MICHEL DE KLERK'S DESIGNS FOR
AMSTERDAM'S SPAARNDAMMERBUURT
(1914-1920)

A CONTRIBUTION TO ARCHITECTURAL LYRICISM

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In late autumn of 1915 at the Amsterdam architectural association's (Architectura et Amicitia) sixtieth anniversary exhibit, the thirty-one-year-old architect, Michel de Klerk made his first major statement in urban design. A display of photographs and drawings illustrated the two housing blocks and shops which he designed facing each other across the communal park in the Spaarndammerbuurt workers' quarter of northwest Amsterdam. These were subsequently built, by 1918, and then, within the next two years, a third, larger housing block, also comprising a post office and meeting hall was added to the ensemble and had the singular virtue of creating an unique and unified urban setting. Together this group of buildings and city spaces (figures 1-3) constitute a memorable example of Dutch architecture and epitomize, as well, many of the finest values of the Dutch expressionist movement, the 'Amsterdam School'.

For these reasons the area around the park, or the 'plantsoen' as it is called, has been the subject of many studies for the fifty years since its completion. Most of these have only been concerned with one aspect of the buildings, or, if more than one, in an offhand, generally superficial way. This paper intends to provide a fuller documentation by describing the buildings in detail, placing them in their urban context, discussing their historical and theoretic bases, and by considering aspects of the cultural and social milieu in which they evolved. Their commemorative record would be incomplete without some of the responses, positive and otherwise, that de Klerk's designs have occasioned, and several of

1 This paper is based on material from my doctoral dissertation on the work of Michel de Klerk (1884-1923) and the Amsterdam School, for Columbia University (1970), sponsored by Professor George R. Collins. Extended research on the buildings at the Spaarndammerbuurt was aided by a grant from the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society. I am grateful to the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and to Dr. Stanford Anderson, Eugene Santomasso, and Gregory Gale for contributing to research in New York. In the Netherlands I was aided by discussions with Dr. A.W. Reinink, Joost de Klerk, and A.W.F.M. Meij and assisted with the collection of material by Jan and Hansje Becker, Kitty van Groningen, Dr. C. Wegener Sleeswijk, Pieter Landweer, Petra ten Doesschate, Jaap Rietman, and Dr. W.H. Vroom. William Alex kindly offered editorial advice; William Rose typed the manuscript; and my husband, Richard Frank, took many of the photographs.
these are included. One such contemporary evaluation is useful to note at this point as a summary to the problems being addressed by the city of Amsterdam. It is complimentary to de Klerk and was made by the architectural critic of the Amsterdam daily, De Telegraaf, on completion of the second housing block: 'I am extremely happy with it because it can serve as a fruitful example; I want all who build in Amsterdam to see how one can relate buildings and open spaces, how one can attain unity between various street walls, how workers’ dwellings can be the subject of monumental solutions, how the unity which is obtained excludes neither variety of form nor variety of color. The Spaarndammerplantsoen may pass as one of the ways in which the modern square [Dutch: 'plein'] can be solved.'

Immediately after World War I local and national agencies of government in Holland, which could do little during the war years to alleviate the acute housing shortages, began to make financial means available for housing. However, long before the war, uncontrolled urban growth had been brought to an end by the Netherlands Housing Act of 1901 which required every community of more than 10,000 inhabitants to draw up an expansion plan. The Act encouraged the sponsorship of low cost housing by private foundations and associations by making government financing available to them. Significantly, these were socially oriented groups. Also, by 1905, Amsterdam officials had drawn up rigid building codes that set high standards of safety, durability and hygiene for all new building. Moreover, two commissions were in existence to advise the Mayor and Aldermen of Amsterdam on the esthetic quality of architectural projects. These were the 'Commission on Beauty', first organized in 1898 and

2 Huib Hoste, Aan het Spaarndammerplantsoen, De Telegraaf, June 8 (1918).
4 Bouwverordening van Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1914.
5 The first commission was called 'Schoonheidscommissie', the second 'Stadsschoon'. De Woningwet 1902-1929, gedenkboek samengesteld ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling gehouden te Amsterdam 18-27 October 1930 bij het 12½-jarig bestaan van het Nederlandsch Instituut voor Volksbouwvestiging en Stedebouw, Amsterdam 1930, 29, 35; Conflict Schoon-