

Between Time and Style. A Conversation With Alice Roegholt on the Het Schip Museum and the “Courage to Look Forward”

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Abstract

Het Schip, which was built in Amsterdam between 1919 and 1921, is a great example of Dutch social housing and a real workers' palace. Michel De Klerk designed the building in the Amsterdam School's expressionistic style, which was new at the time. Not only did the workers and their families get a good place to live there, but it was also a nice one. The building looks like a steamship because of its triangular shape, which is why people call it Het Schip (The Ship). It has wavy patterns of colourful bricks, architectural sculptures, and a lot of other interesting details. At first, the block had 102 homes with different floor plans. There was also a post office on the corner where the workers could send letters, manage their money, and make phone calls. After decades of neglect, in 2001 a living museum was established, in which the restored post office and later a model residential unit and the former school are accessible for visitors, while residents continue to live their life in the renovated units. In this interview, Alice Roegholt talks about her decades-long experience as an engaged curator of Het Schip.

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It is possible to gain important insights into domesticity as a source of inspiration for spatial design over time by figuring out how the ideas of collective living and reinventing the home have impacted Dutch architecture throughout the 20th century. Furthermore, concepts of modernity developed in the past help us recognise the value-driven thrust of social dynamics reflected in material worlds as well as the determining forces of politics and economics. How can concepts and iconic physical spaces be modified and passed down through the generations? Het Schip is an Amsterdam School social housing masterpiece that was commissioned to Michel De Klerk by the Eigen Haard Housing Association (literally: “Have your own fireplace”). They still control the complex, which was built between 1917 and 1920. In 1999, Alice Roegholt initiated its interior restoration. She oversaw the project’s conversion into a museum and argued that such an extraordinary housing project was relevant to daily communal life. She is adamant about De Klerk’s creative method of enhancing workers’ lives. The Het Schip Museum now honours Alice Roegholt as its founder and emeritus director. She has a background in sociology and a deep understanding of Amsterdam’s social and urban history in the 20th century. She has been involved in the squatting and social housing movements. In this interview, she reflects on her decades-long experience as an engaged curator of Het Schip. The daily lives of residents of collective housing projects from the 20th century are depicted in this one-of-a-kind living museum, along with their ability to adjust to changing circumstances.

According to her, De Klerk’s approach is still relevant today because he considered both internal and external spaces as places for everyday engagement with the modernity of his era. He made built-in cabinets for every home and designed telephone booths for post offices. Particular attention was paid to kitchen layout and door frames. Every home had a toilet and electricity, but no showers because residents thought that using the neighbourhood’s shared bathhouse would be adequate for their needs. The expressionist design of these structures and their efforts to promote communal lifestyles were eventually forgotten by local architectural and urban history. In the meantime, locals started looking for modifications to conform to changing notions of modernity.

1 *How are overlooked architectural experiences revived and recognized as crucial turning points? Is architectural critique still relevant in mobilizing energies and resources to transfer the experimental dimensions of past architecture into the future?*

ALICE ROEGHOLT In 2001, we opened the Het Schip post office museum. I remember going into the building for the first time when the post office was still open. I was so shocked that it was working that I bought stamps I didn’t need. Then, a group of Italian architectural students came in to take pictures, but the woman behind the counter kicked them out.



That moment made it clear to me that something had to change. The post office shouldn't have turned away people who wanted to see the architecture of the building, which was once an experimental way to design housing.

In fact, interest in the Amsterdam School and its work on social housing design has grown in the second half of the 20th century. The British architect Reyner Banham said that the Amsterdam School's expressionism was in the same line as Berlage and Frank Lloyd Wright. He said that this movement, with Michel De Klerk as its "showpiece," was an important body of thought in European architecture.

There were many more publications after that. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam held a big show about the Amsterdam School in 1975. The Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York then had a show about the same topic. In their catalogue, Maristella Casciato called Michel De Klerk's work "The Built Utopia." He was one of the few utopian architects who were able to make their idealistic plans a reality. Later, she wrote a long paper about the Amsterdam School. For many years, this book was the main work on the Amsterdam School.

Several of Michel De Klerk's buildings have been designated as national monuments and have undergone significant restoration. It was in this context that his most renowned work, Het Schip, was transformed into a museum showcasing the contributions of de Klerk and other architects of the Amsterdam School.

Fig. 1 - Het Schip,
Amsterdam, architect
Michel de Klerk, ca.
1924, Photo Archive
Alice Roegholt.



2 *With your curatorial experience in an architectural design museum, how would you incorporate the passage of time into a space, particularly considering the experimental efforts in a complex project like Het Schip, which may now seem naive?*

AR I didn't have clear plans when I first met Het Schip. People did not go to that area very often unless they had family there. I suggested putting together a celebration in 1998 before the 100th anniversary of the Housing Act. I thought about making a museum for social housing, but I did not think I would do it myself. The city thought the idea was too big, so they suggested an exhibition in the Beurs van Berlage instead. But I thought everything was already going on in the middle of the city. I wanted to go to a neighbourhood where working people lived. I rode my bike through the neighbourhoods of the 1920s and suddenly came across the Het Schip tower. It was amazing. I had seen it from the train but never knew where it was. I saw a sign that said "Post Office" on the building and went inside. The inside was peeling and painted the postal service's standard green at the time. When I asked the clerk why it was not kept up better, she said they were leaving. A man behind me in the queue saw that I was not from the area and told me that the locals called the building "The Ship" because it had the captain's house, the waves, and the lifeboats. At that point, I knew the place was more than just a building. It stood for what social housing should be.

Fig. 2 - Het Schip.
Amsterdam, architect
Michel de Klerk,
Photo Museum Het
Schip.

The Getty Foundation helped restore the post office and the houses in Het Schip completely in 2015 and 2016. They used the original picture of Michel De Klerk as a starting point and fixed small damage that had happened over the years. The modern updates included putting in bathrooms, replacing the coal stove and making the houses more modern by adding space for a refrigerator, washing machine and even underfloor heating.

For more than a hundred years, only one unit has stayed the same on the inside. It has been a model house since 2004, and you can visit it as part of Museum Het Schip. The 2001 original post office museum expanded in 2016, after the renovation works, to include the old school, which now has a permanent collection and temporary exhibitions about the Amsterdam School of Arts and Architecture and experimental housing projects.

How does the Amsterdam School experience resonate with contemporary debates? To what extent can we identify a lasting legacy in its approaches and perspectives?

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AR To be honest, I did not know much about the Amsterdam School when I first started. But later, I talked to the daughter of a city official who had backed the Housing Act. At the time, she was more than 100 years old. She said, “The Ship isn’t about looking back; it gives us the courage to look forward.” That stuck with me. It fits with what De Klerk said about architecture: individuality within a group, hope through beauty, and social ideals that look to the future.

Just the design of an architectural and urban project like this one won’t tell its story today. People did not ask residents how they felt when the building was built. I’m glad I talked to people who lived there before they passed away. The people who live in the building today are very different. Families used to live in 60 square meters in the beginning. Now, one person might live in that same space and think it is too small. It is hard to compare past and present experiences, but the building still has meaning.

Most people who live there now like how different the building is, especially after it was fixed up in 2015. Everyone had a chance to say what they wanted, and they were given a temporary place to stay while the work was going on. About 80% of them chose to come back. Anyone who rents here must also sign an agreement acknowledging that the building is of interest to tourists and architects. That has changed people’s minds from not wanting to show visitors around to being proud to do so. Some people even say, “We live in a museum!”

That is a significant change in perspective. Do residents view your curatorial role as part of that transformation, embodying the new pride for the place?

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Fig. 3 - Het Schip, Amsterdam. Model Unit: an armchair to rest and find domestic comfort after long work hours, 2025, Photo Archive Alice Roegholt.



Fig. 4 - Het Schip, Amsterdam. Model Unit: a modern tea serving set as an icon of domestic intimacy, 2025, Photo Archive Alice Roegholt.



AR A woman came by to say goodbye not long ago and remembered the first time she saw me: on the roof with a repairman, getting ready for restoration. She yelled, “Don’t fall, Alice! There won’t be a museum without you!”. People in the area have heard that story many times. It was a turning point when people from outside the community came in with new ideas that were put into action.

We get about 50,000 visitors each year now. We could handle up to 100,000 people without bothering the neighbours, but we are always aware of our limits. This is not the Sagrada Família or La Pedrera. Because our museum is in a neighbourhood where people live, we value depth over volume. We can keep that balance by giving guided tours every hour.

How do you envision Het Schip continuing to resonate with today's diverse audiences and future generations, particularly as concepts of community and collective living become more relevant in contemporary architectural discussions?

AR I see that more and more people want to be part of a community and are interested in how spatial design has historically brought people together. A lot of people feel lonely and want real connections in this digital age. Because of this, more and more people are interested in what inspired past community projects and spatial designs. The need for shared space and living together is coming back, even though the shapes of these spaces may be different.

Het Schip wants to be open to everyone. We get a lot of architecture students, but we also welcome families, kids, and tourists. The building has fantasy elements that kids love, historical stories that interest every citizen, and design elements that practitioners can relate to. Everyone who comes finds a way to connect with the space.

In addition to showing off the building itself, there are also temporary exhibits that focus on past design ideas and practices for social housing. Most of the time, major exhibitions last six months. Smaller ones may last less time, depending on how much space we have. We also show the work of local artists in the café for one-month exhibits. This helps Het Schip connect with everyday creative life again.

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