

Anyone

Richard Meier in Holland: Black and Whiteness

Author(s): Wouter Vanstisphout

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Richard Meier in Holland

BLACK AND

The Hague, Holland's most boring and beautiful town, the seat of the national government and the product of incomprehensibly inefficient town planning, has for the last five years been the scene of the infinitely slow rising of the great form that is Richard Meier's City Hall (**the birth of which is the meaning of the decade**). The building is too big, too white, and – according to Rem Koolhaas – too good for Holland. Surrounded by buildings that are all in some way extremist, exaggerated, and immoderate, it is the result of one of the most spectacular political and architectural wars imaginable; City Hall marks the epicenter of a hot zone of architectural and political incident and anecdote.

It all began with a new socialist city government and probably the most important trend in Dutch architecture of the 1980s and 1990s: the rediscovery of inner-city architecture as representative of good government. Throughout the country socialist aldermen stood up, cut their hair, changed from denims into suits, bought designer glasses, and invited good architects from good architecture magazines to do good public buildings: Maastricht got an Aldo Rossi museum, Groningen one by Alessandro Mendini and Coop Himmelblau, The Hague got a Richard Meier City Hall, and Rotterdam got a Ben van Berkel bridge and a Peter Wilson theater. The socialist minister of culture wrote a memorandum, "Space for Architecture," demanding architectural quality. International architects crowded around Holland smelling the country's penchant for interesting, critically acclaimed, and above all **international** architecture. Historians and journalists made fortunes out of subsidized exhibitions, booklets, and lectures celebrating the continuity of Holland's modernist past into its pluralist present. An architecture museum was built to symbolize the awesome **civitas**-producing power of **interesting** architecture. The museum tightly controls the independent architectural magazine **Archis**, which all of a sudden became bilingual, strengthening the myth of internationalization. Through **Archis** and the architecture schools, Dutch architects and critics acquired the talents of their American counterparts – speaking in tongues, using incredible poetic language of medical and pseudo-scientific metaphors, and producing **strange** designs. But here is the crucial difference: the Dutch actually succeeded in having them built.

To maximize profit in this lush architectural climate one needs to realize that in Holland architecture is expected to mean something, to represent, and to make itself understood. What it should mean is so simple that it is absurdly tautological. The architecture itself doesn't really matter; what matters is the feat of actually realizing a good, interesting, international, and important building. The building should communicate this: "I am an interesting building, interesting is good. I am a good building; I am not a bad building; it is more difficult to build a good building than a bad one. The city government has made it possible to build a good building; I am that building; the city government is a good government." This is how socialist governments can have a consistent idea about using architecture while inviting the most mind-bogglingly different architects. It does not matter one bit what the architecture looks like as long as it looks like architecture. Still, the heated debates leading up to the selection and construction of Meier's white building show that underneath the surface of socialist pragmatism lies an old and nagging certainty that it **does** matter what architecture looks like, that some architecture **is** better than other architecture. The pluralism of socialist architectural politics conceals a deep and sometimes semiconscious historicist determinism regarding the **meaning** of architectural aesthetics.

The story of the City Hall is tangled, messy, provincial, and gossipy. It all began with a socialist alderman named Adri Duivesteijn, a former activist against urban renewal projects and infrastructure. A photo from the 1970s shows him straddling a crash barrier wielding a sledgehammer and grinning stupidly at the camera. In 1986 Adri began his third term as alderman; as with each previous term, his hair was a little shorter. This term he was named head of the department of urban renewal and city planning – a real power position he planned to use. In the center of the city was a desolate area called het Spul (the Sluice). Meanwhile The Hague's perennial problem of a city hall presented itself; the Dudokian building from the 1920s at the edge of town had never been completed, and half of the staff worked in an old building in

the center of town. Both were too small to accommodate their functions. The city had planned to execute a design by a Dutch firm to complete the existing city hall. The plan was functional and pragmatic. It proposed nothing new. It didn't mean, represent, or say anything in particular. It just accommodated the civil servants.

Adri preyed on it.

In his diary about the city hall project, **The Hague City-Hall: Building in the Snake Pit**,¹ he tells about the birth of the other idea:

"Now I have to realize that fucking project by Ellerman even when I'm against it," I complained happily, "and at the same time there is no money to do anything downtown and a big piece of land is lying empty at the Sluice." And suddenly I felt a fever rise. It was the same fever I felt when I realized that I could relocate the city theater, but this time it was more intense and more overwhelming. This was the moment that later would be known as 'Duivesteijn's brain wave.' 'Why don't we build the city hall at the Sluice, together with the public library?' Van Otterloo [a colleague of Adri] shook his head: 'No, that's no good, we'll have three city halls.' 'Then we'll have to use the Monchy Square [the address of the old City Hall outside the center] for housing,' I stated strongly."

The fever was of a specific kind; it concerned the creation of a socialist focal point, a space and a symbol for the people, the proletariat. The latent socialist rhetorics behind Adri's fever are so strong that in his book he shirks from expressing them and quotes a colleague to indicate indirectly the true nature of his affliction: "When I just came here, I asked several people the question: 'Where does a citizen of The Hague go to when the revolution comes?' I got several answers; this means that The Hague has no single focal point such as Damsquare in Amsterdam or the Coolsingel in Rotterdam." This anecdote bares the core of Dutch Moral Modernism: the country that is the least likely candidate for a revolution compulsively toys with the idea of it. Social democracy rules without ever having to shed one droplet of blood. Dreams of black and white photographs of Russia and France, of Lenin and Jaurès, of the Place de la Concorde and Red Square, of the stair scene in **Potemkin** and the barricades of the communards. More importantly: the politicians dream of an urban space of indeterminate and uncontrollable use while proposing a building for governing the city.

Bleary-eyed with the fever, Adri started leafing through architecture magazines. In **Archis** he stumbled across an article on Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois building in Chicago. He took the magazine along to a City Council meeting and passed it around. "I was especially taken by the atrium, a grand public hall where all kinds of activities can take place and one you can just walk into, without any premeditated purpose." Socialist nostalgia was plugged into high-capitalist architecture and sold with 1970s Team X behaviorist rhetorics: the stage was set. Adri's strategy was typically socialist-pragmatic: he wanted to lease the building to a developer from whom the city would rent space. A competition was staged with a short list of six; each developer would have to choose an architect to make a design. "The design will have to have an international élan: fresh, innovative, transparent, and efficient."

Thus began a hasty and awkward scramble for international glamour architects by people who had only just been forced to think of architecture in this way. This amounted to a lot of leafing through **Archis** and a lot of phoning around: "Who's famous right now?" Adri was helpful. He had visited two German museums designed by Richard Meier and James Stirling, respectively, and told two developers that something by those two would be nice. Another developer had just seen the Opéra de la Bastille but couldn't get Carlos Ott on the phone – so he contracted his French codesigners Saubot & Julien. Another firm chose to work with the Dutch firm Van den Broek & Bakema, who were still coasting on the merit of their 1960s Team X projects and building technocratic fortresses around Holland and Germany. And of course one firm chose Helmut Jahn.

Stirling bowed out early – not enough time. Adri glanced around, saw Koolhaas's enigmatic National Dance Theater going up right next to where the City Hall would rise and phoned him. Koolhaas had thought the same



Richard Meier & Partners, City Hall and Central Library, The Hague Photo: Richard Bryant ©Esto/Arcaid

thought and read him the telegram he was just going to send: "CAN I COME TO YOUR PARTY?" The architects were decided upon. Adri traveled around the world to have dinner with all of them. When he visited the United States, his initial infatuation with Jahn began to wane in the presence of white knight Meier: "Meier always took me to small, artistic, and always special restaurants, with Jahn I ate where the jet set ate." In the mind of our socialist arriviste, Manhattan's intellectualist cuteness was pushing out Jahn's high-capitalist Chicago glamour.

The architects and developers started to work. Once finished, their designs would be shown in an exhibition and a jury would decide the winning design. Months later the designs arrived. Adri describes how he felt when Meier's crate was opened and inside was a perfect model, its whiteness blinding the alderman, somewhat like when the archaeologists opened Tutankhamen's sarcophagus and first saw the inner shell of pure gold: "My head spun. I became silent." At the opening of the exhibition the architects presented their projects to the populace. Koolhaas charmed everyone by playing the underdog and by explaining his mini-Manhattan scheme with a size XS model he carried around in his pocket. Jahn was lagging far behind, in both design and presentation. Meier awed his audience with "beautiful" slides and trinitarian word clusters like "Space, Form, and Light." The whiteness of the Douglas House clinging to the green hillside, the whiteness of the Ulm Exhibition and Assembly Building metastasizing in a million details, the whiteness of the Frankfurt Museum for the Decorative Arts reflecting the historic town, and the whiteness of Meier's hair reflecting in CAD computer screens started to stand for something that the other architects didn't have: a kind of (teary) integrity, (boring) seriousness, (puritanical) cleanliness, or, in other words, **architecture that is better than other architecture.**

The jury thought differently.

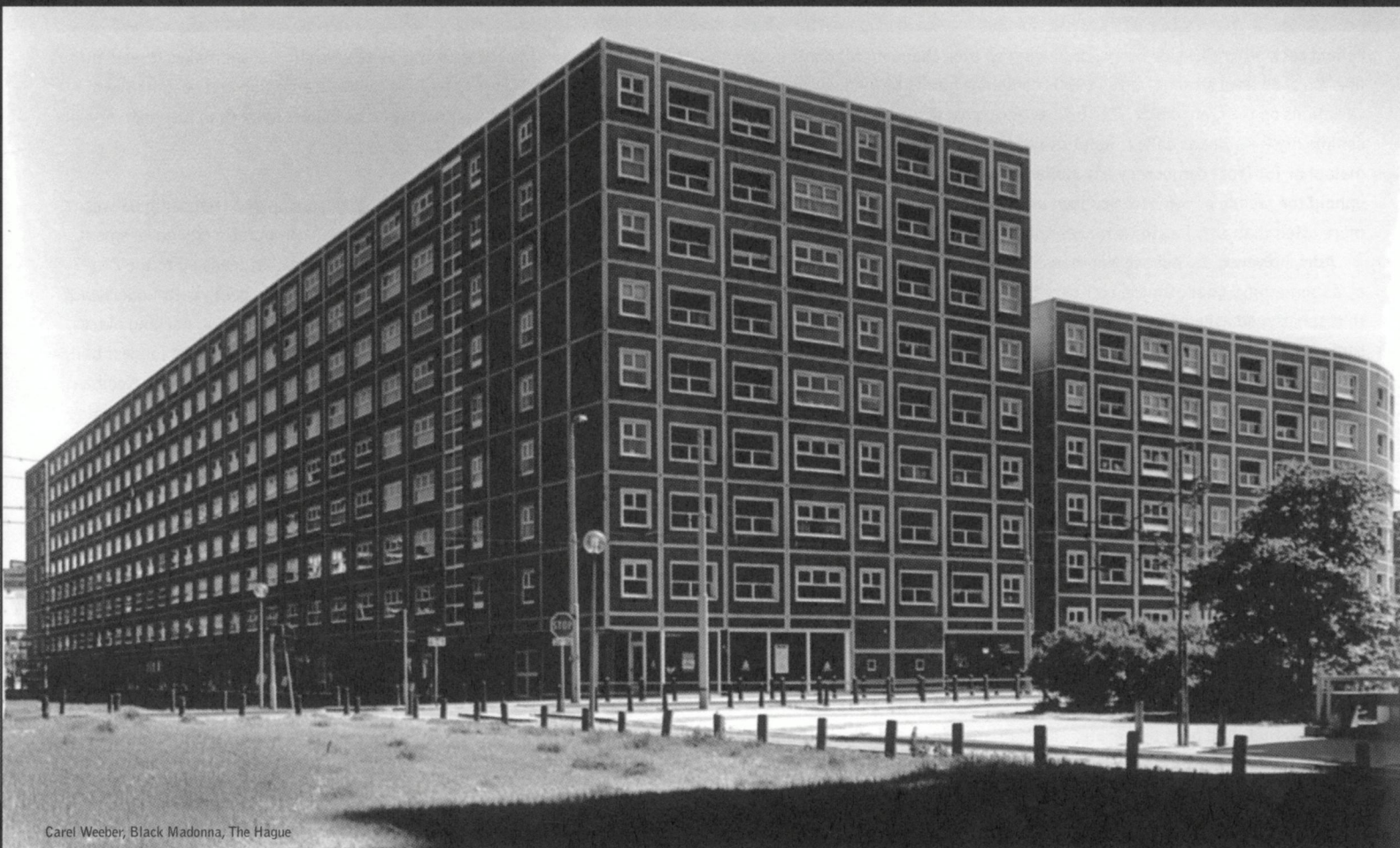
The politicians, artists, critics, and architects were steamrolled by Holland's most steadfast dissident architect, Aldo van Eyck, who, 20 years after Team X, had changed from an overvalued ideologue-designer into a hysterical prophet for a personalized historic avant-garde and was always screaming at architects for not having the same spirit, inventiveness, engagement, and quality as the historic avant-garde with whom he had worked

either physically or at least psychically: Rietveld, El Lissitzky, Miro, Appel, Duiker, Giedion, Le Corbusier, van Doesburg, Mondrian, Mart Stam, etc. Van Eyck stands for the metaphysical school in modernism, for an intentional architecture based on spirit, ideology, phenomenology, and genealogy. Van Eyck stands for the belief that some architecture is better than other and that this lies not in how it looks but in the mindframe and loyalties of the designer. It means that the queasy colors and geometric patterns of van Eyck's designs from the 1970s onward are to be understood as the true sublimation of the spirit of the 1920s.

In short, it means that Aldo van Eyck didn't go for Meier's whiteness.

He hated it with a vengeance. He hated it so much that he tried everything to prevent it from being built, even when this meant supporting a design by Rem K. (During lectures in Delft, van Eyck always referred to Koolhaas the way Dutch privacy laws oblige newspapers to refer to convicted criminals, giving only the first letter of their surnames.) The jury was split: one half supported the populist design by Van den Broek & Bakema, the other supported Meier. One member, a distinguished art historian, supported Koolhaas. Van Eyck started to fulminate in public against Meier, calling him a fraud, a plunderer of modernist form, a heretic, a rat. Van Eyck's anger merely brings into practice what he had preached some years before in his infamous Royal Institute of British Architects lecture "Rats, Posts, and Other Pests," in which he urged the audience to **hound them down**, the rationalists of New York and Venice, the pomos and all the rest who tried to practice architecture as an intellectual, conceptual, and formal discipline, or rather the whole architectural scene of the late 1970s. By switching his choice to Koolhaas, van Eyck broke the deadlock and made it possible for the jury to agree on a compromise. Koolhaas was announced the winner.

The strange thing is that "Koolhaas and his delirious OMAMA mixture" were among the pests whose annihilation van Eyck had demanded in 1981. But the stakes for killing Meier's design were much higher. For Aldo van Eyck the design represented the oldest and most loathsome betrayal of the historic avant-garde: the appropriation in the 1930s by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock of modernism as **the International Style**, thus formalizing it, making it understandable as the **n**th phase in the historical development of



Carel Weeber, Black Madonna, The Hague

style and aesthetics and divorcing it from its experimental, idealist, sociological, hence transgressive pretensions. Van Eyck's whole career is a desperate fight to win back modernism for the metaphysical – or as Philip Johnson calls it, the sociological – side. Meier's detailing, derived from Duiker, Terragni, and Le Corbusier, and above all his whiteness – the flag of the International Style – provoked van Eyck's hate in extremis. Seeing modernist ideals being plundered by rich American intellectuals and then seeing the Americans come back and build capitalist monuments obscenely clad in the stripped hides of 1920s architecture was just too much. It had to be stopped to save the ideals and dreams of his forefathers.

Adri didn't give a rat's ass about the ideals and dreams of van Eyck's forefathers. He knew that in the Dutch context Meier's whiteness and modernist grammar would work extremely well, that it would directly communicate the triumphal nostalgia for a social-democrat past that was gaining momentum in Holland. At the same time Adri was learning more and more about architecture, making trips to Berlin and Frankfurt to visit the **Siedlungen** by Ernst May and Bruno Taut. In Rotterdam white housing projects from the 1920s by J.J.P. Oud were being frenetically renovated and even totally reconstructed. What was being "built" was a revamped myth of social democracy as provider of dwellings, factories, and schools for everyone. The sign for "human" was white, white was good, white was what made social democrats better than liberals and better than Christian democrats, then and now. (In **Architecture** magazine, Colin Davies walked right into the trap by writing that Meier's building is Dutch because Meier draws his inspiration from a "close study of architects Duiker, Oud, and Stam" and adds, "It is ironic that it should take an American to remind the Dutch of their pioneering Modern Past."² It is ironic that it should take an American to believe so completely and so embarrassingly in local Dutch propaganda.) White communicates, even when the architect didn't originally mean it to communicate anything other than architecture, as is the case with Meier. Most importantly, Meier's atrium was the biggest of all; it seemed fit for the mass uprisings and demonstrations about which Adri and his friends loved to fantasize. Red flags waving against white walls. Pure bliss.

Adri carefully picked apart the jury's questionable deliberations and proceeded to promote and cultivate a consensus about the superiority, the dignity,

the pure beauty, and also the low cost and low risk of Meier's design. The Hague and Holland were split between the Koolhaas camp and the Meier camp. Koolhaas's most famous battle cry was: "If you build his design, something will stand; if you build mine, something will happen." Meier's monumental horizontalism contrasted effectively with Koolhaas's vertical flexibility and dynamism. By now the jury itself had fallen into enemy camps. Members took to attacking each other in public. One of Adri's weapons was a contribution by jurist Marte Röling, an artist famous for her shaggy blonde looks, the big Havana cigars she smokes, and the Starfighter jet she owns. Röling wrote a little something about Meier's design and inserted it in the jury report as a minority position: "Try and think of Meier's City Hall in the snow. Try and think of Meier's City Hall under one of those [Dutch magic-realist painter] Willink skies. One of those menacing, dark, leaden grey skies that makes everything white lighten up. Try and think of Meier's City Hall on a morning in spring." By describing, or evoking, the design in this way Röling made it part of a typical Dutch aesthetic romanticism: the atmospheric flatness of 17th-century masters, the photographs from the 1920s of white social housing against dramatic skies, the Mondrian paintings interpreted as landscapes, the totally white paintings from the 1960s. Meier's design was sucked into

the Dutch context, not a physical but a metaphysical, utopian context replete with idealized polder landscapes, white architecture, and Mondrian paintings, seagulls flying over, willows waving, something like the Hamptons only with Calvinist socialism instead of money and sea breezes.

In the discussions with the Koolhaas camp Adri most clearly formulated his choice of Meier. Of the Koolhaas design the critics said it was a perfect representation of real-life democracy. Its complexity, flexibility, populism, and opacity came to the fore in a structure consisting of three architecturally different slabs cut into small towers that seemed to slide

1 Adri Duivesteyn, **Het Haagse Stadhuis, Bouwen in een Slangenkuil** (Nijmegen: SUN, 1994). All translations are my own.

2 Colin Davies, "Dutch Modern," **Architecture** 85:2 (February 1996): 106.

3 Joost Meuwissen, "Wiel Arets en de Architectuur," **Archis** (January 1992): 28.

4 A common construction technique for government office towers in the 1960s. The top floor is built first, jacked up, then the floor beneath it is built, jacked up, etc. until you reach the bottom.

5 Charles Jencks, "Irrational Rationalism: The Rats Since 1960," in Dennis Sharp, ed., **The Rationalists: Theory and Design in the Modern Movement** (London: 1978), 229.

behind each other like side wings, producing an ever-changing Manhattan skyline. On each level strange, early-1980s computer-gamelike modules provided variations on the typical plan. The grid as generator of a loosely systematized complexity – Koolhaas calls it **indeterminate specificity** – became the basic metaphor for local democracy **à la Hollandaise**. Meier's City Hall was said to uphold the facade of democratic, open relationships while the citizens were, more often than not, lost in its mazes and incomprehensible lingo.

Adri, however, did not see Koolhaas's complex representation of democracy as something **good**. On the contrary he thought it was a negative design that sanctioned aspects of government he preferred not to see. Using the same criteria as the critics, he turned the argument around in Meier's favor. Meier's design presented an ideal image and therefore should be built: "If Meier's atrium keeps up the appearance of open relationships, then it is also a permanent reminder of the ideal of openness and democracy. It can function as the conscience of bureaucracy. Perhaps it will encourage the opening up of the administration. At the end of the day Meier's design was more idealistic and more optimistic in its vision of the possibilities of democracy than Koolhaas's."

What kind of democracy is encouraged? The open democracy of the mass, of crowds in market halls, churches, factories, city squares, sports arenas, and Swiss cantonal elections where all adult males can stick up their hands to vote. By reading total nostalgia into the design, on an aesthetic as well as a representational level, the supporters of Meier's design made its realization unavoidable, indisputable.

Adri's fight had been desperate. The main man in the Koolhaas camp was another socialist alderman. They dragged each other down in their struggle and both had to resign. But the City Council did vote for Meier's City Hall. Adri went on to become director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam and tried to make it into a propaganda machine for social-democratic architecture. It didn't work out. The staff didn't really believe in it, and the public just didn't show up. (Tellingly, Adri also manipulated the competition for this building; Koolhaas should have won with a brilliantly open design, but Adri overruled the jury's choice and put forward Jo Coenen's far more hermetic design.) Last year Adri became a member of parliament and is doing quite well as the Joan of Arc of social housing.

Last year Meier's City Hall opened its doors to the public, the critics, the civil servants, the City Council, the librarians, and, last but not least, the many businesses that rent office space in a building that turned out to be much too big and too expensive to accommodate just the municipal bureaucracy and the library. Still, there it stands, incredibly well detailed, incredibly white, and incredibly big. It looks like a building that tries to take its place modestly in a classic urban form but has mistakenly turned out twice as big as it should be. Its horizontal white walls are visible above the roofs from everywhere. Its sheer whiteness and the muchness of its modernist details (I challenge anyone to find a Terragni, Duiker, 1920s Corbusier, or Meier quote that is **not** in the building). Then there is the bigness of the hall: no shops (forbidden), no plants (forbidden), and no crowds (yet) – just Space, Form, and Light. In a vain effort to say something about this building that makes any sense at all, a beautifully dumb text by Dutch architect Joost Meuwissen on the work of his ex-pupil Wiel Arets comes to mind: "His buildings are beautiful. They are beautiful on the inside, and beautiful on the outside, beautiful from far away and beautiful from close up. You might say that in his buildings beauty is spread rather evenly."³

In the meantime City Hall is surrounded by one of the strangest collections of international architecture around. Behind it stands a cluster of office towers in an urban park by Rob Krier. Featured are towers by Krier, Cesar Pelli, and a huge 1960s jackblock⁴ office tower currently being reclad as a giant Amsterdam Canal House with gabled roof by friend rat Michael Graves. Next to City Hall stands Koolhaas's National Dance Theater. A little farther away stands the megalomaniacal machine architecture of Jan Hoogstad's Ministry of Culture, Planning, and the Environment. This collection is built without exception by rats and posts, by the pests that Aldo van Eyck wanted to **hound down**. All of them are totally individualistic objects, stating their own purposes and appropriating any flavor-of-the-month "context" to get built. Neither City

Hall's architecture nor the leaden-gray sky that lightens it makes it seem different from the others. It is the social-democratic ambition and nostalgia with which it has been saddled that makes its whiteness more than just another color.

POSTSCRIPT: BLACKNESS

Two projects undermine the treaty of nonaggression and friendship between the international rats and posts and the social-democratic city government. The first is by Koolhaas: The Hague's main street that leads up to the City Hall will be turned into a pedestrian area. A tunnel is being built underneath, or rather an underground building containing a tram tunnel, parking places, underground connections between the shops, and a gallery. The longest building of all time, it has no outside, just an endless slithering of insides. Koolhaas, in **S,M,L,XL**, describes it in grim terms: "With hopes of saving entire chains of department stores, it was a last ditch attempt to restore the center's accessibility, which had been progressively compromised by the serial dogmas of the past decades that, in a Vietnamlike paradox, suggested that in order to save the European City its arteries had to be blocked. Masters of our own Hades, we quietly savored our triumph: staring down the future, underground." While happy aldermen and international architects fill the city with interesting objects, Koolhaas strips the professions of everything: exterior, form, visibility, representation. He goes underground and burrows pitch black tunnels underneath the white palace. **So** romantic.

Diagonally across from City Hall stands a building by Holland's most extreme rat, Carel Weeber (simultaneously more radical than Koolhaas and president of the Dutch Institute of Architects). In the 1970s, Weeber achieved a certain notoriety by attacking the metaphysical side that dominated Dutch architecture and town planning in withering terms. He demanded an objective town planning and objective housing design based on order, realism, and a toughness appropriate to the reality of social housing. By investing all in the structure and the space and nothing in detailing, he created giant boxes, strips, and ribbons of houses in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Their beauty comes from their seriality and the perverse pleasure that Weeber found in the ugly, the objective, and the big, thus giving the architecture the character of a personal statement, a pirate's flag. Coming from the Antilles, Weeber always plays the part of the outsider, the provocateur of socialist nostalgia. (In Rotterdam, opposite the 1920s white Van Neile factory, he built a neoclassical prison with walls and cells painted entirely in Day-Glo colors and then answered critics that, being color-blind, he didn't really know how it looked but that he expected the colors to numb the prisoners into a state of calm.) The building in The Hague, a superbloc containing 168 dwellings, is called the Black Madonna because of its awe-inspiring blackness and singularity. Black neutralizes the effects of the surrounding architecture. Weeber stated that the city should consist of an objective urban form as mute as possible in order to create architectural focal points. In other words, in order to make architecture possible, architecture should disappear. This building is a device for making architecture disappear – not only its own architecture, which disappears behind the seriality of the dwellings, but also the surrounding architecture whose visual richness is sucked into the black. The attempt to neutralize the architectural hysteria around it paradoxically transforms the building into a strong, individual architectural statement. It makes the surrounding architecture seem ridiculous, spitting muteness and blackness at the white and colored facades.

The Black Madonna recalls the original mania, danger, negativity, and lust that suffused rationalism in the 1970s but was carefully glossed over when they started to build for social democracy. It shows the Sluice to be the perfect realization of the last sentence of Charles Jencks's 1978 article "Irrational Rationalism: The Rats Since 1960": "And so Rationalism, born in the paranoid conjectures of an 18th-century monk dreaming about the lesson of the Primitive Hut, ends 200 years later on a wooden raft of surrealistism, with the rats unable to leave their sinking ship and eating each other to save their lives."⁵ Meier's white palace is just barely holding on.