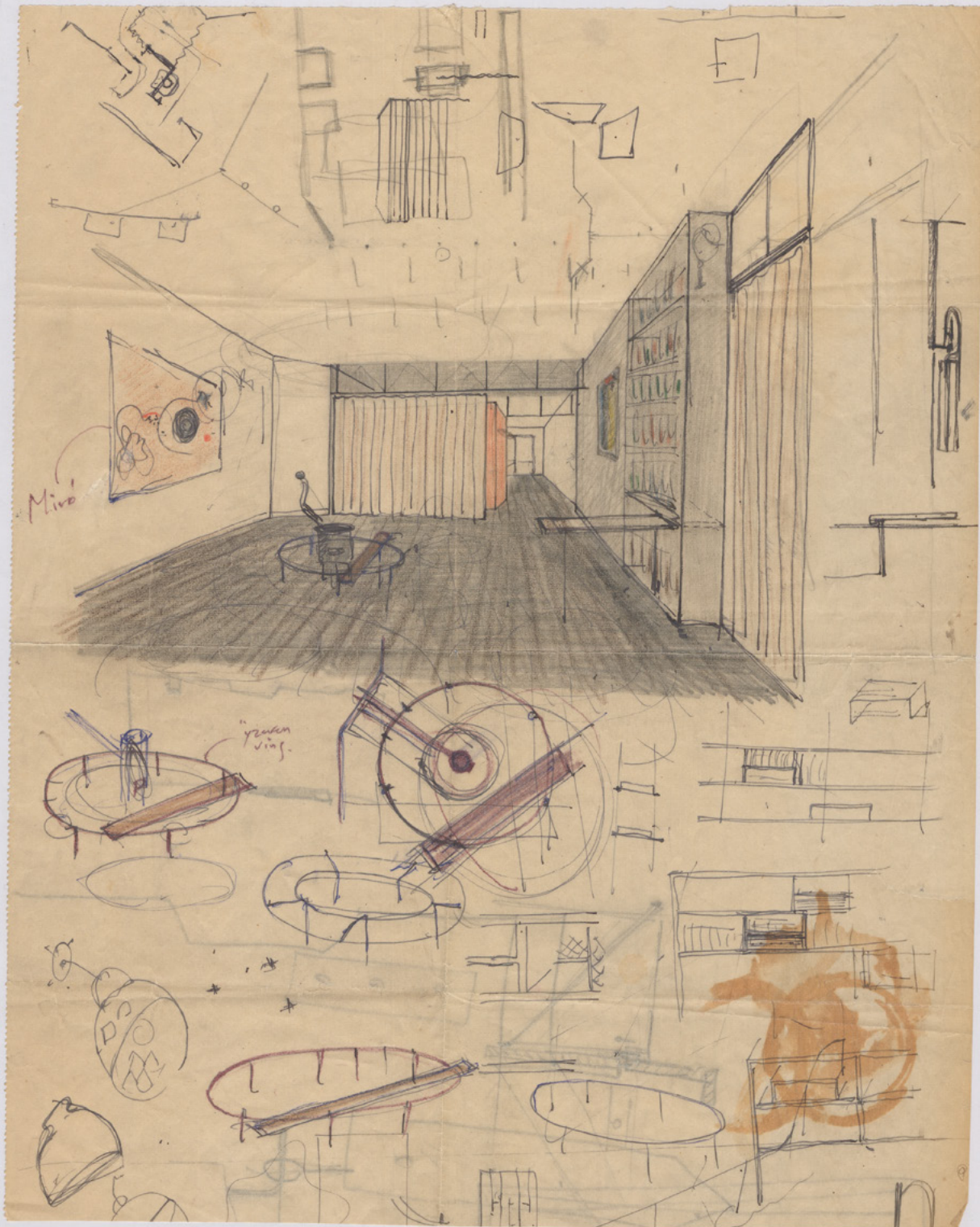


David Hockney, *The Princess Searching*, from illustrations for *Six Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm*, 1969. Etching, Edition of 100. 45.1 x 42.5 cm © David Hockney. Photo: Richard Schmidt.





Aldo van Eyck, Painting instructions for the Binnenkant. Pencil and ink on tracing paper. 4801 Binnenkant SK003 Floor Plans, © Aldo van Eyck from the Aldo van Eyck archive.



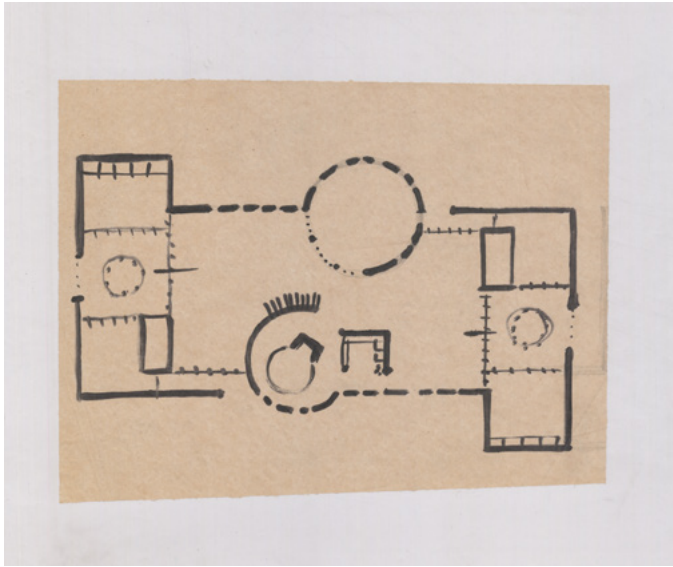
Aldo van Eyck, Interior Perspective, living room Binnenkant. Ink, pencil, wash and cup stains on tracing paper. 4801 Binnenkant SK001 Interior Perspective. © Aldo van Eyck from the Aldo van Eyck archive.



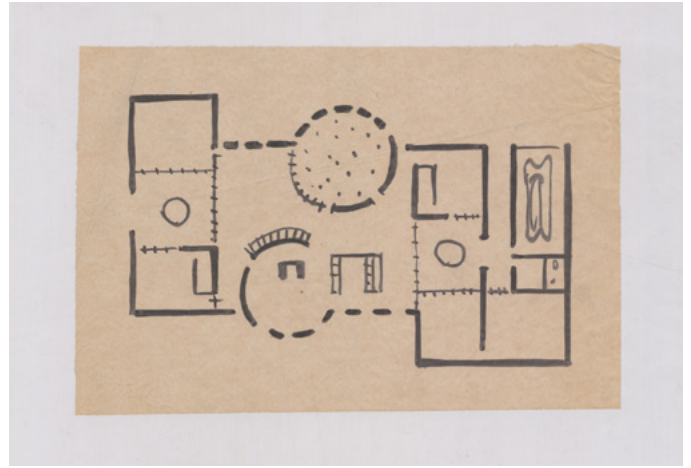


Aldo van Eyck, SK015 Ground Floor Plan 15 – Site Plan, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Pencil, felt pen, coloured chalk, sellotape on tracing paper, 62 x 100 cm. DMC 3658.14, Drawing Matter Collections.

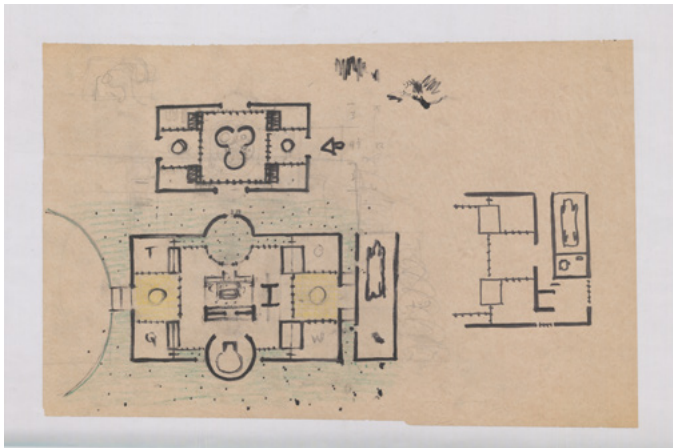
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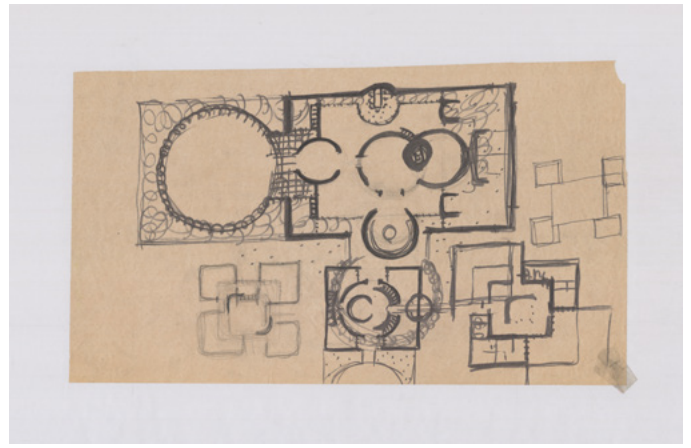
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7— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK001 Ground Floor Plan 1, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.

Felt pen on tracing paper, 23.5 x 31 cm. DMC 3658.1, Drawing Matter Collections.

8— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK002 Ground Floor Plan 2, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.

Felt pen on tracing paper, 22.2 x 32.1 cm. DMC 3658.2, Drawing Matter Collections.

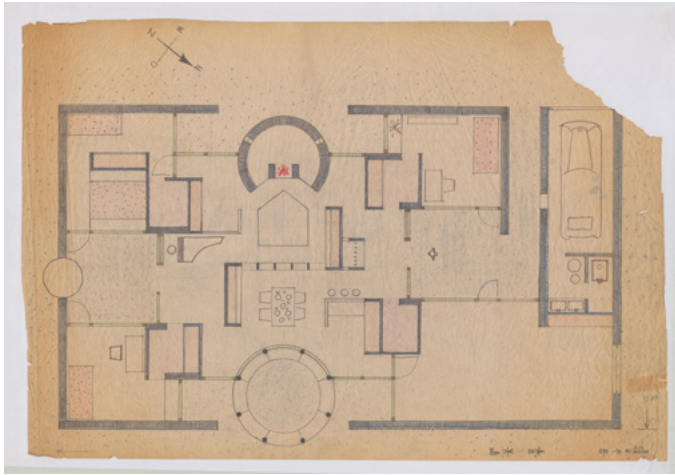
9— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK003 Ground Floor Plan 3, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Pencil, ink, felt pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 21.5 x 50.8 cm. DMC 3658.3, Drawing Matter Collections.

10— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK004 Ground Floor Plan 4, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.

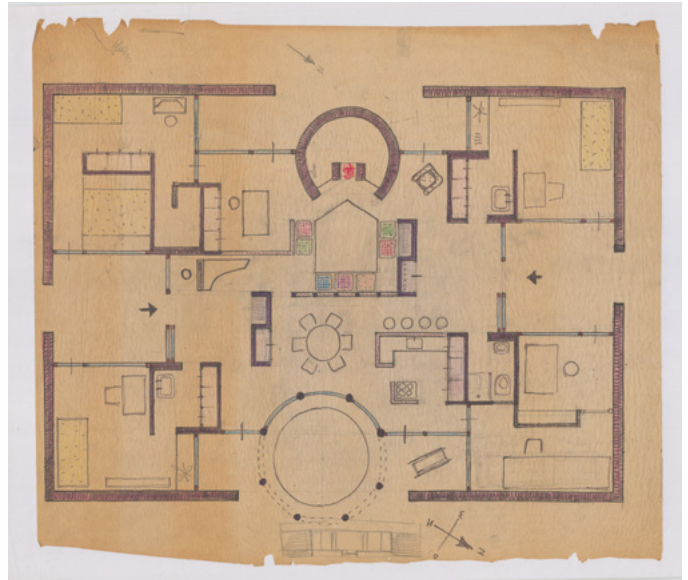
Pencil and felt pen on tracing paper, 315 x 535mm. DMC 3658.4, Drawing Matter Collections.



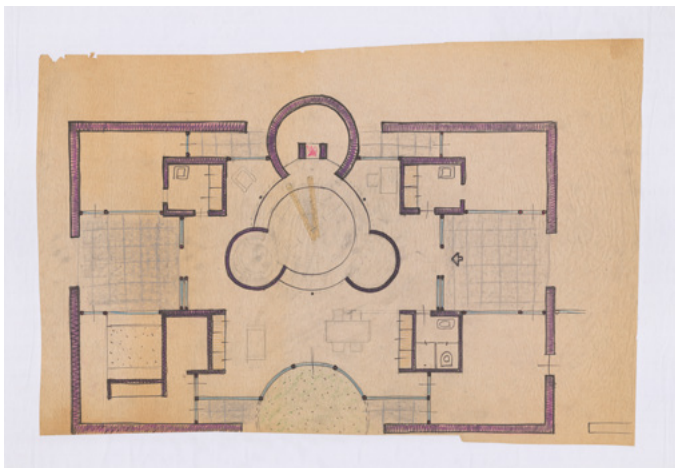
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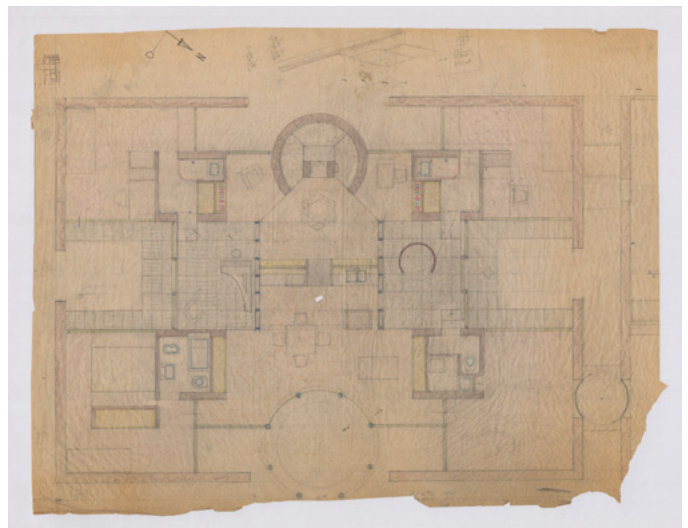
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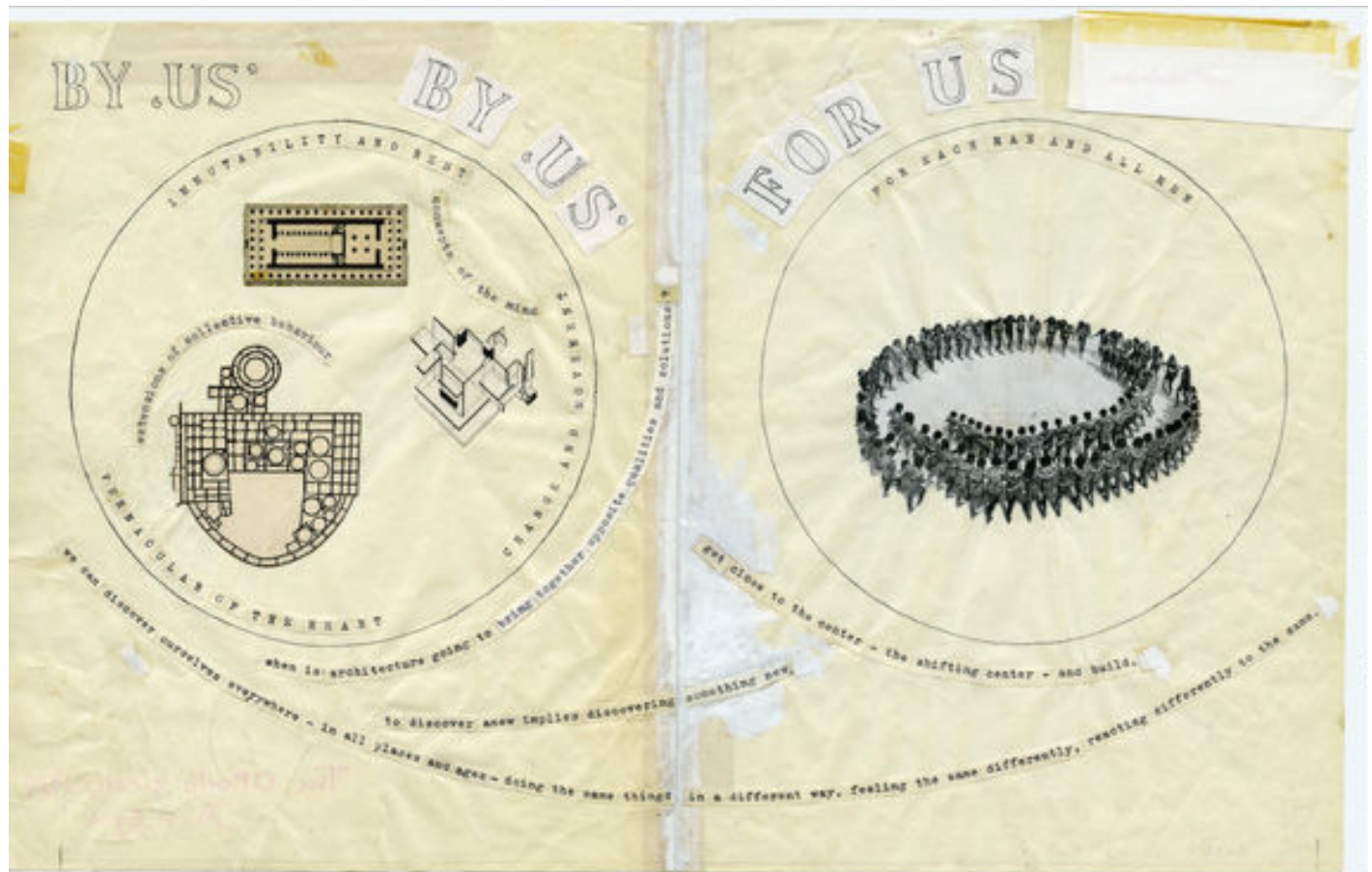


- 11— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK007 Ground Floor Plan 7, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.  
Pencil, felt pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 78.2 x 114 cm. DMC 3658.5, Drawing Matter Collections.
- 12— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK010 Ground Floor Plan 10, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.  
Pencil and felt pen on tracing paper, 79 x 90.5 cm. DMC 3658.6, Drawing Matter Collections.
- 13— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK005 Ground Floor Plan 5, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.  
Pencil, felt pen and coloured chalks on tracing paper, 67 x 100 cm. DMC 3658.9, Drawing Matter Collections.
- 14— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK009 Ground Floor Plan 9, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958.  
Pencil, felt pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 75 x 99 cm. DMC 3658.12, Drawing Matter Collections.

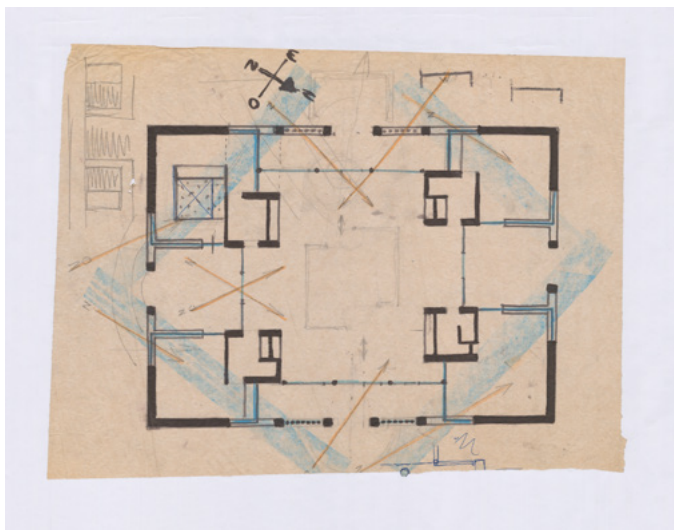


Reliquary Crystal, Cologne, early 13th century. National Museum of Denmark, no. 9082. Photo: Ukendt. CC-BY-SA license: <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/dmr/asset/225197> [accessed 15.07.25].

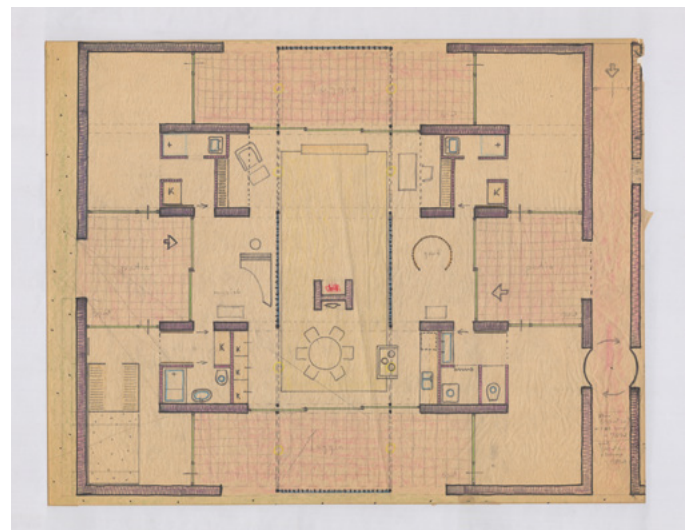




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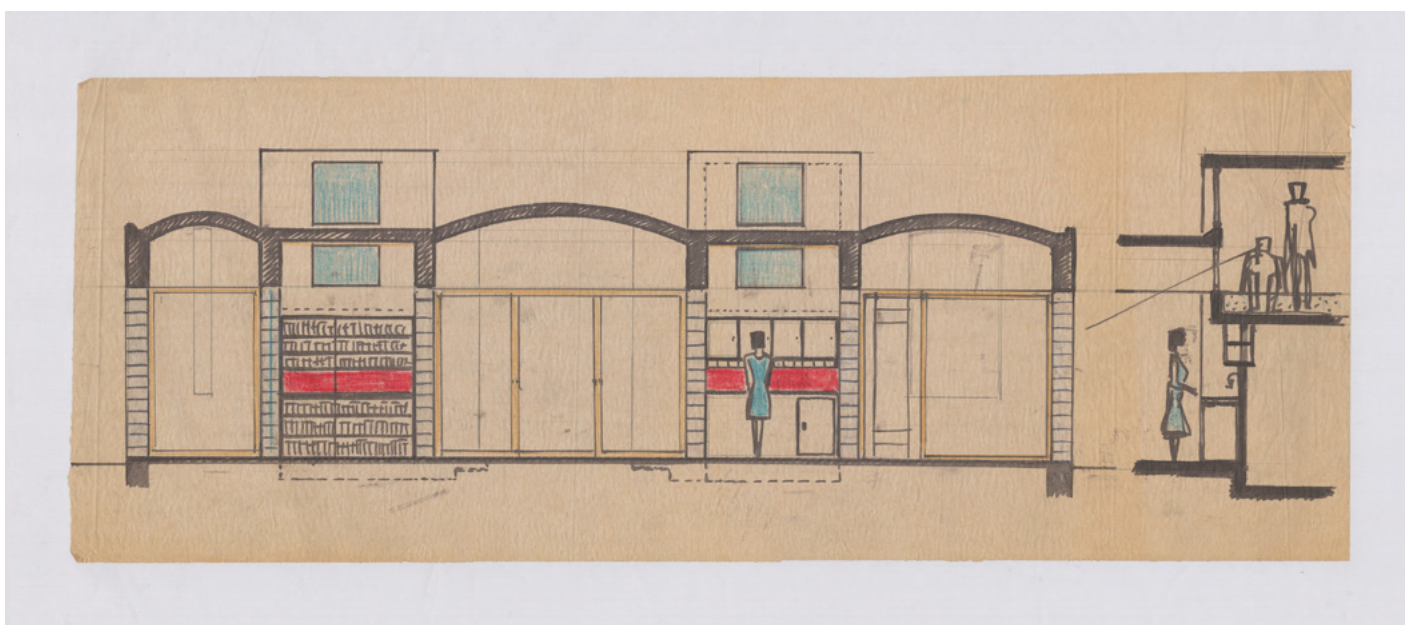
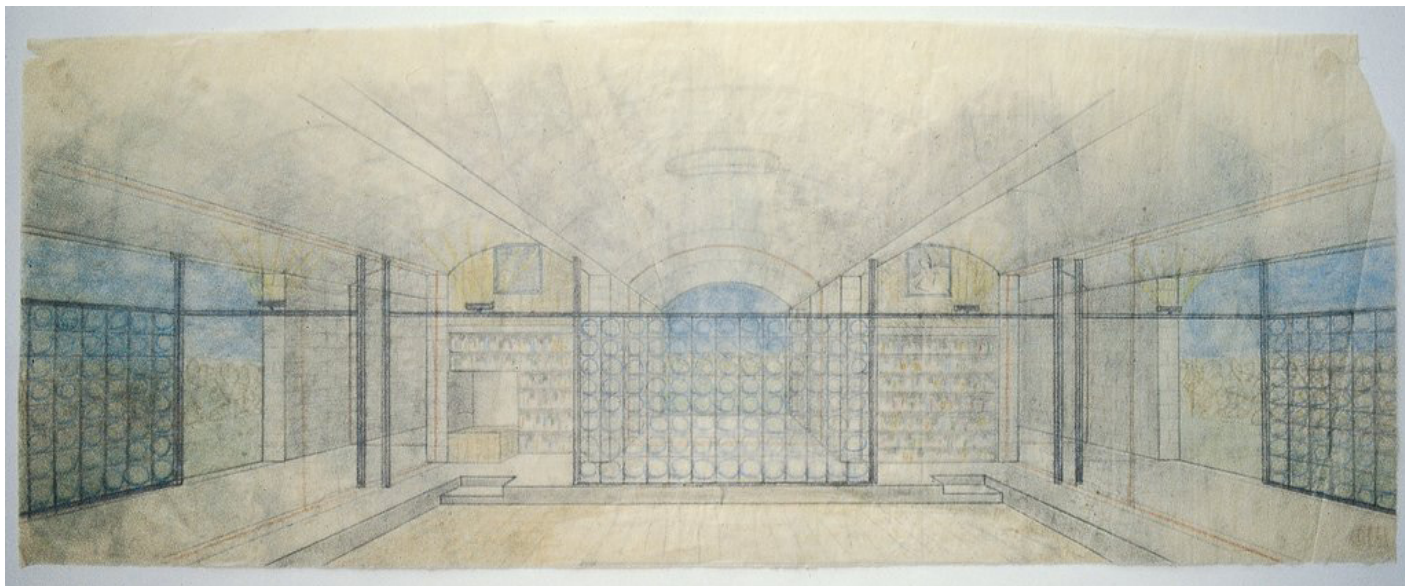


16— Otterlo Circles AB1 and AB2 front. Second version of the Otterlo Circles, prepared for inclusion in Aldo van Eyck, *The Child, The City and the Artist*. (1962). The Aldo and Hannie van Eyck Foundation.

17— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK013 Ground Floor Plan 13, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Pencil, felt pen, ballpoint pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 35 x 46.5 cm. DMC 3658.10, Drawing Matter Collections.

18— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK021 Ground Floor Plan 21, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Felt tip pen and coloured chalks on tracing paper laid on card, 70 x 90 cm. DMC 3658.22, Drawing Matter Collections.





19— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK052 Interior Perspective 9, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. DMC, no.3658.20.

20— Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, SK040 Section 4, The Four Tower House, Baambrugge, 1958. Pencil, felt pen and coloured crayons on tracing paper, 31.5 x 82.5 cm. DMC 3658.33, Drawing Matter Collections.



Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663. Oil on canvas, 70 x 75.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Public domain via <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Interior-with-Women-beside-a-Linen-Cupboard--50874e6f82c7190c896320bf39c7f4c9> [accessed 15.07.25].