Jeroen Geurst
Interviewed by
Charles Rattray

Nuanced Rationalism



'You can't just make Rationalist schemes without thinking of what is going on inside them – how people behave in them'

Jeroen Geurst is a founding partner of Geurst & Schulze, established with Rens Schulze after a competition win while they were still students, and author of the much-acclaimed Cemeteries of the Great War by Sir Edwin Lutyens *(010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 2010). Geurst studied architecture at TU Delft during the late 1970s and early '80s. He spent his trainee period in the office of Van den Broek and Bakema (the successor practice to Brinkman and Van der Vlugt), discovered the old drawings of the Van Nelle factory in their basement and then made them the subject of an exhibition and book, published during his fourth year, in 1983 (*Van der Vlugt Architect 1894–1936, *by Jeroen Geurst and Joris Molenaar, Delft University Press). It was, he says, like 'rediscovering Modernism after a period of "human process" architecture'. That comment reflects the contrasting interests of the important professors at Delft at the time, Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, Jaap Bakema (who died in 1981) and Carel Weeber. As Geurst explains:*

Above us there was a kind of debate going on between Weeber and Van Eyck: between Rationalist and more humanistic architecture. So you had Van Eyck on the one hand (and Hertzberger was his pupil); on the other hand you had Carel Weeber; in between was Bakema, who was a friend of Van Eyck – they had both been in the Team X movement – but he had also worked with Weeber, who was his pupil. My study was between these opposite viewpoints and I think that is still part of our work: it is not only Rationalist and not only concerned with social things, but tries to deal with both worlds. You can't just make Rationalist schemes without thinking of what is going on inside them – a school or a house – how people behave in them.

But I learned more from less well-known architects, the teaching assistants. For example it was a Delft thing that one learned about architecture by deconstructing schemes, in a more or less modern way, and then by using this analysis in design projects. So from the beginning I learned to analyse – and using the plan: the plan was important; the appearance of the building was not important at all.

Is this how you came to analyse Lutyens?

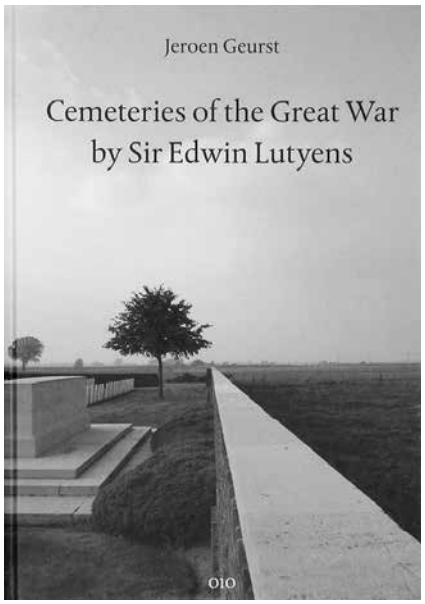
During my studies I was interested in Schinkel, Palladio, Baroque architecture in Rome … I wanted to know everything. It was interesting to be analysing Terragni on the one hand and Alberti on the other. As a student you are not able to choose what is really important, but it was the mix of these influences that was useful. I joined a student-organised project to analyse Baroque houses and gardens around Rome (later we added Florence and I wanted to add Palladio) and we produced a guide to the excursion; of course in the early 1980s what we made was very primitive, but when I see it now it is very comparable to Lutyens: houses and gardens …

… **contained, and in contrast to the surrounding landscape** …

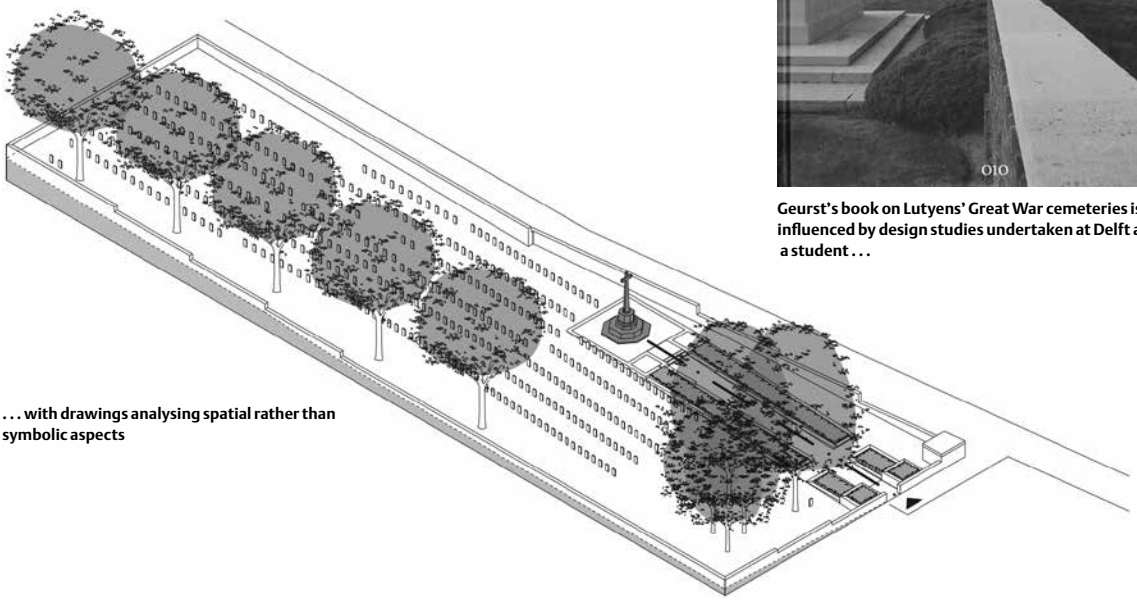
… yes, very formal. And I know that Lutyens was influenced by Italian villas and gardens. In that Rome project we also tried to invent a new way of drawing so that, for example, we could

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'we could see a tree as a column, a hedge as a wall, so that there starts an interesting conversation between garden and house'



Geurst's book on Lutyens' Great War cemeteries is influenced by design studies undertaken at Delft as a student . . .



. . . with drawings analysing spatial rather than symbolic aspects

see a tree as a column, a hedge as a wall, so that there starts an interesting conversation between garden and house: they both have rooms; some of them are outside. Because we isolated all the different elements of the garden and the house together in one drawing, with axes and so on, it could also be a Modern building since by stripping away what didn't interest us that much, the symbolic things, we concentrated on the spatial things.

I am gazing at the impressive list of contributing authors to this student-produced guide: Agrest, Panerai, Vidler, Moneo ...

It was about typology. We were also interested in what typology was and how it might be defined: not only the type of a house, but the essence of architecture and the meaning of type. Of course in the background there was also discussion of Post-Modern architecture, of Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi, but they were never really a big thing in Dutch architectural education.

Nor, presumably, was Venturi.

No, I don't think so. There would always be someone in the Faculty saying 'Venturi is my hero', but not really in education.

I mention Venturi partly because in the 1970s the teaching of history was not taken seriously in many architecture schools and perhaps he changed that. How was it at Delft?

History was taught sometimes by architects – like Van Eyck – showing examples. And then, around 1980, came Stanislaus von Moos. He may have been writing about Venturi then [his book on Venturi, Scott-Brown was published by Rizzoli in 1987]. He was studying Le Corbusier's journal, *L'Esprit Nouveau;* the issues had no index and as a group of students we read all of them and made one ... yes! He also invited Maristella Casciato; we studied Italian Rationalist architecture with her.

When we were walking in Den Haag earlier, you described history as a bottomless resource. How do the lessons apply when you are called on to make a large development in a harsh world – an entire block for one developer, say?

When we make a big ensemble like the Andreas ensemble [in Amsterdam south] its scale has a lot to do with Berlage's part of Amsterdam – the big blocks – and Van Eesteren's part of the city: it sits in between. So it fits in scale very well with the existing city which is not made up of single houses. There are other situations, like the project in Den Helder which is a big scheme but is part of an old extension of the city that was built up by single family houses. It is designed by two architects [Geurst & Schulze with Tony Fretton] but looks as if it is made by many more. So I think the scale of the urban fabric plays a big role in the appearance and typology of a project. If we just add to the scale of developments they grow and grow and grow, and then they do not have a good relationship with how we use, and feel, the city.

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A combined typology at a large scale: Andreas Ensemble, Amsterdam includes a hotel, creche, bar, shops and housing. The proportions of window-frames, balustrades, walls and steps were based on fixed ratios derived from the size of a brick

'the scale of the urban fabric is also very influential on the appearance and typology of a project'



Housing at Den Helder: a large scheme brought to the scale of the existing fabric of single family houses

Part of this interest in continuity is your choice to use brick almost exclusively, from the start of the practice. Brick is the material of the Netherlands, of course, but this reminds me of a definition of poetry, as reproducing an experience for the reader. Through context and material you seem to be doing the same thing.

Yes, if you compare it to poetry, I want to speak with a language you can understand when you are on a certain spot, so that you are not confronted with a completely different language. Maybe in some positions in a city that different language can have a meaning, but I think that is very particular. Ninety per cent of the city is built up by very normal buildings and used by normal people; the fabric is built up by housing, not by 'interesting' buildings. Of course at special places you may have a special building – a museum or a town hall where it is interesting to attract the eye. It is not often that I am asked to make a commission like that. Normally I am asked to make something very special out of a very normal programme. So then I like just to deal with this programme and to speak the language of the area. I like to use brick not only because it may be from the area, but also because I like the material: it looks hand-made, it shows the history of the area and speaks of clay in Holland. I try to discover where the clay comes from, whether it is from the area or other areas. It tells something of the very deep history of a place.

Even when – as I discovered this morning – you use a German brick here for your own offices by Scheveningen harbour, you might argue that the use of foreign bricks in a place that was a trading port ...

[*Laughs*] ... That would be an interesting meaning. In fact we like brick but we are disappointed by the quality of Dutch bricks. I think in Holland we can make very good bricks but they are too expensive. And they heat the clay to a lower temperature than in Germany, sometimes below 1000 degrees, so the brick is softer, and is easier for a bricklayer to lay because the mortar connects more easily with the brick itself. But then, after ten years, you see the facade overgrown with moss because the brick harbours

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moisture. So we prefer bricks from Germany because they are well made, harder, and after ten years the building is still beautiful. If the factories in Holland made a brick with a quality like that, then I'd have it.

Berlage's Gemeentemuseum [in The Hague] has had a direct influence on your use of this simple material, brick. You are glad that your office is near it.

Yes. During the period that our office has been working it has been an influence at different scales. Every time I come back to this museum. It starts with the attitude of Berlage: he was an architect, he was a designer of interiors and he also did urban planning. And he was a very serious architect – as I am – not doing jokes like Lutyens. Berlage was also very engaged with social questions, so he was very influential in social housing, in communal buildings, and with people around him. I always liked his attitude as an architect. The Exchange building [in Amsterdam] was one I didn't always understand as a student, but the museum building was something very special and direct. When I designed my first schools we often showed the example of his staircases at the museum, the way the interior was clad with tiles, the quality of light, the enfilade of spaces. And then, later, I discovered that he was also treating brick in the way we were: he took the brick as a standard for all his proportions.

A special size of brick, too.

Yes, but for me the way to use brick as a standard for measurements in a building came from the Lutyens cemeteries where a lot of Belgian brick was used and I discovered that in all these hundreds of cemeteries they have the same standard for making stairs and walls. Then I thought, this system is really intelligent because you need a system to cover all the different solutions. Our practice was growing and, as we got more and more houses to build, I thought I must find some standard in our office otherwise I would have to reinvent for every project. And then I discovered that it was easy to connect the size of a step with the size of a brick and then the size of a step to the scale of the building – *la scala* is the word, the Italian for stair and for scale. And so you always divide the height of a building in steps. When you connect the size of the brick to the size of the step you immediately cover the whole building.

You say you don't do jokes – and on the whole that is probably very sensible since jokes don't last long in a building – but there is a distinct sense of play in your work. Whether it arises from your study of Lutyens or whether from a fascination with things such as the brick sizes.

I think it's important to make buildings agreeable. I also think that I have quite a rational attitude to things but I know that when you build only a rational scheme, buildings are not interesting enough. Sometimes you can lose rationality by playing games – and you see it a lot, sometimes in buildings that are under construction, very rationally, you think, and then they clad it with a funny thing and the connection is completely lost. But there is another way of playing. Lutyens said that if you really know the rules, then you can play the game. Of course he was talking about Classicism, and we know Classicism has a precise grammar; there are many rules. But you can describe Modernism as a type of Classicism because its language is generic: you can use it for everything. This playing within



Vermeer Tower, Delft: brick, the essential material of the Netherlands . . .

'la scala *is the word… you divide the height of the building in steps. When you connect the size of the brick to the size of the step you immediately cover the whole building'*



. . . with internal linings that include timber dados

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the rules of a system means that a building can have both sides: the Rationalist side and the more emotional.

It raises issues. If you take the word 'rationalism' and you pair it up – as you have done [in a series of commissioned photographs hanging in the office] – with domesticity, or with luxury, or with emotion, then you have things that appear to be at odds with one another. In certain projects you have set out to do that, quite deliberately, have contrived relationships for a purpose.

Yes, when you have a set of elements you can use, like covering a wall with wood, which is a very old-fashioned way to do things – not the Modernist way, since it breaks the abstraction of the wall – then I like to deal with these very good systems that were invented a hundred years ago to treat the interior of buildings. So I am not interested in the abstraction of a box and then the putting-in of some living programme. We know that a wall, a floor and a ceiling are different. We can touch a wall, and then, when we touch it many times it will show fingerprints. We can paint it again but we can also cover it with some material that is something appropriate to its function. I was always surprised when I went back to my old school and it was still exactly the same as when I left it at 12 years old. Even though it had changed its use, the floor was still stone, the walls were covered with tiles. This is rational: doing things that are needed, that are sensible. It can give a very cosy feeling for inhabitants and is also something very practical.



Housing at Duindorp, showing the playfulness of Lutyens . . .

'playing within the rules of a system means that a building can have both sides: the Rationalist side and the more emotional'



. . . a stone's throw from Geurst & Schulze's powerfully-modelled offices by the harbour at Scheveningen, The Hague

The scope of the practice's work doesn't include the commercial office …

… this is a commercial office. We bought it from the developer but what you see is more or less what we offered to the market. Later on we were part of the market ourselves.

I'd completely forgotten about that! What you have here is four uniform floor-plates. If someone asked you to make a tall office block in south Amsterdam, Frankfurt or the City of London, could the same lessons apply?

Yes, that would be no problem but the problem is always the clients who are only interested in their spread-sheets and the image of the building. There are some exceptions, I know. But I like to work with very small budgets: it makes you very keen to do only the essential things.

You want to have lots of constraints and then to find freedom within them.

Yes, I'm an architect like that. Don't give me a commission on a beautiful site and say 'do whatever you like, show us what you can do'.

If someone did say that you'd probably just start introducing constraints to make it possible.

Yes, Alvaro Siza, whom I know well and have worked with, had the Portuguese pavilion at the Expo in Lisbon, the most important building. They said 'just do something you like and where you like'. He didn't know what to do, and then he chose the waterside site, near the entrance to the area, and then, with those two in opposition, there were ways to think … and then it starts. I think we are more craftsmen than artists. I feel myself more of a craftsman than an architect – somewhere between these two positions but more of a craftsman. As Adolf Loos said (do you know the story?) you are in a beautiful rural landscape, enjoying it, and then suddenly become aware of 'a discordant note in the tranquillity' – and you know that an architect was there.

Geurst & Schulze, a *monograph on the work of the practice, was published by Quart Verlag, Lucerne, in 2013*

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